

Research Paper

Cultural heritage elements in tourism: A tier structure from a tripartite analytical framework

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ABSTRACT

The sheer richness of cultural heritage (CH), as shown in the quantity, diversity, and different levels of quality of its elements, challenges people who try to grasp it. This paper develops a tripartite framework to obtain a holistic and structural understanding of CH elements of a tourism site based on their positions in cultural heritage, tourism production, and tourist consumption. Multiple methods were used to operationalize this framework in a case study of Yueyang Tower in China. Eight dimensions were derived to evaluate CH elements: cultural importance, contribution to place, physical presentation, onsite interpretation, general importance to visitors, prior knowledge, motivation to visit, and onsite experience. A tier structure was identified comprising: the dominant element, the distinctive few, and the nebulous plenty. Within this structure are processes of inherited value assessment, national value transmission, and local value thematization. This research provides knowledge grounded in empirical cultural data and offers insights into issues in cultural heritage tourism practice and research.

1. Introduction

Attractions are at the core of the tourism system as both critical resources for destination development and motivators for visitors, but they are still under-researched (Leask, 2010, 2016). Cultural heritage is one of the most important types of visitor attractions (Leask, 2010, 2016; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011). Indeed, significant numbers of tourists visit cultural heritage attractions every year (Chen & Huang, 2017). Studies on cultural heritage tourism attractions are also rich (Leask, 2016; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011). However, both the concept and composition of cultural attractions are complicated, which creates difficulties for research and management (Loulanski, 2006; Vecco, 2010). Cultural heritage attractions are often the aggregate of many cultural elements, which are not necessarily organically connected to each other. This is particularly true in places where prolonged civilization-s have existed. For instance, in China, the longstanding civilization and historical vicissitudes have left multiple layers of culture elements in every location. These heritage resources are becoming better understood Due to the recent census and inventory efforts by national and local institutions, which registered 766,722 heritage sites and 108.15 million elements of movable cultural heritage (State Administration of Cultural Heritage, 2011; 2017); countless poems and prose pieces were also recorded (e.g. Professional Committee of Historical and Cultural Tower Protection [PCHCTP] 2015, 2016). The sheer richness of this cultural heritage, as shown in the quantity,

diversity, and different levels of quality of its specific elements, represents a daunting challenge for anyone who tries to grasp it, both in general and specifically for cultural heritage tourism providers and visitors. It is a basic human cognitive tendency and function to find structures in such murky phenomenon (Lai & Li, 2012). However, currently, there seems to be a lack of research at such a micro level about specific heritage elements and their structure at a specific place. Such failure could lead to ignorance and underutilization of heritage elements in tourism development, deficiency and superficiality in tourism products and interpretation, and hence a lack of rich, deep, and satisfying experience for tourists (Song & Tan, 2012).

In the face of such rich heritage, this study aims to develop a holistic and structural understanding of the roles and positions of specific cultural heritage elements at a tourism site. Existing studies that are related to such richness in cultural heritage tourism are reviewed and analyzed in four perspectives: geographic scale, heritage resource coverage, cultural heritage tourism parties, and structural strategy. Then the current study focuses on a site, covers its heritage elements holistically, and develops a tripartite framework that includes the three sides of cultural heritage tourism (cultural heritage, tourism production, tourist consumption) to analyze the heritage elements of Yueyang Tower Scenic Area in Hunan Province, China. Suitable for the exploratory nature of this research, a general grounded theory approach is adapted. Multiple methods are used to examine the three sides along eight dimensions simultaneously, which reveal a tier structure of

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cultural heritage elements. Mechanisms that could explain the structure are also explored. Overall, the study contributes to the field by developing a systematic approach to the analysis and understanding of the entirety of cultural heritage elements at a site and providing a structure that could help managers describe, evaluate, and explain their cultural heritage resources, which could further help the development of tourism product and experience.

2. Literature review and research framework

“Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations” (UNESCO, 2008, p. 5). The richness and complexity of cultural heritage is evidenced in the semantic evolution of this concept (Loulanski, 2006; Vecco, 2010). Currently cultural heritage is commonly divided into two categories: tangible and intangible (Vecco, 2010). Heritage tourism focuses on the touristic use of both tangible and intangible remnants of the past (Park, 2014). While heritage tourism developers must inevitably deal with the richness of heritage at a place, this issue has yet to be addressed directly and systematically in academic research and in practice. The studies reviewed here are deemed relevant as they deal with the use of specific heritage resources in tourism. Although these studies were conducted under different topics, they are reinterpreted here in four dimensions based on a critical analysis of the literature and the current study (Fig. 1). The first dimension is the geographic scale covered, such as a region, a site, or a certain type/element of heritage within a site. This dimension is related to the width and depth of heritage resources exploited in tourism. Generally, the larger the geographic scale, the more the heritage resources are covered, but less in-depth discussions of the resources are carried out. The second dimension is coverage of heritage resources (i.e. whether resources are covered holistically, selectively, or individually). These two dimensions involve research decisions about the object and scope of the research. The third dimension comes from a general notion that heritage resources are developed in tourism production to provide products for tourist consumption. Research may take any of the three cultural heritage parties as the focal or starting point of analysis (resource, production, or consumption). The fourth dimension is the structural strategy used to organize the rich heritage resources, such as layering, theming, storytelling, and evaluating-ranking. These dimensions are interrelated: the review below uses the geographic dimension as a convenient starting point. Then the position of the current study is presented, which is underlined in Fig. 1.

