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When Sacred Space becomes a Heritage Place: Pilgrimage, Worship, and Tourism in Contemporary China

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When promoted at sites that have traditionally been religious in character, heritage tourism evokes questions of intentionality, commodification, and authenticity. In particular, tourism at such sites is alleged to flatten out local practices, cause social problems, and commercialise the sacred. In short, local cultural practices are presumed to be transformed for the worse by tourism, a presumption which implies the existence of pristine pre-tourist cultures which can serve as baseline tools for measuring the impact of this touristic degradation. In this paper I address these concerns by examining tourism at a particular Chinese religious site, recently designated as a national park and world heritage site, the Buddhist pilgrimage destination of Mount Wutai (Ch. *Wutai Shan*). In 1982 the Wutai area was designated one of China's first national parks and in 2009 was inscribed on UNESCO's world heritage list. In the last two decades Wutai Shan has become one of the most visited religious destinations in northern China, primarily by citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC). According to local, provincial, and national authorities, these overwhelmingly ethnic Han Chinese visitors are tourists, not pilgrims. Although the extent to which they identify as Buddhists is unclear, religious practice is widespread among visitors. Moreover, this practice is not hidden, since the state is very much present at Wutai Shan. State heritage policies at the site are designed to protect this as a heritage space, and thus, align with broad UNESCO preservation goals, particularly spatial arrangements. However, unlike UNESCO, local, provincial, and national authorities do not view tourism as a threat to the 'heritage' of Wutai Shan. Instead, by eliminating (as a direct effect of UNESCO management recommendations) a vibrant informal local economy structured around pilgrimage, state officials (particularly provincial and local officials), aim to 'clean up' this space, spur tourism, and capture a significant share of the resulting revenues. The net result is a situation in which state policies simultaneously enable mass tourism, manage religious practice, and seek to guide visitor experiences. What remains is not a sacred place somehow ruined by tourism and / or commodification, but a quotidian religious space at which the thick happenings of Buddhism-in-practice have been curtailed but not eliminated. In short, the enactment of this sacred place remains, albeit under the careful gaze of various parts of the state.

Key Words: Wutai Shan, heritage, tourism, Buddhism, UNESCO

Introduction

When promoted at sites that have traditionally been religious in character, heritage tourism evokes questions of intentionality (both of destination producers and visitors), commodification, and authenticity. Indeed, concerns about the commercialisation of cultural sites and events by tourism have circulated within tourism studies from the field's earliest years (see Greenwood, 1977; Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1992). For several decades critics have argued that, while tourism may encourage a renewed interest in traditional arts and social practices

among local craftsmen and others, tourist purchases are fuelled by a desire to possess a mark, rather than out of any genuine interest in local cultural traditions or beliefs (Mathieson and Wall, 1982:165-169). This lack of genuine interest may, according to critics, induce some local residents, pressured to assume the idealised identities which tourists expect, to 'become other,' resulting in an encounter defined by 'reciprocal misconstructions' (Lanfant, 1995:35-36), or what Dean MacCannell (1994) has called the 'postmodern emptiness' of (commodified) cultural performance (see also Brunner, 1995; Linnekin, 1997:216). As a result, given a monetary value, ritual and tradition become

valueless for local inhabitants (Harrison, 1994:243-244). In its extreme form, this argument describes a process of ‘McDonaldization’ and ‘Disneyfication’ that transforms heritage sites into spaces that resemble theme parks, and makes other, presumably more authentic travel experiences impossible (Ritzer and Liska, 1997:97-101).

The commercialisation of local cultural practices and social relationships as a result of tourism is also blamed for social problems such as drug abuse, petty crime, environmental degradation, prostitution, and a decline in social stability (McLaren, 1998:28). In short, (local) cultural practices are presumed to be transformed, for the worse, by contact with tourism, a presumption which implies the existence of pristine pre-tourist cultures which serve as baseline tools for measuring the impact of this touristic degradation (Hitchcock *et.al.*, 1993:8; Wood, 1993:63).

In this paper, I address these concerns by examining tourism at a particular Chinese religious site recently designated as a national park and world heritage site - the Buddhist pilgrimage destination of Mount Wutai (Ch. *Wutai Shan*). Wutai Shan has been one of the most important Buddhist sites in East Asia for centuries, drawing pilgrims from China, Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, India, and Japan. In 1982 Wutai Valley was designated one of China’s first national parks and in 2009 was inscribed on UNESCO’s world heritage list. In the last two decades Wutai Shan has become one of the most visited religious destinations in northern China, attracting approximately four million annual visitors in 2012 (GOC, 2011), the vast majority of whom are citizens of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). According to local, provincial, and national authorities, these overwhelmingly ethnic Han Chinese visitors are tourists, not pilgrims. Yet other than temples, monasteries, and pilgrimage trails, the area offers visitors little diversion. What draws millions of people to Wutai Shan each year if they do not worship Buddha (*baifo*)? Is this a case of a once-sacred place that has been ‘Disneyfied’ by mass tourism? In other words, is this yet another example of the corroding effects tourism is supposed to have on the sacred and authentic?

