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Taming the sacred?

Pilgrimage, Worship and Tourism in Contemporary China

In this paper I describe and analyze the impact of tourism on the Buddhist pilgrimage destination of Mount Wutai (Ch. Wutai Shan) in Shanxi, China. Designated a national park in 1982 and world heritage site in 2009, Wutai Shan now attracts more than four million visitors a year, raising concerns about degradation of a sacred landscape. But, contrary to state suggestions, religious practice remains widespread among visitors, although the extent to which most visitors identify as Buddhists is questionable.

In this paper I describe and analyze the impact of tourism on the Buddhist pilgrimage destination of Mount Wutai (Ch. *Wutai Shan*) in Shanxi, China. Wutai Shan has been one of the most important Buddhist sites in East Asia for centuries, drawing visitors from China, Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, India, and Japan. In 1982 the Wutai Valley was included on China's first list of national parks and in 2009 (was) listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. 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, the vast majority of whom are citizens of the People's Republic of China. Is this then yet another example of a once-sacred place that has been "Disneyfied" by mass tourism? In other words, does Wutai Shan demonstrate 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 identify as Buddhists is questionable. This speaks to the difference between "worshipping Buddha" (*baifo*) and self-identifying as a Buddhist in contemporary China. Moreover, religious 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, the Chinese state does not view tourism as a threat to this site. Instead, by eliminating a vibrant informal 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 – in short, to *tame* Buddhism and deploy it as a development tool.[1]

Religious practice at Wutai Shan, as at other sacred spaces in the PRC, is managed (by state actors) and enacted (by visitors in response to state directives). The result is a quotidian religious space in 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 gaze of various parts of the state. If UNESCO "World Heritage" signifies unique landscapes that symbolically belong to a universal audience, this specific World Heritage Site illustrates an ongoing Chinese state effort to rationalize and formalize 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.

Tourism at Religious Sites

Social scientist Zhang Mu and his colleagues have described religious tourism in China as, "a special tourist activity orientated by religious culture with the help of a specific eco-cultural environment."[2] They suggest that most Han Chinese do not believe in a deity or practice religion, and therefore visit historic pilgrimage sites for cultural and historical reasons as "cultural pilgrims."[3] Similarly, Zhang Cheng, while agreeing that the number of Han Chinese visitors to domestic religious sites has grown, suggests that contemporary Chinese tourists do not practice religion.[4] Chinese state tourism officials label religious destinations in the People's Republic of China (PRC), particularly Buddhist sites that attract an ethnic cross-section of visitors including Han, Meng (Mongolian) and Zang (Tibetan), as "religious-

cultural tourism" (*zongjiao wenhua luyou*) destinations. For example, according to official statistics, religious devotees constitute less than ten percent of annual tourist arrivals at Wutai Shan. The most comprehensive data on visitor arrivals, compiled for Wutai Shan's World Heritage 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.[5] 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.

This data appears to support a claim that relatively fews ethnic Han people practice religion. From a state 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. Hence, increased tourism at such erstwhile pilgrimage destinations is desirable, since this generates revenue to further a national campaign of "development" (*fazhan*) and "modernization" (*xiandaihua*). This perspective is markedly different from that of the UNESCO and affiliated institutions such as the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). These international organizations view sites such as Wutai Shan as part of a collective World Heritage that require protection from, broadly speaking, modernization, in this particular case state development policies that have sought to expand the domestic tourism industry for political, economic, and "spiritual" (*jingshen*) concerns.[6] Heritage in contemporary China, be this religious or otherwise, is not simply a matter of balancing preservation of the past and development in the present. Instead, it's part and parcel of a broader state-directed campaign to maintain material (*wuzhi*) development while increasing the civilizational level of the Chinese nation.[7]

Pilgrimage and Tourism: Past and Present

Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism all have deep historical pilgrimage traditions in China, particularly a shared affinity for mountains believed to possess a charismatic aura. By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), four Buddhist mountains had been identified as 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.[8] The importance of mountains as destination is clear in the phrase used to describe this early type of cultural tourism, *mingshan shengdi*, "famous mountains and great places." For centuries, lay people have visited sacred mountains for reasons of health, penance, and prosperity, while Tibetan, Mongolian and Han Chinese monks and nuns have done so to pray and make merit.

With the retreat of the Party-State from the private sphere a degree of religious practice has re-emerged in contemporary post-Maoist China. For Buddhists as well as other religious practitioners, the key state concern is political: as long as they avoid political issues and do not pose a threat to the government or Chinese Communist Party (CCP), religious practitioners are largely left alone. 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 shortcuts to raising their personal quality (*suzhi*). Meanwhile, Tibet as both place and metaphor has become an attraction for urban sophisticates, "Tibet" as a symbol of simplicity, nature, folk wisdom, and esoteric Buddhism serves as a backdrop for advertisers selling everything from bottled water to health foods, while Han musicians, artists, and filmmakers reproduce these images in their work. Tibet-themed shops selling ethnic jewelry, clothing, and handbags are increasingly common in upscale shopping areas of Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities. Annual tourist arrivals in Lhasa are projected to reach fifteen million by 2020.

In short, Tibet, Tibetans, and by extension Tibetan Buddhism have undergone a transformation in popular Han Chinese culture. No longer are Tibetans characterized as materially backward, morally suspect, and victims of feudal superstitions. Nor is it necessarily the duty of Han Chinese to modernize 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 elites as an appropriation of Orientalizing Euro-American stereotypes about Tibet and Tibetans, mirroring anthropology's "savage slot."[9] 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.[10] And the most important Tibetan Buddhist site in mainland China outside of Tibet is Wutai Shan.