First, there are studies at the regional level that discuss the development of cultural heritage tourism in a province or city. In such research, heritage resources are often listed at a nominal level without delving into their specifics. Two ways to organize these resources are identified. The more popular one is theming (e.g. Mitsche et al., 2013; Teng, Ma, & Shen, 2006). Zheng, Xu, and Dai (2003) proposed a tier structure as they attempted to develop strategies for the cultural heritage development of the city of Suzhou in China. Whether or not this model is valid remains to be examined.

Second, at the site level, researchers have examined heritage attractions/sites within a certain region to assess their potential for

tourism development. Such studies, as listed in Table 1, involve first evaluating these sites according to predetermined criteria such as market appeal and robustness (du Cros, 2001), cultural values, physical values, product values, and experiential values (McKercher & Ho, 2006). Each site is treated as one entity and assigned a value on each criterion and ranked accordingly. Priority in tourism development is given to sites with high ranking: hence, a selective approach is taken here. Some studies cover multiple sides in the production process by using multiple research methods: for example, Li and Lo (2004) used documentary research, site observation, and questionnaire survey to explore the resource, production and consumption sides of cultural heritage tourism. However, the specifics and structure of within-site elements and between-site elements in the region are not discussed.

Third, studies have been conducted about a specific type or element of heritage. This seems to be a practical and workable way to tackle the rich cultural heritage. Table 2 shows the studies in the Chinese context, based on which the following observations are made. Firstly, by focusing on one type or element of heritage, an in-depth understanding of the heritage can be obtained. This tends to be accomplished either by applying general concepts and testing common theories (e.g. constraints, attitude, motivation, authenticity, perceived value, experience, satisfaction, and loyalty in the studies about calligraphic landscapes by Zhang, Zhang, Cheng, Lu, and Shi (2012, 2013, 2013, 2014); sustainability in du Cros, Bauer, Lo, and Rui (2005) and Sofield and Li (1998)) or by adopting existing cultural concepts (e.g. Buddhist worldviews in Wong, McIntosh, & Ryan, 2013) or generating culturally grounded concepts (e.g. poetic gaze in Yu & Xu, 2016; moral gaze in Yu & Xu, 2018). Secondly, each study has its own research objective and is indicative of the individuality and fragmentation of visitor attractions/sites and academic research in the subfield of heritage tourism (Leask, 2010, 2016). On the one hand, these different types/elements of heritage examined belong to common Chinese traditional culture rather than different local cultures of the study sites. When put together, these studies contribute to understanding the common Chinese culture and its richness as well as the vast country and its population under the influence of this culture. On the other hand, an integrated understanding of the different types of cultural heritage and their interrelationships has yet to be developed. Thirdly, the studies have focused on one element or one type of cultural heritage at a certain place while ignoring other elements, depending on the salience of such element and the researchers’ attention and interest. However, each site involved arguably has a rich and diverse accumulation of cultural heritage, which is yet to be studied holistically.

Note: Studies that are not discussed in the text are omitted from the list of references Due to space limitations.

In comparison to the literature analyzed above, this study is framed along the four dimensions as follows.

- *Geographic scale: Heritage elements in a site.* As the research goal is to understand the rich heritage in cultural heritage tourism, the study aims for a relatively in-depth analysis of specific heritage elements. This is more feasible at the site level than at the regional level (a province or city) as the latter involves a quantity of heritage

Research Goal:	A structural understanding of the rich heritage elements in cultural heritage tourism			
Geographical scale:	Region	Site	Heritage element	
Heritage resource coverage:	Holistic	Selective	Individual	
Cultural heritage tourism parties:	Resource	Production	Consumption	
Structural strategy:	Layering	Theming	Storytelling	Evaluating-ranking

Fig. 1. Dimensions of research on the rich cultural heritage elements in tourism.

Table 1
Studies on cultural heritage tourism potential assessment at the site level.

Article	Cultural heritage tourism assessment criteria (pre-determined)	Methods and assessors
du Cros (2001)	Market appeal; robustness	(Theoretical paper)
Li and Lo (2004)	Market appeal; product design needs; cultural significance; robustness	Documentary research; site observation; questionnaire survey of tourists
McKercher and Ho (2006)	Cultural values; physical values; product values; experiential values	Site visits by post-graduate students in a Cultural Tourism class
Laing, Wheeler, Reeves, and Frost (2014)	Experience value; type of experience (peak vs. supporting)	Site visits; interviews with supply-side stakeholders
Yan, Gao, and Zhang (2017)	Resource values; development state	Questionnaire survey of tourists

Table 2
Research on different types of cultural heritage in Chinese tourism.