At least in this case, the answer is no. At Wutai Shan, religious practice is widespread among visitors, although the extent to which most visitors identify *as* Buddhists is questionable. Moreover, this practice is not hidden, since the state is very much present at Wutai Shan. This includes officials from the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, the Ministry of

Tourism, the Religious Affairs Commission, the Ministry of Housing and Rural Development, and the National Forest Administration, among others. State heritage policies at Wutai Shan are designed to protect this site as a heritage space, and thus, align with broad UNESCO preservation goals, particularly spatial arrangements. However, unlike UNESCO, local, provincial, and national authorities do not view tourism as a threat to the ‘heritage’ of Wutai Shan. Instead, by eliminating (as a direct effect of UNESCO management recommendations) a vibrant informal local economy structured around pilgrimage, state officials (particularly provincial and local officials), aim to ‘clean up’ this space, spur tourism, and capture a significant share of the resulting revenues. The net result is a situation in which state policies simultaneously enable mass tourism, manage religious practice, and seek to guide visitor experiences. What remains is not a sacred place somehow ruined by tourism or commodification, but a quotidian religious space at which the thick happenings of Buddhism-in-practice (such as noise, smells, gambling, soothsaying, buying, selling, chatting, singing, dozing, and sundry other activities), actions that revolve around temples and monasteries, have been curtailed but not eliminated. In short, the enactment of this sacred place remains, albeit under the careful gaze of various parts of the state. If for UNESCO the notion of world heritage signifies particular cultural landscapes that speak to and hence symbolically belong to a universal audience, this specific world heritage site illustrates an ongoing Chinese state effort to rationalise and formalise social practices (such as worship) that may be neither ‘rational’ nor formal. What remains is not staged performance, but worship-in-practice that is supposed to be cleansed of informality and ambiguity.

To Categorise or Not to Categorise Visitors? A Note on Typology

In the early years of tourism studies, a good deal of work began with the question of intentionality as a stepping stone to determining which types of tourists were engaged in either a search for or the practice of authentic travel (see McCannell, 1976; Cohen, 1988; Greenwood, 1977). This desire to delineate resulted in various attempts to chart and classify the experiences and practices of travellers in contrast to tourists, with the former typically framed as active seekers of meaning and the latter as passive observers of staged performances (see E. Cohen, 1979; Richards and Wilson, 2004; S. Cohen, 2010). Among these researchers, Erik Cohen has been one of the most influential. In his first foray into typologies, he

classified tourists as ‘drifters,’ ‘explorers,’ ‘individual mass tourists,’ and ‘group mass tourists’ (Cohen, 1972). In his later work, he posited five categories of tourists, ranging from ‘recreational’ and ‘diversionary’ travellers who had no concern with authenticity to ‘experiential,’ ‘experimental’ and ‘existential’ tourists, of whom the latter, he argued, seek the most profound and deepest experiences (1988:377). This typological approach has continued to be commonplaces. For example, in her discussion of British tourists at beach destinations in Greece, Wickens (2002) categorises tourists as heritage seekers, ‘ravers’ (hedonists), ‘Shirley Valentines’ (British women seeking a Greek man for romance), ‘heliolatrous’ (sun worshippers), and ‘Lord Byrons’ (Grecophiles).

These attempts to situate the particularities of tourism experiences into broad categories raise several issues. First, such an approach assumes that tourists actually can be classified into distinct categories. In the above example, might a British female tourist not only engage in a short term sexual relationship with a local Greek man (or vice-versa) while on vacation, but also spend time sunning on a beach, partying at night, visiting cultural sites on rainy days, and returning in the future to do this all over again? In other words, classifying tourists by mono-intentionality ignores the broad spectrum of everyday tourist behaviour. People engage in a range of activities while on vacation. In short, monolithic categories leak.

A second question about typologies is the implicit ranking of types that follows from initial assumptions of what tourists *should* do. According to MacCannell (1976), the touristic quest is a search for one’s authentic self, a quest which, according to Erik Cohen, is a search for what has not yet been tainted by modernity (1988:374). If we assume this search is the point of tourism, the hierarchy implied among Cohen’s five tourist types seems quite logical: from those who are completely unreflective and focus solely on physical pleasure to existentialists who are profoundly aware of the alienating effects of modernity. Or, to quote Cohen:

those who are disposed to reflect upon their life situation are more aware of their alienation than those who do not tend to such contemplation (1988:376).

In other words, to not feel alienated indicates a misrecognition of one’s own self-alienation.

This claim presumes that residents of complex, modern societies are in fact alienated from their authentic selves. It thus, is a circular argument: the modern

condition is defined by alienation, so if a member of a modern society does not recognise his or her own alienation this confirms said alienation. In form this logic mirrors the false consciousness argument employed by Marxists to explain why many workers in industrialised societies do not acknowledge their own exploitation and thus alienation. What both these approaches share is a hegemonic belief that some people (such as academic researchers and Marxist theorists) are privy to a more accurate realisation of reality. To disagree with this view demonstrates one’s own inability to reflect on and critically analyse reality.

But why assume a tourist needs to be alienated in order to have a fulfilling travel experience? This only makes sense if we first accept the questionable logic that someone’s authentic self is located not at home but on the road, among strangers. In other words, *if* we assume that modern life is inherently alienating, and *if* we accept the premise that the less-modern is the site of authentic being, tourists who do not settle for surface experiences and the comforts of modernity are logically more correct in their choices. Indeed, these appear to be qualitatively better choices. Moreover, those who do settle for less do so because they delude themselves, not being ‘aware of their alienation’ (Cohen 1988:376).

