



# The spiritual or secular tourist? The experience of Zen meditation in Chinese temples



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Participant observation of Chinese tourists at a Zen mediation camp.
- Analyses the experience of tourists classified as inward or outward directed.
- Examines the role of temple, rituals and landscape in the formation of tourist experience.
- Assesses the flows between secular and sacred understandings by tourists at the mediation camp.

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## ABSTRACT

By exploring the meditation camps in Nuonatayuan and Hongfa Temples, the paper examines what motivates tourists to experience Zen meditation in Chinese temples, and how they shape those experiences. The study is based on participant observation and thus includes material drawn from observation, informal and formal interviews, personal experiences and secondary documentation. From the analysis, it can be seen that the meditative experience includes sacred and secular experiences, while in the commercial setting the experience shifts to and fro between secularism and sacredness. It is noted that the tourist context of separation from daily life, the landscape values of the locations, the temple atmosphere, the sharing of experiences with like-minded individuals, contact with monks and mentors all contribute to the senses of personal wellness that participants obtain.

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## 1. Introduction

Within China, and more globally, Zen Meditation has gained recognition as a tourism product in recent years, thereby adding to the range of tourism experiences that promise spiritual, psychological and potential health benefits. According to statistics cited on the Buddhism Channel of the Chinese web services of Tencent, over one hundred Chinese temples have been holding themed meditation camps since 2014. Tourists come to the temples, eating, working, meditating and living with the monks during the period of the ‘meditation camps’, hoping to find solutions to personal problems, to simply add to their experiences of life, or alternatively

to escape daily pressures (Cooper, 1991; Sadhra, Shaver, & Brown, 2010). Certainly, in a wider context, evidence exists that Vipassana, a form of meditation derived from Theravada Buddhism (Gunaratana, 2002; Young, 1997), has provided significant benefits in stress release (Davis & Hayes, 2011) and therefore possesses a potential for achieving these objectives.

Therefore, in some instances the experience might be cathartic and while the initial purchase of such an experience may be motivated by a wish to relax, some may be converted to Buddhism (Tweed, 1999). This type of potential result raises interesting questions such as, what motivates tourists to engage in Zen mediation camps, what did those tourists experience and how was this transformation produced? And are these experiences entirely physiological in nature, or do the tourists attain some sense of the spiritual?

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First it seeks to examine the concepts of the Zen mediation camp within the wider literature

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of religious tourism, and in doing so seek to locate the discussion in a Chinese contemporary and historical context. Second, it then examines the process of participation in a Zen Meditation camp from two perspectives. The first is based on a research method of participatory observation, while a second perspective is premised on the shared statements made by other participants at two meditation centers. The final section of the paper seeks to draw out themes, and so contribute to the literature on tourism and spirituality by this examination of the hitherto little researched phenomenon of Zen Meditation camps in China.

## 2. Literature review

Current studies on meditation, pilgrimage and religious tourism primarily adopt perspectives derived from psychology, medical science or religious studies in an attempt to measure the effect of pray and meditation on an individual's sense of well-being and behavior (Wu & Lin, 2001). Hence researchers have sought to explain the experiences in terms of addressing anomie generated by a consumerist, secular society (e.g. Smith & Kelly, 2006) while Opdebeek and Habisch (2011), in the Chinese context, talk of the need to rediscover the 'soul' of Chinese classical culture. Sharf (1995), however, suggests that some care needs to be taken when seeking to define meditative experiences, arguing the latter term is over-used due to a western influence on Vipassana, and that one should pay more heed to the "key technical terms relating to Buddhist praxis, including *Samatha* (concentration), *vipasjand* (insight), *samddhi* (trance), *samdpatti* (higher attainment), *prajñā* (wisdom), *smṛti* (mindfulness), *srotadpatti* (stream-entry), *kensho* (seeing one's nature), *satori* (understanding), and even *makyo* (realm of illusion)" (Sharf, 1995, p.231). He suggests that conventionally these are "interpreted phenomenologically: (and) are assumed to designate discrete "states of consciousness" experienced by Buddhist practitioners in the midst of their meditative practice" (Sharf, 1995, p.231). He also suggests that traditionally the meditative was not a key part of monastic life, but was a twentieth century invention (or reform), and this awareness of the reform movement is significant when seeking to understand the current "product" or "service" being offered in meditation "camps".