Types of cultural heritage	Articles
Architecture	du Cros et al. (2005)
Calligraphic landscape	Zhang, Tang, Shi, Liu & Wang, 2008; Zhang et al., 2012; Zhou, Zhang, & Edelman, 2013; Qi, Yang, & Zhang, 2013; Li, Huang, & Zhang, 2014
Painting	Ong and Jin (2017)
Novel	Ryan, Zhang, Gu & Lin, 2009
Poetry	Yu and Xu (2016)
Prose and Confucian morality	Yu and Xu (2018)
Confucianism	Yan & Bramwell, 2008
Religion (Taoism)	Shuo, Ryan & Liu, 2009
Religion (Buddhism)	Ryan & Gu, 2010; Wong et al., 2013; Jiang, Ryan & Zhang, 2018
Traditional beliefs and practices	Chen & Chen 2017; Zhou, Zhang, Zhang & Li, 2018
Festival	Sofield and Li (1998)

elements that may be too immense to be handled in depth. A site, comparable to the concept of visitor attraction (Leask, 2016), has a fixed, permanent resource within a set geographic or management boundary and is the basic unit of production and consumption in tourism.

- *Heritage resource coverage: Holistic.* Studying the entire cultural heritage at a site can provide a more holistic understanding of the cultural heritage of a place and the tourism experience it offers, including the relative position of and the relationship between different types and elements of cultural heritage. Such a comprehensive and structural understanding of cultural heritage at a place may further help the planning and design of tourism products and experiences. Note that ‘holistic’ does not mean exhaustive, as the researchers are limited by what is available to them at the time of research.
- *Cultural heritage tourism parties: A tripartite analytical framework that simultaneously analyzes cultural heritage resource, tourism production, and tourist consumption.* Studies of cultural heritage tourism at the regional or site level above have examined one, two or three sides. A simultaneous analysis of the three parties offers a more informed basis for the construction of a structure. The tripartite analysis also allows for the discovery of continuity/congruity or discontinuity/incongruity between the three parties, which may help inform the conservation of heritage and its use in tourism production and consumption. The relationship between cultural heritage and tourism has emerged as a hot topic (Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011), but it has seldom been examined at such an elementary level.
- *Structural strategy: Evaluating-ranking, layering and theming.* Evaluating, ranking and constructing layers/tiers/hierarchies seems to be a common and even unconscious way to deal with a complex phenomenon as people tend to differentiate things and assign values according to various criteria. Theming is also common as both a strategy in product development (Erb & Ong, 2017; Ong & Jin, 2017) and an analytical method in qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

3. Methods

3.1. The study site: Yueyang Tower Scenic Area

Yueyang Tower Scenic Area in Hunan Province, China (Fig. 2), provides an appropriate case for this exploratory study because it is representative of many Chinese cultural heritage tourism places that have a long history and a rich cultural heritage which is now quite developed in tourism and is of a scale adequate for an in-depth analysis. Since its initiation as a military tower in 214 AD, Yueyang Tower has been rebuilt or repaired at least 62 times according to historical records (Editorial Committee of Local Records of Hunan Province (ECLRHP) (2016). The current tower was built in 1880 and designated as a major historical and cultural site protected at the national level in 1988. The tower stands at the strategic location of Dongting Lake and the Yangtze River and has been visited by many scholar-officials who were the social elites in generations of traditional China. They have left hundreds of literary and artistic works to today, including the largest poetry and prose collections among the 15 famous towers in China (PCHCTP, 2015; 2016). In an effort to develop tourism, the site was expanded from 4.8 ha to 44.67 ha. During 2006 and 2007. It was designated as a national AAAAA-level scenic spot in 2011 (ECLRHP, 2016). It received 848,414 visitors in 2017 (personal communication with the director of Yueyang Tower, July 19, 2018).

3.2. Data collection

Suitable for the exploratory nature of this research, the methodology of grounded theory as presented in Corbin and Strauss (2015) is generally followed in this study (with modification in data collection methods presented below). The purpose of grounded theory is to construct theory grounded in data. It is adapted here to enable the discovery of a structure of cultural heritage elements in tourism based on data, including the components, their interrelationships, and their functions within this structure. Five types of triangulation were used to reveal different aspects of this complex phenomenon: theory triangulation (the tripartite framework), methodological triangulation (multiple methods), data triangulation (multiple data sources), interdisciplinary triangulation, and investigator triangulation (two