This perspective is nothing more than a return to the cliché of ‘the traveller,’ that heroic Western archetype, the he-who-is-not-a-tourist standing in opposition to the always-worked upon ‘tourist.’ As I have argued elsewhere (Shepherd, 2002; 2003; 2015), self-identifying travellers are still tourists, they are simply tourists who frame and filter their experiences through a subjective lens of not identifying *as* tourists (see also Stausberg, 2011). However, this traveller narrative is not reducible to a ‘Western’ condition. To do so reifies a different dichotomy, the ‘East’ in contrast to the ‘West.’ This assumes a monolithic Western condition, when it in actuality reflects the values and perspectives of a specific class of people (those who believe alienation is part and parcel of the condition of Modernity).

Of course, one might say this discussion is no longer relevant in an era of postmodern tourism. Constructivists point out that people travel for a multitude of reasons (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Digance, 2006; Maoz and Beckerman, 2010), and even at a religious site, ostensibly faith-driven visitors engage in a range of behaviours. They may pray, travel along a pre-determined route, visit a set number of shrine-like destinations, and yet also eat well, shop for souvenirs,

and, broadly speaking, have fun, thereby collapsing distinctions between secular and religious, serious and playful, contemplation and entertainment. According to Collins-Kreiner (2010), 'no place is intrinsically sacred' (2010:444), 'each person may interpret his or her own experience differently' (448) and consequently, 'issues of 'right' and 'wrong' seem less important in the post-modern world, and may not even exist' (450). This is a view endorsed by Maoz and Beckerman (2010:436), who reject any distinctions between pilgrims and tourists. Oakes and Sutton (2010) suggest that tourist and pilgrim intentions overlap, as pilgrims also act as tourists while some tourists may engage in religious practices. The logical endpoint of this perspective rejects any distinction between secular and religious travel, asserting that any journey that is 'redolent with [personal] meaning' can be classified as a pilgrimage (Digance, 2006:36). Thus, a wide variety of travel actions which are not formally religious can nevertheless serve a sacred-like purpose (Badone & Roseman, 2004:2).

I fully recognise and accept the critique of typologies and the ambiguity of intentionality. But I do see value in recognising that visitors to, in this case study, a site that has been a sacred destination for centuries, may engage in a range of behaviours while having a *primary* intention. For example, some visitors to religious sites in any society are undoubtedly motivated by supernatural goals, desires, or intentions (Eade and Sallnow, 1991). This raises the issue of the relationship between the intentions of visitors and the purposes of a (religious) site. At a site that is considered sacred space for very specific and exclusive reasons, do the intentions of all visitors have equal standing or even relevancy? Or does the sacredness of a site serve as a stopping point for personal intentionality? In this case study, Wutai Shan is not sacred because it is the location of certain temples and monasteries; it is sacred because the landscape has been believed to be the home of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, by Buddhists in the East Asian region, since at least the Fifth Century CE. In other words, the religious material culture which UNESCO has classified as world heritage is not the source of Wutai Shan's aura; these buildings affirm an already-present sacred landscape (and in the process add to the sacredness of the landscape).

An erasure of all differences between pilgrims and tourists rests on an anthropologically thin basis (see Stausberg, 2011). First of all, to characterise a pilgrimage site as any place to which people travel (see Digance, 2006) not only negates any differences

between a destination valued for its cosmological significance and one valued for other reasons, it also erases the very notion of sacred space (Timothy and Olsen 2006): when everything is equally valuable nothing is sacred. Moreover, a questioning of abstract categories does not mean that differences do not in fact exist among visitors to religious sites (Eade & Sallnow 1991). For a place to be sacred, whether in a religious sense (such as Varanasi in India or Lourdes in France) or a secular sense (such as Graceland in Memphis or, say, the American baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York), one must understand and experience this sacredness (Bremer 2006).

Tourism at Religious Sites

What then of tourism and religion, or more to the point, tourism at religious sites, in China? Zhang Mu and his colleagues describe religious tourism as,

a special tourist activity orientated by religious culture with the help of a specific eco-cultural environment (2007: 101).

They also assert that most Han Chinese do not believe in a deity or practice religion, and therefore, visit historic pilgrimage sites such as the Buddhist mountains of Ermei Shan in Sichuan and Wutai Shan in Shanxi for cultural and historical reasons. These visitors are thus, 'cultural pilgrims' (ibid:105). Similarly, Zhang Cheng (2002), while agreeing that the number of Han Chinese visitors to religious sites has grown in China, suggests that contemporary Chinese tourists do not practice religion when they tour these sites. Finally, religious destinations in the PRC, particularly Buddhist sites that attract an ethnic cross-section of visitors including Han, Meng (Mongolian) and Zang (Tibetan), are described by national tourism authorities as 'religious-cultural tourism' (*zongjiao wenhua luyou*). For example, according to official statistics, religious devotees constitute less than ten percent of the annual tourist arrivals at Wutai Shan. The most comprehensive data on visitor arrivals, compiled for Wutai Shan's world heritage nomination application in 2007, estimated that 59,400 of a total of 575,000 arrivals in August 2006, the busiest tourist month in the PRC, were religious pilgrims (GOC, 2008a:233). In conversations with a local official in 2010, I was told that only one in eight visitors came for religious reasons. The rest were tourists, he explained.