Situating Wutai Shan

Wutai Shan (literally "the mountain of five peaks") is a high altitude valley located in central Shanxi Province, approximately three hundred fifty kilometers southwest of Beijing and a short distance from the Mongolian steppe. It is also roughly equidistant between the cities of Datong, two hundred kilometers to the north and Taiyuan, two hundred forty kilometers to the south. While the elevation in the center 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.

The sacred aura of Wutai predates the introduction of Buddhism to China in the first 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 dedicated to the Bodhisattva Manjusri (Ch. *Wenshu*), and by the late Tang Dynasty (618-907) Wutai Shan had become a major pilgrimage site for Buddhists throughout East Asia.[11] In the late thirteenth century Kublai Khan, the Mongolian 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 by Kangxi (reigned 1661-1722) and his grandson Qianglong (reigned 1735-1799). During this long period of political stability and economic prosperity, Qing administrators poured resources into Wutai Shan and patronized 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.[12] These monasteries were subsequently directly funded by the imperial court during Qianlong's reign.[13]

Wutai Shan also became an imperial destination, frequently visited by emperors. 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. 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 about a several hundred kilometer radius.

The 1911 Nationalist Revolution had little 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 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 designated 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 civilized 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.[14]

A revised master plan issued in 2005 divided the national park territory into four zones centered 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.[15]

In addition, the nomination file stated that temples and monasteries illustrated 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".[16] Pilgrimage, the primary reason why people had visited Wutai for centuries, was mentioned, but only as a practice of foreign Buddhists and local Tibetans and Mongolians.[17] Instead of Buddhist pilgrimage practices, the nomination report highlighted Wutai

Shan's geological and biological characteristics.

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 Province or Yellowstone in Wyoming, USA, the reality is quite different. The national park includes forty-seven functioning monasteries and temples, representing both Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, approximately 2,500 Buddhist monks and nuns live within the park boundaries, according to state data.[18] This is the largest official concentration of Buddhist monks and nuns in China outside of Tibet.

In addition, the temples inside the park are usually crowded with people clearly worshipping Buddha (*baifo*) through kneeling, praying, bowing, and burning incense. Until recently, state officials sought to cleanse these religious spaces of ritualized faith, defined in the language of the Communist Party as feudal (*fengjian*) and superstitious (*mixin*). However, the Party no longer seeks 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 process takes various forms, from surveillance of monastic communities and registration of monks and nuns (who in turn receive monthly government stipends) to signage aimed at local residents that prescribes how they should act within the park.[19] 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, most secular residents will eventually be relocated to a satellite community outside the park's south gate. Far from leading to the commercialization 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.

Managing Faith

Wutai Shan may be a World Heritage Site, but the vast majority of visitors are domestic Han Chinese. This illustrates the resurgent role of Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism, both as faith practices and cultural phenomenon,

in China over the last two decades, especially in urban areas. As residents have grappled with a radical transformation of lived experience, ranging from officially sanctioned (divorce, the accumulation of private wealth) to unofficially tolerated (co-habitation, same-sex relationships, and sex work) social practices and personal responsibility for work, education, housing, and health care religious practices have gained in popularity.[20] 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 arrive by car or 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.

Notes

1. Emily Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).
2. Zhang Mu, Huang Li, Wang Jian-Hong, Liu Ji, Jie Yangeng, and Lai Xiting. "Religious Tourists and Cultural Pilgrimage: A Chinese Perspective" in *Religious Tourism and Festivals Management: An International Perspective, eds. Rzaq Raj and Nigel Norpeth* (Cambridge, MA: CABI Press), 101.
3. Ibid, 105.
4. Zhang Cheng. *The Distinctive Tourism of Chinese Religion* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Peoples Press, 2002).
5. Government of China (GOC), *Nomination Report for Mount Wutai* (Beijing: State

Administration of Cultural Heritage, January, 2008), 233.

6. The Chinese term "spiritual" *jingshen* does not connote a sacred or cosmological element; it instead evokes the idea of a unique and essential characteristic, of "Chineseness.".
7. Robert Shepherd, *Faith in Heritage: Displacement, Development, and Religious Tourism in China* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013). See also Robert Shepherd and Larry Yu, *Heritage Management, Tourism and Governance in China: Managing the Past to Serve the Present* (New York: Springer Press, 2012).
8. Pal Nyíri, *Scenic Spots: Chinese Tourism, the State, and Cultural Authenticity* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2006), 12-13.
9. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness" in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox, 17-44. (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991).
10. Gray Tuttle, *Tibetan Buddhists in the Making of Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 222.
11. Chou Wen-Shing, "Ineffable Paths: Mapping Wutaishan in Qing Dynasty China," *Art Bulletin* 89, no. 1 (2007), 108.
12. Natalie Kohle, "Why did the Kangxi Emperor go to Wutai Shan? Patron, Pilgrimage, and the Place of Tibetan Buddhism at the Early Qing Court," *Late Imperial China* 29 no. 1 (June 2008), 78.
13. Government of China (GOC), *Nomination Report for Mount Wutai*, 117.
14. UNESCO, "Tentative World Heritage List: Mount Wutai Administrative Bureau," accessed January 17, 2016: http://whc.unesco.org/archive/advisory_body_evaluation/1279.pdf.
15. Government of China (GOC), *Conservation and Management Plan for the Nominated World Heritage Site of Mount Wutai* (Beijing: State Administration of Cultural Heritage, January, 2008), 240-241.
16. Government of China (GOC), *Nomination Report for Mount Wutai,* 14.
17. Ibid, 27.
18. Ibid, 234.
19. Shepherd, *Faith in Heritage*, 2013.
20. Adam Kleinman, "Remaking the Moral Person in China," *The Lancet, 375* (March-April 2010), 1074-1075.