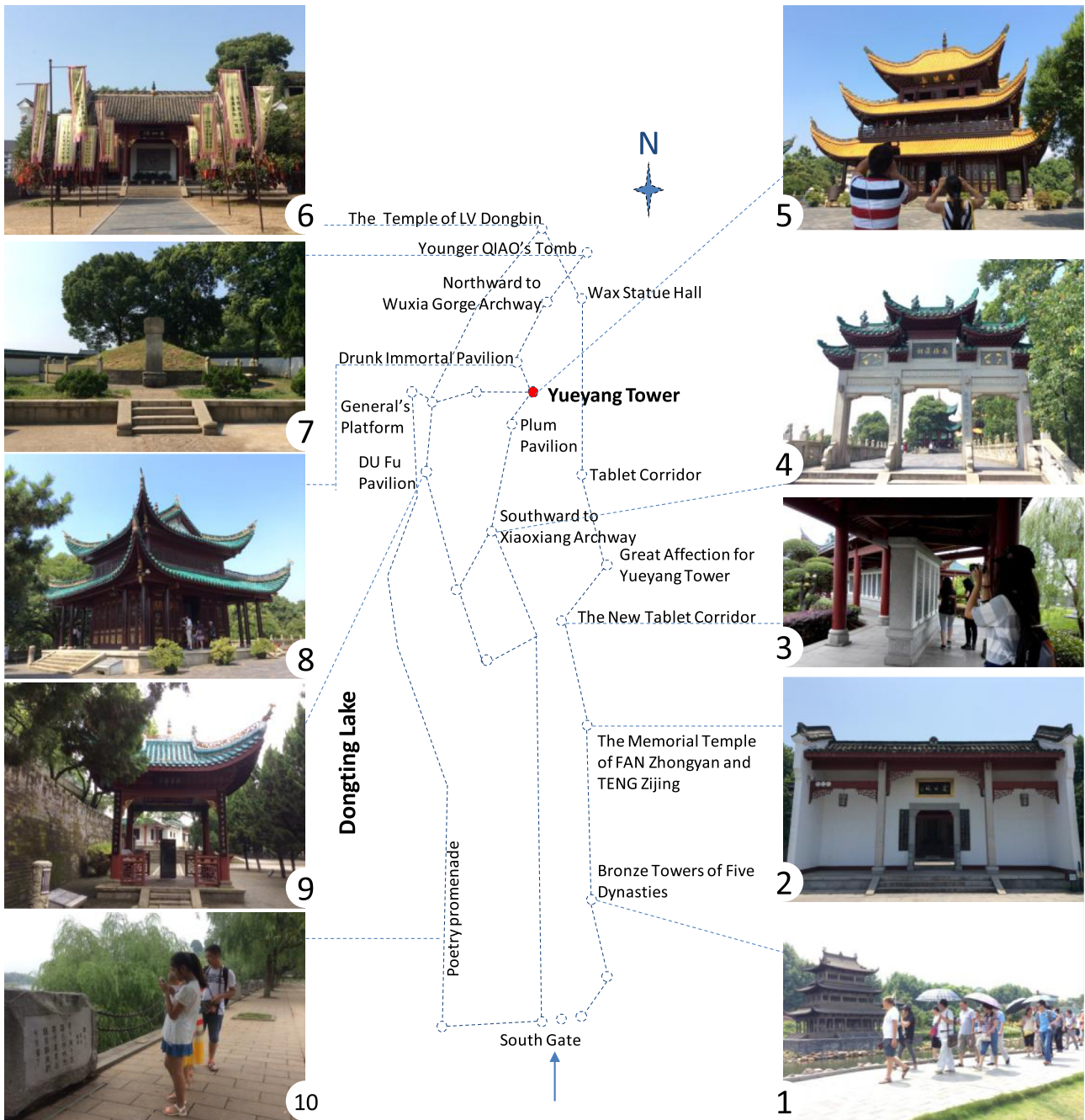


Fig. 2. Tourism offerings at Yueyang Tower Scenic Area (photos by the first author).

researchers) (Jennings, 2010).

The data collection did not strictly follow the theoretical sampling method usually used in grounded theory research, which stops collecting sample units when theoretical saturation is reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Instead, in line with the research goal, this study aimed for holistic understanding of heritage elements in the site and sought to build on as much available relevant data as possible. Multiple methods and sources were used to collect data based on the tripartite analytical framework, as shown in Table 3.

First, regarding the tourism production side, onsite observation and documentary research were conducted to examine what cultural heritage elements are presented and how they are interpreted. Specifically, every element of the site was closely examined and recorded by taking photos over four days in mid-July 2015. A three-day onsite observation was conducted again in mid-July 2018, and not much difference was

found. Books offering official interpretations of the site's history and current offerings by site managers and local researchers were also analyzed (Chen, 2013; ECLRHP, 2016; Zou, Wang, & Li, 2008).

Second, the tourist consumption side was examined by three methods: onsite participant observation, face-to-face semi-structured interview, and analysis of visitor-generated content online. Firstly, visitor behavior at various spots was observed to see what they do and how they interact with the site and with each other. Secondly, interviews were conducted with 12 groups of visitors about their general travel plan, their reasons for visiting Yueyang Tower, and their impression and experience of the site. Different interviewees were sought in terms of gender, age (from teens to seniors above 60), and origins (five groups were from the local area and seven from other provinces in China). Aside from a 2-h in-depth interview with a local group of three visitors, most of the interviews lasted about 10 min. Notes were taken

Table 3
Data sources and analysis of cultural heritage elements in tourism.