These data support the claim that few Han Chinese practice religion. From this perspective, tourists visit Wutai Shan not because it is sacred but because it is an historical and cultural destination that demonstrates the country's unified multi-ethnic basis. From a national

state perspective, increased tourism is desirable, since this will further a national campaign of 'civilisation' (*wenming*) and educate visitors. Local and provincial authorities support increased tourism which will spur development and generate revenues. Both perspectives are quite different from that of UNESCO and related institutions such as the International Committee on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), which consider sites such as Wutai Shan to be parts of a collective *world* heritage that require protection from, broadly speaking, modernisation. In this particular case state development policies that have sought to expand the domestic tourism industry for not just political and economic reasons but also what is termed in Chinese as 'spiritual' (*jingshen*) concerns. Heritage, be this religious or otherwise, is part and parcel of a broader state-directed campaign to cultivate and boost the spiritual^[1] basis of development, thereby balancing out material (*wuzhi*) development and increasing the civilisational level of the Chinese Nation (Shepherd, 2012).

The 'Spiritual' in Revolutionary China

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, both tourism and pilgrimage effectively ended. Led by Mao Zedong, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aimed to reorder not only the (material) means of production but also the moral basis of citizens. This in turn required a spatial reordering of urban residents into work units and peasants into communes (Anagnost, 1994).

The primary objective of work units was to replace the foundational role family ties had played in Chinese society for thousands of years with a new form of community, a fully rationalised, organised, and planned micro-society that simultaneously displaced preferential kin ties and turned social relationships into an aspect of economic production (Bray, 2005:96). Work units provided members with food, clothing, housing, education, and employment, functioned as the primary social web for members, and served as a foundational aspect of identity (Leung, 2000:618). They also were the primary (and for most people, the only) source of travel, in the form of collective annual vacations. At the height of socialism in China, tourism as an individual activity became impossible. All hotels, restaurants, and forms of transportation were state-owned, and official letters were required to access these services.

1. This Chinese notion of 'spiritual' does not reflect any cosmological linkage but rather a sense of 'Chineseness.' It thus describes an ethno-moral aspect of personal character.

In retrospect, urban work units and rural communes were as much pedagogical tools as they were political institutions, designed not just to control citizens spatially but also to shape them morally. Paradoxically, while aimed at undermining kin ties (the social glue of Confucianism) this social structure used the foundational premise of Confucianism (that all people can be improved through a combination of social modelling and self-cultivation) as a key organising principle. This was combined with Mao's belief that the collective will power of society could enable China to literally leap through material stages of development and thereby achieve authentic communism without passing through a capitalist stage.

Although the reform period in China began in 1978, work unit culture only began to be dismantled after 1989. Housing is now private, people can change their jobs at will, and travel is a matter of money and not state permission. Most importantly, social and economic changes have eroded any belief in communism, creating a space for religious faith while raising questions about the role of the CCP. In short, if the Chinese Communist Party no longer advocates communism in practice, what is the ideological justification for its rule?

The CCP has responded to this legitimacy dilemma by jettisoning Mao's profoundly non-Marxist interpretation of the relationship between a society's base and superstructure (Anagnost, 1997:84). Mao had rejected the fundamental Marxist point that a society's material base (its stage of development) determined its social development (its superstructure), instead arguing that the collective will of Chinese people could transform the base itself, thus fast-tracking China's advance towards communism. After gaining power in 1979, Deng Xiaoping shifted the political focus away from class struggle towards general prosperity (*xiaokang shehui*), based on material and spiritual civilisation (*jingshen wenming*). That is to say, while he radically transformed the economic basis of Chinese society by embracing (limited) private market action, he did not intend to allow market forces to shape social and moral behaviour. Deng thus, was as much a heretical Marxist as was Mao. While Mao had attempted to use the superstructure to transform the base, Deng sought to prevent the base from transforming the superstructure.

Importantly, 'spiritual' as used in Chinese does not connote the supernatural, paranormal, or Godly. It instead signifies ethical and moral attributes that characterise right-thinking and right-acting citizens and

is thus more akin to the English language concept of 'virtuous' (Kipnis, 2006). Deng's approach thus echoed late nineteenth century reformers who advocated using foreign technology and products while maintaining a (presumed) Chinese cultural essence (Dynon, 2008:86). For example, Deng began the first 'Spiritual Civilization Campaign' (*jingshen wenhua yundong*) in 1982, which promoted public morality (*gongde*), patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi*), culture (*wenhua*), discipline (*jilu*), and ideals (*lixiang*).

A second Spiritual Civilization Campaign was launched in 1996 by Jiang Zemin, the former party leader of Shanghai who rose to power in the wake of the Tiananmen Square violence in the spring of 1989. Whereas Deng's 1982 campaign had at least made a pro forma recognition of the role of collectivisation in Chinese society, Jiang's 1996 campaign replaced the language of socialism with that of cultural nationalism (Dynon, 2008:93). In 1997 the State Council, China's highest body, established the Central Commission for Building Spiritual Civilization (*zhongyang jingshen weming jianshe zhidao weiyuanwei*). It was given three responsibilities: improving technical aspects of life, increasing public awareness of the law, and promoting physical fitness and hygiene. More broadly, however, this commission was tasked with overseeing the 'cultural engineering' (*wenhua gongcheng*) of society (Tomba, 2009:606).

