Voices from the Margin:
**Journey of sacredness: Assessing how commercial activities in
China affect religious tourists' spiritual values**
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Goal and objectives of the dissertation*Goal*

The thesis seeks to assess how commercial activities affect the spiritual values of religious tourists

Objectives

The specific objectives of this research are aiming to:

(1) assess the level of perceived commercialization of religious tourism.

✓ categorize types of commercial activities;

✓ assess general attitudes of religious tourists towards commercial categories;

✓ identify key factors of commercialization that affect religious tourists' attitudes.

(2) assess the level of perceived spiritual values of religious tourists.

✓ explore general factors of spiritual values of religious tourists;

✓ confirm the validity and reliability of the extracted factors of spiritual values;

✓ measure which factors are more important to religious tourists;

✓ assess how the degree of belief affects spiritual values of religious tourists.

(3) test the relationship between religious commercialization and spiritual values.

✓ explore the linkage between religious commercialization and spiritual values of religious tourists;

analyse perceived impacts of commercialization on spiritual values based on religious tourism destination image;

Methodology

The Four Great Buddhist Mountains in China (FGBMs) provided the research context. A blog study, interviews and two surveys were employed to achieve the research aims. First of all, Mafengwo (mafengwo.com.cn) was selected as a data source for considering religious tourists' travel blogs. All valid blogs collected were focusing on religious commercialization and the spiritual values of tourists at FGBMs. Further, interview and survey work was designed to collect field data. While the researcher used the interviews to investigate the subjective impression of religious tourists towards commercial activities and spiritual values, the survey assessed tourists' perception of these topics with more quantitative data. Three fieldwork studies were reported in this research. On the first fieldwork trip the researcher conducted an indicative number of interviews and questionnaires from Mount Emei and Mount Putuo. Based on the feedback from these on-site tourists, the interview and survey were modified. Then further fieldwork consisting of 20 interviews and 200 questionnaires at each of the FGBMs respectively were undertaken. More supplementary data was needed in the third fieldwork to make sure that all the research questions were answered comprehensively. Finally, Excel and SPSS were applied to consider the descriptive data and to undertake factor analysis, and correlation analysis.

Results

Religious commercialization was a common issue at the FGBMs, with negative consequences for the tourists' experiences. Shopping, food and drinks, and accommodation were the most commercial categories. The influence of transport, entrance tickets, and entertainment on tourists was not so serious. The main problems in shopping were forced consumption, cheating behaviours, unclear prices, and bogus products. For the basic expenses, tourists were more concerned with price and the quality of products. Besides the tourism products, tourists also paid attention to the attitudes and behaviours of the staff at

the sites, the monks/nuns, and local residents.

In terms of spiritual values, the results of the interview analysis revealed that there were seven themes underpinning tourists' spiritual values. These themes were (1) a new window for life; (2) the need for religious belief; (3) importance of closer relationships; (4) inspiration from others; (5) enlightenment from nature; (6) the symbolism of wild animals and insects; and (7) sacredness of symbolic properties. They were influenced by both tourists' objective and existential experience (Wang, 1999; Pearce, 2005). The experience influenced the tourists' values and subsequently shaped their attitudes and daily behaviours (Homayouni, 2011; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). The researcher identified five factors characterising tourists' spiritual values and measured their relative importance. These factors were transcendence, general connectedness, inner balance, positive life direction and specific religious feelings. Similarities to studies about visiting churches in western culture were noted (Howden, 1992). The results suggested that within the context of eastern culture, people were also concerned with meaning or the purpose of life, their true selves and relationships with others, the natural environment, and specifically Buddha. In addition, tourists visiting Buddhist sites paid attention to their inner resources, religious beliefs and positive life direction. Meanwhile, tourists also had a sense of being connected with all forms of life in universe and noted their personal attempts to transcend individual physical or psychological conditions.

The linkage between commercialization and spiritual values, suggested that more than half of religious tourists had a high level of spiritual values, and the majority of them were influenced by the high level of commercialization. Tourists did enjoy the strong cultural and religious atmosphere, but were concerned about the negative impacts of commercial activities at the same time (Singh, 2004; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Wong, Ryan, & McIntosh, 2013). Additionally, the tourism destination images of the FGBMs

could be divided into four patterns: sacred with high spiritual values, cultural with long histories, attractive with natural features, and commercial with shops and restaurants. Around half of tourists thought that these mountains were sacred or cultural and full of religious and traditional elements. But the other half expressed the view that these mountains were famous principally for their natural features. Only a few tourists regarded these mountains as over commercialized. However, commercialisation was a persistent negative factor for all four groups.