Cultural heritage tourism parties	Data sources	General guiding questions	Analytical dimensions
Cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Onsite observation ● CH inventories ● Historical and cultural research literature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the specific cultural heritage elements? ● How does a specific cultural heritage element emerge and evolve in history? What are its meanings? ● How are different elements related to each other? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cultural significance (frequency of literary citation) ● Contribution to place
Tourism production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Onsite observation ● Site documents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What and how cultural heritage elements are presented onsite? ● How are they interpreted? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Physical presentation ● Onsite interpretation
Tourist consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participant observation ● Interview ● Visitor-generated content online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do visitors do and feel onsite about the cultural heritage elements? ● What do visitors report online? How are the cultural heritage elements commented and in what frequency? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● General importance to visitors (online comment frequency) ● Prior knowledge ● Motivation to visit ● Onsite experience

with permission of the interviewees. However, this may not actually be considered to represent saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Hence, the third method took advantage of visitor-generated content online, which took the form of unconstrained expressions. This data source also covered a much more diverse group of visitors in terms of temporal distribution and opinions expressed, though other personal attributes could not be identified. The entire stock of 685 visitor comments (including excerpts from 85 travelogues) was retrieved from the largest and most popular tourism user-generated content (UGC) website in China, www.mafengwo.cn, on February 28, 2018 (the first comment was posted on July 16, 2013). This data set was imported to Excel and specific cultural heritage elements were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively (the frequency with which the elements are mentioned) (Meyer & Avery, 2009). Quotations cited in the findings from this set of mafengwo.com visitor comments are marked as MCxxx and visitor journals are marked as MJxxx.

Third, in addition to what are already presented onsite, existing inventories of cultural heritage elements at this place are obtained as potential resources for tourism, including collections of poems in PCHCTP (2015) and prose in PCHCTP (2016). Poetry and prose are the two most widely practiced and important literary styles in ancient China (Lin, 2009) and their influence extends well into contemporary China, including the tourism field (Yu & Xu, 2016, 2018). Furthermore, to understand specific cultural heritage elements, relevant historical and cultural research literature was consulted.

3.3. Data analysis

The structural analysis of the rich heritage elements in cultural heritage tourism involved a complex process. The elements presented onsite and visited by tourists were identified and introduced in column 1, Table 4. The literary heritage and the history of the tower is further analyzed in terms of temporal distribution in Table 5. Understandably, the lists are not exhaustive but cover most of the heritage elements of this site. The method of constant comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) is a major method used in each step of the analysis.

First, the data analysis started from general guiding questions about the roles and positions of cultural heritage elements in cultural heritage, in tourism production, and in tourist consumption (column 3, Table 3). Comparisons were made between meaningful data units within each data source to generate more specific analytical dimensions. Eight dimensions are specified as a summary of relevant information expressed in the tripartite data sources (column 4, Table 3):

- Cultural significance: How important a cultural heritage element is in Chinese culture and history. A quantitative indicator of cultural significance is how frequently a cultural heritage element is cited in the literary collections related to the studied place, as shown in Table 5.

- Contribution to place: How much and what kind of contribution a cultural heritage element has made to the culture, image, and fame of the place.
- Physical presentation: The location, space, and architecture assigned to a cultural heritage element (see location and architecture in Fig. 2). If a cultural heritage element is important, it is assigned a relatively central location, more space, and grander architecture.
- Onsite interpretation: How much interpretation is offered onsite about a cultural heritage element.
- General importance to visitors: A quantitative indicator of this dimension is how frequently a cultural heritage element receives comments on the tourist UGC website (column 2, Table 4).
- Prior knowledge: How much do domestic visitors know about a cultural heritage element and whether this knowledge is associated with the place? This is judged by the researchers as cultural insiders based on, for example, what is taught in the education system.
- Motivation to visit: To what extent does a cultural heritage element motivate tourists to visit the site?
- Onsite experience: How important is a cultural heritage element in the onsite experience and what role does it play?

Second, cultural heritage elements were compared with each other to determine their relative position along each of the eight dimensions. Comparisons with regard to the frequency of visitor comments online and physical presentations onsite are shown in Table 4. Other qualitative comparisons of cultural heritage elements are presented in the text of the findings section of this paper.

Third, the positions of each cultural heritage element along the eight dimensions were compared. As these positions were highly consistent with each other, their combination provided an overall position for each cultural heritage element. The positions for almost all cultural heritage elements were quite distinctive and hence gave rise to a three-tier structure, which is discussed in the findings section of the paper and shown in Table 6.

Fourth, a further analysis of the tier structure was pursued: Why does a cultural heritage element fall into Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3? As shown above, the tier structure is based on the consistency of the positions of cultural heritage elements along the eight dimensions; in other words, there is continuity between cultural heritage and touristic production/consumption and congruity between tourism production and tourist consumption. Two questions were asked: Why is there such continuity? What about changes (i.e. negative cases, Corbin & Strauss, 2015)?

To answer these questions, the initial eight dimensions seemed too many to use. Some possible core concepts were pursued, and the concept of value seemed to be an appropriate one for the following reasons. Firstly, value is a central concept in cultural heritage practice (Labadi, 2013). Value judgment is involved inherently in the eight evaluative dimensions. For example, cultural heritage elements that are more

Table 4
Cultural heritage elements, visitor comments, physical presentation, and tiers.