This civilization campaign has both an Enlightenment and Confucianist base, which reflects the more than one hundred year-long debate among Chinese intellectuals across the political spectrum about how to be simultaneously modern and Chinese. *Wenming* (civilization) is not actually a Chinese word but a cultural borrowing from Meiji Japan (Friedman, 2004). Like its Japanese equivalent *bunmei*, *wenming* has two distinct connotations, one spiritual and the other material (Anagnost, 1997). For the former, *wenming* refers to what is often described by state officials as well as Han Chinese citizens as a unified history of thousands of years, making China unique in the world. But this term also describes an always-becoming civil society that signals not an unbroken historical narrative but an emerging present and future rooted in the flux of modernity. This is a starkly different view of society than imagined by European and American proponents of 'civil society.' Proponents of the latter perspective believe that a civil society (a society filled with non-state organisations) is needed to check the power of the state, promote ethnic, racial, and social tolerance, and eventually encourage the development of material security for its members. The Chinese term *wenming*,

in contrast, signifies a society of productive, socially responsible, and increasingly self-disciplined citizens, who understand the need to check their individual behaviour, so as to assist state leaders with the development of a materially and spiritually modern society (Friedman, 2004:691). *Wenming* thus communicates both a historical basis of development and a contemporary sense of what it means to be modern and Chinese.

This ideal civil society is guided by the moral attributes of *suzhi* (quality) and *wenhua* (culture). Until the late 1970s *suzhi* conveyed a sense of in-born character, in contrast to *suyang*, one's embodied or learned character. Used in this sense, a person's bad character might be blamed on either family background or a lack of education. However, with the imposition of a national one-child policy in 1978 *suzhi* was re-defined and assiduously promoted by state authorities as not an in-born attribute, but a broader qualitative measurement of social worth as embodied by a person's relative development (Kipnis, 2006:299-300). Those who possess a high level of *suzhi* possess proper (physical) health, (mental) intelligence, and (moral) character, attributes that have Maoist and Confucianist foundations as well as self-cultivation practices such *tai qi*, *qigong*, and *wushu* (Jacka, 2009).

'Quality' and 'culture' are not just key words of the Party but just as importantly of an emerging middle class and affluent elite. This is because the peasantry and working class are no longer viewed as models of ideological correctness and social awareness, as during the Maoist era, but different from 'higher quality' citizens. This repositioning of the middle and upper classes as role models for advancement is a sharp break from the class politics of Mao's era, when anyone with kin ties to intellectuals, capitalists, or the petty bourgeoisie experienced ostracism or worse. But, in today's China, being civil and civilized is a matter of education, social standing, and wealth, not of revolutionary credentials (Anagnost, 1997:86). In other words, the vanguard of a future society of material affluence, social stability, and proper moral character is no longer the working class and peasantry but the emerging bourgeoisie.

Far from being either the enemy of the people or the Communist Party, this emerging class of middle and upper class elites is of crucial importance in the construction of what the Party defines as a *Chinese* modern society. Moreover, rather than contesting a state and CCP focus on cultivating civilization and lifting the quality of the masses, many emerging elites

share this goal (Nyiri, 2006:88). But what role does religion have in this? At a time when the Communist Party has officially postponed communism while remaining atheistic, has faith returned to the quotidian?

Pilgrimages and Tourists in China

Pilgrimage has been practiced by Buddhists and Daoists in China for centuries. People historically have travelled to sacred destinations for a variety of reasons, ranging from formal obligations for rulers and dynastic officials and contemplative experience for the literati during the dynastic era, to everyday acts such as penance, health, and future prosperity for commoners (Naquin & Yu, 1992). Chinese pilgrimage practices have a shared affinity for a particular type of destination, mountains believed to possess a charismatic aura that is independent of built space. This is reflected in the Chinese term for pilgrimage, *chaoshan jinxiang*, 'to bring incense and pay respects to a (sacred) mountain' (shortened to *chaoxiang* to refer to pilgrims) (ibid:11-12).

By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), four Buddhist mountains had been identified and transformed into pilgrimage destinations:

- in the north, Wutai Shan (Shanxi Province);
- in the west, Emei Shan (Sichuan);
- in the east, Putao Shan (Zhejiang), and;
- in the south, Jiuhua Shan (Anhui).

However, these destinations served different purposes for different groups. The literary elite visited sacred mountains not so much to pray as to appreciate nature and history by experiencing 'scenic spots' (*jingdian*), destinations marked by artists, poets, and former rulers (Nyiri, 2006:12-13). For centuries, lay people have visited sacred mountains for reasons of health, penance, and prosperity, while Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist monks and nuns have done so to pray and make merit. In contrast, Chan (Zen) Buddhist monks historically were not supposed to carry out pilgrimages to specific sacred sites but instead, to wander between these sites.

The phenomenon of wandering monks as well as religious tourism has re-emerged in the last two decades as state control over mobility has decreased. The main government and Party concern with Buddhist religious practitioners, as with followers of other faiths, is political stability: as long as they avoid political issues and do not pose a threat to the government or CCP, they are largely left alone. A case in point is the

saga of movements in the early 1990s that were loosely affiliated with Buddhism such as Zhong Gong and Falun Gong. At their height these groups attracted millions of followers and generated enormous sums of money, but were banned and suppressed when they were perceived to threaten the interests and paramount role of the Communist Party. In contrast to these groups, religious practitioners who studiously avoid political questions are largely left alone. Indeed, Buddhism in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular have boomed in recent years, both in rural and urban areas.

In urban bookstores, religious publications ranging from Buddhist and Daoist classics to spiritual guides by prominent monks are just as common as titles in the rapidly expanding field of self-help and self-development, which promise their readers efficient ways of raising their personal quality (*suzhi*). Meanwhile, a 'Tibet craze' (*xizang*) among urban sophisticates that began in the years after 1989 shows no sign of slowing. Tibet as a symbol of simplicity, nature, folk wisdom, and esoteric Buddhism, serves as a backdrop for advertisers selling beer, bottled water, and healthy foods, while Han musicians and artists reproduce these images in their work. Tibet-themed shops sell ethnic jewellery, clothing, and handbags in upscale shopping areas of Beijing, Shanghai, and other coastal cities. No longer are Tibetans characterised as materially backward, morally suspect, and victims of feudal superstitions. Nor is it necessarily the duty of Han Chinese to modernise Tibetans. Tibetans are now 'magical' and 'mysterious,' no longer simply 'superstitious.'