Theoretical conclusions

This study makes a contribution to the theory on religious tourism by identifying religious tourists' spiritual values. No study identified by the researcher has tried to explore what kinds of spiritual values tourists can obtain at religious sites. This study has filled such a gap by extracting themes and factors about spiritual values of religious tourists in the Chinese context. Additionally, this study contributes to the theory by measuring the relative importance of religious tourists' spiritual values. Through the analysis of mean factor scores, the researcher found that inner balance and specific religious feelings are more important than the other three factors. This implies that tourists tend to care more about things which are closer to them, such as their inner feelings, true selves, and the meaning of life.

Practical application of the dissertation

This study contributes to practice by analysing impacts of commercialization on tourists' spiritual values. General suggestions are provided for the improvement of the FGBMs. For administrators and site managers, it is better to control the size and number of commercial places, like hotels, restaurants, and stores. Too many commercial places tend to cast a shadow on the glory of the temples. Further, many modern buildings do not fit with the architecture and feel of traditional Buddhism temples and statues. For those who operate tourism businesses, it is desirable to consider the quality of products and set reasonable price to attract more return customers. For

immediate service personnel and religious staff, the attitudes towards tourists could be improved as reports of latent hostility or inaccessibility were apparent. Further, this study also proposes some key points to improve religious tourists' spiritual values. On one hand, it is important to avoid the over commercialization of religious places. On the other hand, it is necessary to decrease secularization of monks or nuns and revive traditional rituals. These directions can be useful to enhance the overall religious atmosphere. More importantly, encouraging tourists to participate in the rituals is a positive way to cultivate their spiritual values.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of Chapter 1

The first chapter introduces the global development of religious tourism. Two core concepts, religious commercialization and spiritual values, are then discussed and clarified. This chapter also presents the research questions, aims and procedures.

Abstract of Chapter 2

A second chapter reviews much highly relevant literature. It consists of five sections: global religious tourism, Chinese religious tourism, religious commercialization, tourist experience, and spiritual values. This chapter provides a basis for research on commercialization and the tourist experience, and aims to better understand the relationships between religious commercialization and tourists' spiritual values as identified in previous studies.

Abstract of Chapter 3

The third chapter introduces the research methodology and the location of the studies. This chapter describes the Four Great Buddhist Mountains (FGBMs) in China, and then discusses the relevant methods and methodological framework of the research. An emphasis is placed on using multiple methods to enrich the work.

Abstract of Chapter 4

The fourth chapter evaluates the level of commercialization at the FGBMs. Both qualitative and quantitative tools were

employed to assess tourists' attitudes towards different types of commercial activity. The commercial activities can be identified in three domains and divided into seven categories. The results were discussed and then this study built a model about religious commercialization. It was found that food and drinks, shopping, and accommodation were the most commercial categories. Many tourists were influenced by the shopping stores, street stalls, and mobile vendors. Some behaviours, such as indeterminate price, bad service and forced consumption, made tourists feel annoyed.

Abstract of Chapter 5

The fifth chapter tries to assess tourists' spiritual values in religious places. Interviews and a survey were selected as the research methods. The interview analysis was used to investigate tourists' subjective themes about spiritual values. And the objective survey analysis was employed to extract factors of spiritual values and measure their relative importance. The extracted factors of spiritual values are transcendence, general connectedness, inner balance, positive life direction, and specific religious feelings.

Abstract of Chapter 6

The sixth chapter explores how commercial activities in religious places affect tourists' spiritual values. Two kinds of interviews were conducted at the FGBMs. The first interview focuses on tourists' perceived level of religious commercialization and spiritual values, and how commercial activities affect their feelings. The second interview tried to understand the general impression of religious tourists towards destination images and ascertain the factor influencing their views. The second objective assists in contextualising the relative importance of commercialization in the overall views of a destination. It was found that Tourists' spiritual values were enhanced by others' Buddhist beliefs, devoted acts, traditional rituals, cultural architectures, and natural features. But many commercial activities, non-standard staff services, low quality of tourism products, and environmental pollution

appeared to negatively affect tourists' impressions on religious sites.

Abstract of Chapter 7

The last chapter considers the key points from the research findings. These findings contribute to the academic literature, and practical management for religious tourism. In addition, this chapter reviews the limitations of the current studies, and proposes directions for further research. Further, the trajectory of religious tourism development in China has been predicted. Some possible opportunities and challenges for developing religious tourism sustainably are highlighted.

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