Specific cultural heritage elements*	Frequency of visitor comment online (N = 685)	Physical presentation onsite	Tier
1.1 FAN's prose for the tower and the memorial temple for FAN and TENG The tower (Fig. 2.5) was rebuilt/renovated for more than sixty times in history since 214 AD, yet its national fame was unequivocally attributed to FAN's prose written in 1046 at the request of TENG. Two plaques carved with the prose were put at the first and second floor of the tower. The memorial temple (Fig. 2.2) was built in 2006 to commemorate FAN and TENG with their statues and an exhibition of "The Life of the Two Sages". See Yu and Xu (2018).	215 (31.4%)	Dominant presentation	1
2.1 The general's platform A representation of the early military history of the tower started by LU Su from 214.	11 (1.6%)	Distinctive presentation	2
2.2 Younger QIAO's tomb Rebuilt in 1992 for Younger QIAO (Fig. 2.7), a beautiful lady and wife of a famous talented general (LU Su's predecessor).	21 (3.1%)		
2.3 The temple of LV Dongbin and the Drunken Immortal Pavilion The pavilion (Fig. 2.8) was built in 1880 and the temple (Fig. 2.6) in 2006 for a legendary Taoist master LV Dongbin (born in 798).	7 (1.0%)	Collective presentation	3
2.4 LI Bai's couplet and calligraphy LI Bai (701–762) wrote a poem that first used the name "Yueyang Tower". His handwritten couplet is put up on the third floor of the tower.	15 (2.2%)		
2.5 DU FU Pavilion and Mao's calligraphy The pavilion (Fig. 2.9) was built in 1962 to commemorate the 1250th anniversary of the birth of the great poet DU FU (712–770; Fig. 2.1) who wrote a famous relevant poem, <i>Ascending Yueyang Tower</i> . Chairman MAO Zedong's calligraphy of this work is put up on the third floor of the tower.	16 (2.3%)		
3.1 Bronze towers of five dynasties These bronze models (Fig. 2.1) are designed to authentically reflect the architectural culture of Yueyang tower at different historical periods.	33 (4.8%)		
3.2 'History of Yueyang Tower' exhibition Illustrated by using historical records, poems, paintings, and pictures generated at each historical period of the tower.	–		
3.3 The old and new tablet corridors; the lakeside poetry promenade The new corridor (Fig. 2.3) presents more than 80 calligraphic tablets in four sections: works of contemporary national leaders, ancient calligraphers, contemporary calligraphers, and FAN's prose written by different calligraphers. The lakeside promenade (Fig. 2.10) is lined with 126 stones carved with poems about Yueyang tower and Dongting Lake, written by poets from ancient times to today.	40 (5.8%)		
3.4 The wax statue hall It includes 42 statues in five themes.	1 (0.1%)		

Note: *Sources: onsite observation; Chen (2013); ECLRHP (2016); Zou et al. (2008).

valuable are presented more dominantly/distinctively and given more interpretation. Secondly, Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) listed four layers of manifestations of culture, ranging from the most superficial to the deepest: symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. Arguably, the cultural heritage elements observable at Yueyang Tower fall into the first three layers, while underlying them are intangible values. Hence, the concept of value may be used as an overarching perspective to discuss the general characteristics and functions in the tier structure and help understand the relationship between its different components. Specifically, the continuity and congruity between the three parties that led to the tier structure is essentially the continuous inheritance of values and value assessment in China. However, there are also changes, and this is exemplified by the negative case of LV Dongbin.

Fifth, the relationship between the different tiers was further analyzed. Two functions emerged: national value transmission and local value thematization. Specifically, values created by Tier 1 and Tier 2 elements might have been transmitted by Tier 3 elements across the country and throughout the history. Tier 1 and Tier 2 elements may be expressed in and be used to connect different forms of culture and cultural heroes in different ages at the place, thus thematizing the place.

The results of the above analytical process are reported in the findings section of the paper. Due to the complexity of this research project and space limitations, the reporting of results from this study takes advantage of Yu and Xu (2018), who examined the same site and analyzed its dominant part (Tier 1 in the current study). Hence, readers are referred to their paper for details about this part, which is briefly summarized in Section 4.1.1.

4. Findings

The goal, approach (analytical framework) and findings of this research are summarized in Fig. 3. This section first presents the characteristics of the three tiers along the eight dimensions of the tripartite framework of cultural heritage elements in tourism at Yueyang Tower (Table 6, Fig. 3). Second, the general continuity and congruity of the position of cultural heritage elements in the tier structure is discussed with the proposed concept of inherited value assessment (the left ellipse in Fig. 3). Then a negative case of discontinuity is presented. Third, two themes, national value transmission and local value thematization, are proposed as a characterization of the relationship between different cultural heritage elements in the tier structure (the rightmost arrow in Fig. 3).