It is tempting to explain this transformation of Tibetans from primitive threat to mystical 'Other' among urban Chinese sophisticates as an appropriation of Orientalising Euro-American stereotypes about Tibet and Tibetans, mirroring what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) has termed anthropology's 'savage slot.' However, this reimagining of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism also reflects a return to a historical trajectory that has linked Tibet with China religiously and culturally since the Tang Dynasty (618-897 CE), especially during the Yuan (1271-1368 CE) and Qing (1644-1912 CE) eras (Tuttle 2005:222). Moreover, the most important Tibetan Buddhist site in mainland China outside of Tibet is Wutai Shan. This was recently illustrated by the announcement that the current Dalai Lama would like to visit this area, as did several of his predecessors, most notably the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who stayed at the Pusa Temple in Taihui during a pilgrimage tour in 1908.

Situating Wutai Shan

Wutai Shan (literally ‘the mountain of five peaks’) is located in central Shanxi Province, approximately three hundred and fifty kilometres southwest of Beijing. The Wutai area is a short distance from the Mongolian steppe and roughly equidistance between the cities of Datong, two hundred kilometres to the north and Taiyuan, two hundred and forty kilometres to the south. While the elevation in the centre of the valley at the monastery town of Taihui is approximately 1,100 meters, the surrounding peaks reach over 3,000 meters, making these the highest mountains in northern China. Wutai Shan was one of the PRC’s first national parks (1982) and forest preserves (1992), and was added to UNESCO’s world heritage list in 2009. Wutai National Park, which encompasses the entire valley, receives approximately 2.6 million visitors each year, almost all of whom are domestic residents.

The sacred aura of the Wutai area predates the introduction of Buddhism to China in the third century CE. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), the area was popular among Daoists as a refuge and retreat. In the fourth century, the rulers of the northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 BCE) constructed several temples in the area dedicated to the Bodhisattva Manjusri (Ch. *Wenshu Shuli*), and by the late Tang Dynasty (618-907) Wutai Shan, also known as Qingliang Shan, had become a major pilgrimage site for Buddhists throughout East Asia (Chou, 2007:108). This history illustrates not so much the sacralisation of Wutai Shan, as its identification, first by Daoists and later by Buddhists, as a place that possessed a sacred aura.

In the late thirteenth century the Mongolian leader Kublai Khan, founder of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), introduced Tibetan Buddhism to the area. This Tibetan presence later was expanded under the patronage of the Manchurian Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), particularly the Kangxi Emperor (reigned 1661-1722) and his grandson the Qianlong Emperor (reigned 1735-1799). During this long period of political stability and economic prosperity, Qing administrators poured resources into Wutai Shan and patronised the Gelukpa School of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1659 Tibetan Buddhists were granted control of the major religious sites at Wutai and in 1705 the Kangxi Emperor decreed that all ten Mahayana monasteries at Wutai be converted to Tibetan Buddhism (Kohle, 2008:78). Subsequently, these monasteries were directly funded by the imperial court during Qianlong’s reign (GOC, 2008(a):117).

In addition to official recognition and funding, Wutai Shan also became an Imperial destination. For example, between 1683 and 1710 Emperor Kangxi visited the valley five times. The role of Wutai was thus similar to that of the northeastern city of Jehol (Chengde), site of an extensive summer palace and temple complex built during the reigns of Kangxi and Qianlong. Occasional imperial visits to Wutai were replaced after 1710 by annual visits to Jehol. Wutai Shan and Jehol served dual purposes, as links between the Manchurian rulers and China’s imperial past and as sites that symbolically marked the differences between the (Manchurian) Qing and their Chinese subjects. Consequently, the Wutai religious economy flourished during the Qing era. At the time of the 1911 Nationalist Revolution, the valley was home to more than forty major temples and monasteries and several hundred lesser sites, including temples, caves, and shrines sacred to Han Chinese, Mongolians, and Tibetans, scattered in a radius of several hundred kilometres.

The 1911 Revolution had little material impact on Wutai Shan, in part because of its relative isolation. Direct funding from the court, however, ended. Monasteries adapted to these changes by seeking increased and more elaborate donations from pilgrims, especially those coming from Mongolia and Tibet. During the war with Japan (1937-1945) and the Chinese civil war (1945-1949) the Wutai valley suffered little damage. After the 1949 establishment of the People’s Republic, the new government initially placed monasteries and temples in the valley under state protection and allowed worship to continue. However, during the collapse of state authority in the Cultural Revolution, monks were beaten, evicted and in some cases killed, and temples and monasteries were attacked and damaged by Red Guards. It was only in the late 1980s that monasteries and temples were allowed to reopen, albeit under strict government control.

Wutai Shan was decreed a national scenic spot (*jingdian*) and national park by the State Council in 1982 and a national forest preserve in 1992. In 1997 it was listed as one of the top thirty-five ‘elite attractions’ in China by the National Tourism Bureau and in 1998 designated a civilised scenic spot (*wenming jingdian*) by the Shanxi Provincial government, which also issued a master plan for development of the area. The entire valley was added to China’s tentative list of UNESCO heritage sites in 2001.