For its part, the tourism literature represents a focus on tourists (Eade & Sallnow, 1991), which requires researchers to care more about what tourists actually say. As Collins-Kreiner (2010, p. 451) notes, "the visitor experience, whether we refer to it as pilgrimage or tourism, is in fact not homogeneous and comprises different types. The motivations of visitors are also highly diverse, ranging from curiosity to a search for meaning" and thereby implies the need to closely examine the discourse used by pilgrims (or the meditative) to better understand the nature of their experiences.

Currently much of the English language academic literature originates from studies of pilgrimage and visitation to churches and examines to what degree visits to such sites are prompted by a "pilgrimage motivation". It would appear that for many visitors, meditation may well be only a part of the whole visit. While such visitors can share time in pray and meditation with clergy and so obtain an experience of sharing practices related to the spiritual that may lead to belief, (e.g. Andriotis, 2009; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005), other motives (in this research context) may impinge based upon levels of understanding of Buddhism (Wong, McIntosh, & Ryan, 2013a; Wong, Ryan, & McIntosh, 2013b; Yeh, Ryan, & Liu, 2009). Thus another issue is the context of belief systems. Zen Buddhism is a practice that is aware of the role of landscape, ritual activity and factors other than simply the self in this emphasis on an awareness of the "here and now". Consequently other factors can be of great importance in the Zen meditative experience. Additionally, in the Chinese cases studied here, religious tourism

differs from that described in the west (Zhang, Huang, and Wang, 2007). For example, Zen meditation in Chinese temples is often organized with fixed activities and strict rules, and tourists wishing to participate may well be required to complete questionnaires before being permitted to join the rituals of Zen meditation. This therefore differs from the practices associated Buddhist or Taoist sites for festivals as described for example by Ryan and Gu (2010) or Wong, McIntosh, and Ryan (2016).

## 3. Zen meditation: sacred or secular?

### 3.1. Sacred and secular in religious tourism

In the English language literature about pilgrimage and the use of sacred places for tourism, reference may well be made to continua such as the "sacred and secular", and "pilgrimage and tourism" (Smith, 1992). As a branch of religious tourism, Zen meditation in temples can also be measured by those concepts, but encompasses further notions associated with physical and psychological well-being, and senses of identity with self, others, god and the universe. This is not to state that these latter questions do not arise in the case of pilgrimage, whether of the West or Asia, but the process of time spent in meditation camps, the temporary retreat from the world that is involved, the living of an alternative life for a time in the company of monks and nuns and sharing in rituals – all these encourage more introspection. In the West the parallel would be the 'retreat' practiced by primarily the Catholic and High Anglican Church.

Certainly pilgrimage and tourism are two concepts that are historically entwined as evidenced by the Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and it is said pilgrimage is the earliest form of tourism (Cohen, 2003; Singh, 2005). Traditionally (despite the evidence of Chaucer's work) pilgrimage is thought to be pious, and pilgrims are said to believe in religious laws as they set on the journey to fulfill some sacred dreams (Smith, 1992). Compared to the secular, superficial and playful nature of tourism (Boorstin, 1964; Turner, 1975), pilgrimage is presented as being sacred because of its religious essence (Durkheim, 1995). Pilgrimage to tourism is juxtapositioned as is the sacred to the secular, both representing two extremes of tourism, that is, the religious versus the hedonistic.

Given the complexities and nuances involved in visitation to sacred places, the differing disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology and other sciences have been brought to bear upon the subject (Sopher, 1967; Vukoni, 1996) in attempts to rethink the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism. Morinis (1992) coined the term 'centre of the world' when re-conceptualizing the geographical destination as not only a place far away in physical distance (Eliade, 1969), but also as a place full of values and the spiritual center of a belief system. Equally Turner's concept of the liminal (Turner, 1987) has also been paradoxically applied to such centers (Turner & Turner, 1969). The remoteness of the center not only means geographical distance (such as places located in otherwise vacant desert), but also a distance in cultural terms (the center surrounded by a busy commercial society) (Turner & Turner, 1978; Turner, 1973). Cohen (1979) proposed a division of five modes of tourist experience according to the tourists' demand for 'the center' and the distance from it, and the potential existential mode of pilgrimage. The center in Cohen's research is more akin to a spiritual center beyond native society and culture than is simply the traditional center of pilgrimage, for it is place where both pilgrims and tourists are pursuing an internal center of their own and searching for the 'extra-ordinary' that provides a meaning. It appeals because it possesses an 'authenticity' that satisfies the demand for a reality outside the experience of daily (normal) life. In MacCannell's words, the tourist experience appeals to authenticity

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