4.1. A three-tier structure of cultural heritage elements in tourism at Yueyang Tower

4.1.1. Tier 1: the dominant element

FAN Zhongyan's prose (i.e. *An Account of Yueyang Tower*) is the most important element in Yueyang Tower history and culture (Table 6). This observation is found in Yu and Xu (2018) and briefly summarized here to present a complete picture of the tier structure. On the tourism production side, FAN's prose spatially occupies the central location in the park (Fig. 2.5) and is regarded in official discourse as the source of the tower's national fame; the tower is seen as the symbol of FAN's moral ideal (Chen, 2013; ECLRHP, 2016; www.yueyanglou.com, the official website; Zou et al., 2008). FAN's prose is the most interpreted cultural heritage element, with a new memorial temple built for FAN

Table 5
Frequency of literary citation and tower reconstruction across history.

	Dynasty/Period										Total
	Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589)	Tang (618–907)	Five Dynasties (907–960)	Song (960–1279)	Yuan (1279–1368)	Ming (1368–1644)	Qing (1644–1911)	The Republic of China (1912–1949)	People's Republic of China (1949–)		
Poems	1	44	1	136	64	427	299	-	-	972	
Poem authors	1	29	1	55	45	262	187	-	-	580	
Poems referring to FAN's prose (%)	-	-	-	10 (7.4%)	5 (7.8%)	55 (12.9%)	62 (20.7%)	-	-	132 (14.3%*)	
Poems referring to LV Dongbin (%)	-	1*	0	11 (8.1%)	13 (20.3%)	32 (7.5%)	28 (9.4%)	-	-	85 (9.2%*)	
Prose authors	-	1	-	4* + 7	3	22	35	15	3	90	
Prose referring to FAN's prose (%)	-	1	-	2* + 7	2	22	32	14	3	83	
Prose referring to LV Dongbin (& reconstruction)	-	-	-	3 (42.9%*)	1 (33.3%)	12 (54.5%)	21 (60.0%)	12 (80.0%)	3 (100%)	52 (61.2%*)	
Tower repair or reconstruction	1	3	-	2 (18.2%)	1 (33.3%)	5 (22.7%)	12 (34.3%)	5 (33.3%)	3 (100%)	28 (31.1%)	
				1 + 6	1	10	20	2	18	62	

Note: *The calculation of the percentages excludes poems or prose written by or before FAN, TENG or LV. Source: poems collected in PCHCTP (2015), prose collected in PCHCTP (2016), tower history in ECLRHP (2016).

and TENG in 2006, in which their lives and contributions are explained (Fig. 2.2). On the tourism consumption side, almost all Chinese visitors have prior knowledge of FAN's prose as it is an important text they study and recite in childhood. It is also the main factor that motivates their trip to Yueyang Tower and the focus of their experience. As shown in Table 4, 215 visitors (31.4% of 685 comments) mentioned FAN and his prose, which is the most frequently cited cultural heritage element. The current status of FAN and his prose in Yueyang Tower tourism was not established in modern times, but rather is a continuation of their position in traditional Chinese history and culture. As shown in Table 5, FAN is cited in 132 poems (14.3% of the poems written after his time) and 52 prose pieces (61.2% of the prose after his time) related to Yueyang Tower, reflecting his continuous and strong influence throughout Chinese history.

Among the 2000 years of cultural heritage at Yueyang Tower, FAN's prose clearly occupies a dominant position. FAN's cultural creativity is reflected not only in his prose, which is considered to be extremely beautiful, but also in his establishment of a moral ideal that is highly respected in Chinese culture (Yu & Xu, 2018). This prose and moral ideal play a determinant role in the positioning of Yueyang Tower in Chinese culture and the Chinese mind. In comparison, elements that fall into Tier 2 and Tier 3 are much less eminent but also have their roles, as discussed below.

4.1.2. Tier 2: the distinctive few

Tier 2 includes a few elements that are distinctive in the totality of cultural heritage at Yueyang Tower. Five are listed in Table 4. These elements are less eminent than the Tier 1 element but are much more recognizable and/or esteemed than Tier 3 elements. For example, as shown in Table 5, about 9.2% of the poems and 31.1% of the prose pieces referred to LV Dongbin (versus 14.3% and 61.2%, respectively, for FAN). Although less prominent than the Tier 1 element, their position in history is distinctive as the cultural creativity and historical importance of these figures is quite high. They enhance the diversity of the cultural heritage at this place.

On the tourism production side, they are distinctively presented on the site with particular buildings associated with each of them (Fig. 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9) and a medium level of interpretative materials, as observed onsite.

On the tourist consumption side, as shown in Table 4, Tier 2 elements are mentioned in visitor comments much less frequently than the Tier 1 element (ranging from 1.0% to 3.1% versus 31.4% for Tier 1). Visitors have some prior knowledge of these elements as they are household names in Chinese history and culture, but they may not be known as related to this place; hence, they are not specific motivators for a trip. When experiencing these elements onsite, visitors may see them as interesting and pleasantly surprising additions as they tap into their prior knowledge of these familiar historical figures and events, while some may doubt such associations. For example, regarding Younger QIAO's tomb, a visitor was quite appreciative:

I think there are three important spots to visit: The Memorial Temple of FAN and TENG, Younger QIAO's tomb, and Yueyang Tower. In the memorial temple you can understand the two famous officials TENG Zijing and FAN Zhongyan, who were exiled again and again but never changed their initial ideal. At Younger QIAO's tomb, you can 'recall when Gongjin just married Younger QIAO, how heroic-looking he must have been', and looking at her statue holding a book, you can imagine profusely Younger QIAO's talented grace ... (MC9).