This initial application for world heritage status did not discuss Wutai Shan's role as a pilgrimage site for Buddhist religious practice. Instead, the nomination report stressed its geological importance, unique ecology, value as a meteorological research site, role as a guerrilla base during the anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), and historical contribution to Chinese Buddhism. In terms of the latter, the nomination file emphasised the historical, artistic, and scientific merits of the site, not religious practice (UNESCO 2010b). In fact, religious practice was not mentioned at all. This reflects the Chinese state narrative that religion is a historical practice that will eventually disappear through a continued process of social evolution and a UNESCO emphasis on material culture as heritage.

A revised master plan issued in 2005 divided the national park into four zones centred on Taihuai town, location of the most important monasteries and temples. The plan also called for the resettlement of most local residents outside the park boundaries (GOC, 2008b:240-241). After this plan was approved by the Government of China and UNESCO officials, Wutai was formally nominated for world heritage status in March 2008 (GOC, 2008a:35). References to the political importance of Wutai for the Communist Party as a revolutionary site were eliminated. However, these were not replaced by a more prominent focus on Buddhism but instead an emphasis on the area's cultural and natural attributes. For example, the nomination file states that temples and monasteries demonstrate not the importance of Wutai Shan as a Buddhist pilgrimage site but 'Chinese ancient building techniques and art' while Buddhist statues 'display Chinese people's genius in art' (Ibid:14). Pilgrimage, the primary reason for people to visit this area for centuries, is mentioned, but only in passing and only then as a practice of foreign Buddhists and local Tibetans and Mongolians, not Han Chinese (GOC, 2008a:27). Instead of Buddhist pilgrimage practices, the nomination report highlights Wutai Shan's geological and biological characteristics (ibid:18-34).

Recent history, particularly Chinese Communist Party policies that prohibited religious practice under Mao, are noticeably absent from both this nomination report and the UNESCO evaluation of this application. The UNESCO evaluation report noted that,

Mount Wutai declined through social instability [during the last years of the Qing Dynasty and the Republican period (1911-1949), but] since 1949 and the founding of the People's Republic of China, efforts have been directed at reviving and protecting the buildings (UNESCO, 2009:4).

While this report suggests that Wutai National Park is a cultural and historical site akin to an open-air museum, or a natural site similar to Jiuzhaigou in Sichuan, or Yellowstone in Wyoming, USA, the reality is quite different. The valley currently has 47 functioning monasteries and temples, representing both Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism. According to official data, approximately 2,500 Buddhist monks and nuns live within the park boundaries (GOC, 2008a:234). This is the largest official concentration of Buddhist monks and nuns in China outside of Tibet.

Tourism and Faith at Wutai Shan

As noted above, official data suggest that few visitors to Wutai National Park have religious intentions. Yet, the temples inside the park are typically crowded with people worshipping Buddha (*baifo*) through kneeling, praying, bowing, and burning incense. Are local officials deliberately seeking to deceive by misreporting intentions? If so, for what purpose would they do so? And just whom would they seek to deceive?

This is an example of how visitor categories are *culturally* constructed. In this particular case, there is no reliable way for either national park or local government officials to know precisely *why* people visit Wutai Shan. This is because there is no national park entry form with a box to tick showing a reason for visiting. Instead, visitors enter a welcome hall, buy tickets, and pass through electronic turnstiles that count the raw number of arrivals. While registration forms must be filled out at hotels in and around the park, these do not ask the specific intentions of visitors. Hence there is no accurate way to calculate who is visiting for what reasons, except by relying on the popular discourse of religion in China: Mongolians and Tibetans (because of their ethnicity), and Han Chinese who publicly mark themselves *as* religious (by donning the robes of monks and nuns and shaving their heads) are popularly assumed to *be* religious; everyone else is assumed to be a tourist. This conventional wisdom is also reflected in how people identify, which in turn reflects the Communist Party's ambiguous relationship with religion.

According to government statistics, the total number of religious believers in China is 144 million, approximately ten percent of the population. However, this figure accounts only for people who either have a formal affiliation with a church, mosque, or temple, or self-identify with religious institutions or associations of the five officially recognised faiths (Buddhism,

Islam, Daoism, Protestant Christianity, and Catholicism). A much larger number of people engage in occasional religious practices without formal affiliation. In addition, folk practices (*minjian xinyang*) such as ancestor worship and lineage temples have been revived, particularly in rural areas, while fringe groups and various practices deemed 'superstitions' (*mixin*) are closely watched, controlled, and usually suppressed (Yao, 2007:173). This especially applies to activities labeled as feudal superstitions (*fengjian mixin*), which the CCP defines as social practices that involve a medium or formal social network, as opposed to 'common superstitions' (*yiban mixin*), another term for folk practices.

Both social science research and popular media reports suggest that a much broader part of the population practices religion to some extent, particularly Buddhism, than official statistics show (see Chau, 2011). For example, drawing on survey data collected in six Chinese cities in 1995 and 2005, Yao (2007) reports that only a small percentage of respondents (3.6% in 1995, 5.3% in 2005) self-identified as religious (Yao, 2007:174). Yet, a majority of those surveyed in 1995 believed in fate and fortune (57.7%), and a similar number engaged in religious practices such as burning paper money and worshipping ancestors (53.9%). In the 2005 survey, while just 2.6% of respondents identified as Buddhists, 14.8% of all respondents kept an image of Buddha at home, 23.1% had worshipped at a Buddhist temple in the previous year, and 77.2% agreed with the fundamental Buddhist precept that 'goodness will have good recompense' (Ibid:176-178). In other words, while religion as an exclusive or primary identity marker is quite low among Han Chinese, religious practice, especially Buddhism, is increasingly important and common, as seen in activities of visitors to Wutai Shan.

These data illustrate how improved living standards and increased incomes have not led to a decline in religious practice. But, nor does this demonstrate a religious revival. Some researchers have suggested that a turn to spirituality and religion reflects a popular desire for something to believe in after the CCP repudiation of Maoism, or as a coping mechanism in the face of rapid change in everyday life brought about by large-scale modernisation. While this is certainly plausible, pragmatic utilitarian reasons should not be overlooked (Lai, 2003; Yao, 2007). Buddhism in particular is much more visible in today's China, but not, at least for most practitioners, as a vehicle for spiritual salvation or as an escape from materialism.

Instead, it serves as a means of accentuating material wealth, gaining or maintaining health, or achieving specific goals.

This is illustrated by the most common Chinese translation of the English word, 'worship,' *bai*. Unlike 'worship,' *bai* is used specifically to describe acts of venerating the Buddha, for example by burning incense and ritually bowing. This is different than intercessory 'praying,' usually associated with the Abrahamic religions and translated as *qidao*, 'to entreat or beg.' Thus, while acts of piety at Buddhist temples are described as 'worshipping Buddha,' the actual intentions of practitioners may not be what non-Chinese speakers usually associate with the piety of, for example, Christian and Muslim worshippers. In addition, and as noted above, identifying as a Buddhist, Daoist, Christian, Muslim, or Catholic implies formal membership in a congregation or community. Thus the official data that appear to show that very few Chinese citizens are religious, in reality demonstrates that relatively few people identify as members of place-based religious communities. The pragmatic and situational practice of Buddhism and Daoism is widespread.

The reshaping of religious sites such as Wutai Shan into tourist and heritage destinations is a continuation of previous Party and State efforts to control religious practice. Both under Mao and during the ongoing reform period, major religious sites have not been destroyed. Even at the height of Maoist radicalism, the Party did not advocate a deliberate policy of physical destruction of religious sites. Instead, temples, churches and mosques were turned into schools, warehouses, and other public facilities, reflecting the utilitarian aspects of communism-in-practice. From the village level up through all layers of society, the Party-State appropriated religious space for educational and recreational purposes (Anagnost, 1994:221). Until recently, one could argue that state officials sought to cleanse these religious spaces of ritualised faith, defined in the language of the Party as feudal (*fengjian*) and superstitious (*mixin*), and transform them into healthy spaces (Ibid:222). Yet an examination of the religious economy of Wutai Shan demonstrates quite the opposite. The State and Party no longer seek to eradicate faith by banning its practice and seizing control of sacred space. Instead, it now seeks to manage faith through reshaping sacred places into heritage sites.

In Wutai National Park this takes various forms, from surveillance of monastic communities and registration

of monks and nuns (who in turn receive monthly stipends) to signage aimed at local residents that prescribes how they should act within the park (Shepherd, 2013). But, the most important effect of this state management effort is the radical remaking of space within the recently designated park core zone. Private homes, shops, and guesthouses in the village of Taihuai have been destroyed and farmland turned into green park space as part of the official management plan. With the approval of UNESCO, a majority of secular residents will eventually be relocated to a newly built satellite community outside the park's south gate. Far from leading to the commercialisation of the sacred, heritage preservation (and by extension tourism) has in this case had a very different effect. What is called in Chinese the *renao* ('hot and noisy') thick realities of Buddhism-in-practice is gradually being eradicated, replaced by a preserved zone that resembles the transnational park space of UNESCO world heritage guidelines.

Managed Faith

Wutai Shan is a world heritage site primarily visited by a particular type of tourist: residents of societies in which Buddhism has had a foundational role in identity formation for centuries. The vast majority of these visitors are Han Chinese, largely domestic but including members of the Chinese Diaspora. This illustrates the resurgent role of Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism, both as faith and as cultural phenomenon, in China over the last two decades, especially in urban areas. As residents have grappled with a radical transformation of lived experiences, ranging from officially approved as well as unofficially tolerated personal values, to choices in jobs, education, housing, and even personal relationships, religious practices have gained in popularity (Kleinman, 2010). However, this renewed interest is easily overlooked if religious *identity* is conflated with religious *practice*. While Han Chinese increasingly identify with having (situational) faith (*you xinyang*) they are much less likely to foreground possessing religion (*shi zongjiao*) as a key part of their lives.

If most of these Han Chinese visitors to Wutai Shan have worship intentions, are they therefore on a pilgrimage? Relative to the total number of visitors, few participate in formal pilgrimage circuits to the five peaks and designated sites along the way. Some tourists cover these routes by car or commercial tour bus, or spend a few days in a monastery guesthouse, either alone or with family or friends. A few, wealthy individuals fund private prayer services through

generous donations, or purchase the counsel of eminent monks. Most tourists arrive by car or tour bus and stay for two or three days. They tour the major sites in groups led by state-licensed guides, and in the evenings eat, drink, or visit cultural performances such as Shanxi Opera. However, what links all of these different forms of practice is the central role of *baifo*: venerating the Buddha. While not necessarily identifying as either pilgrims or religious adherents, Han Chinese tourists engage in pilgrimage-like religious activities. In doing so they confront a state-directed effort to manage their experiences, an effort ironically sanctioned by UNESCO's modernist vision of how world heritage should look.

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