While such prompted historical imagination enriched one visitor's experience, another visitor had a negative comment: "This scenic area is built recently, except for Yueyang Tower as the main part, many quite awkward spots are artificially added, for example, the so-called Younger QIAO's tomb" (MC215). This visitor put more emphasis on FAN's prose. Others also questioned the authenticity of such elements

Table 6
Cultural heritage elements in tourism at Yueyang Tower: A tier structure based on a tripartite analytical framework.

CH parties	Tiers	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
	CH elements			
	Dimensions	Elements related to FAN Zhongyan and his prose for the tower	Elements related to LU Su, Younger QIAO, LV Dongbin, LI Bai, and DU Fu, etc.	Hundreds of poems, prose; generations of tower, etc.
Cultural heritage	Cultural importance	High	Medium	Low
	Contribution to place	Extremely high quality of creativity	Diversity; creative quality	Quantity; cultural transmission
Tourism production	Physical presentation	Dominant	Distinctive	Collective
	Onsite interpretation	Major	Medium	None to minimum
Tourist consumption	General importance to visitors	High	Medium	Low
	Prior knowledge	Yes, clearly related to the place	Yes, but people may have not related them to the place	No
	Motivation to visit	Yes	Not individually	No
	Onsite experience	Major	Interesting, enriching knowledge; Doubtful	Difficult to understand
		All three tiers: historical and cultural atmosphere		

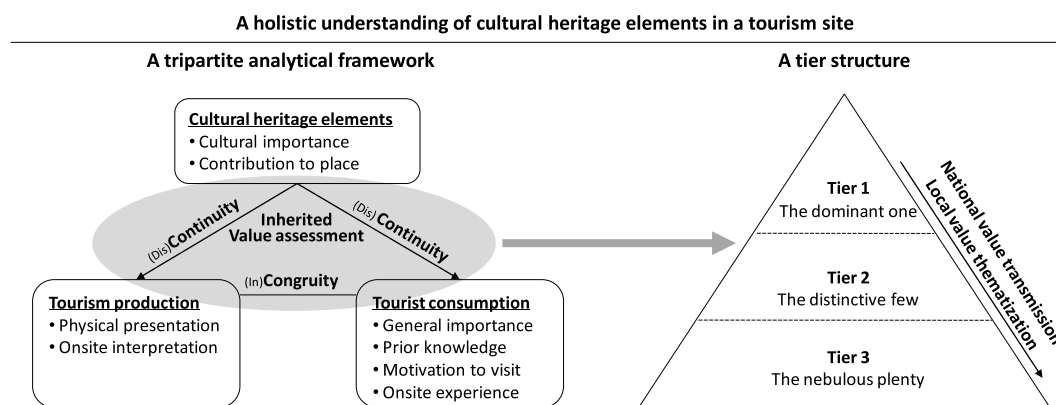


Fig. 3. A holistic understanding of cultural heritage elements in a tourism site: A tier structure from a tripartite analytical framework.

and had a negative experience of their commercialization. For example, one visitor commented:

Younger QIAO's tomb, the temple of LV Dongbin, and Drunken Immortal Pavilion are shopping places to trick tourists and rake in money ... Suggestions frequently come out from staff at these spots: 'Come in and have a look, there are the three treasures of Yueyang inside ...' In fact, following this look are plenty of so-called tourist souvenirs whose authenticity is difficult to discern" (MJ5).

Because what are left of the rich cultural heritage at this place are mostly intangible ones, the challenge here seems to be acceptable and sustainable reproduction in tangible forms. Discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this study and is left for future research.

4.1.3. Tier 3: the nebulous plenty

Tier 3 includes thousands of elements that are the least distinctive in Yueyang Tower cultural heritage. Specifically, as shown in Table 5, they include 972 poems collected in PCHCTP (2015), p. 90 prose pieces collected in PCHCTP (2016), p. 62 reconstructions or repairs of the tower (ECLRHP, 2016), and many other elements that are yet to be collected and published in such a systematic way (Tier 1 and Tier 2 elements are also included in these collections). However, these elements did not achieve high status according to traditional Chinese cultural and historical values. In tourism production, they are presented collectively, such as the bronze towers of five dynasties (Fig. 2.1), tablet corridors (Fig. 2.3) and poetry promenade (Fig. 2.10), the "History of Yueyang Tower" exhibition, and the wax statue hall (the last two are closer to Tier 2 as the presented elements are recognizable figures or works in Chinese history and culture). Little onsite interpretation is offered for this large group of elements.

On the tourist side, visitors have little specific prior knowledge of the nebulous plenty of cultural heritage elements. Hence, they play no role in their travel motivation. During onsite visitation, some visitors may find these elements quite difficult to understand as most materials are provided in ancient Chinese language and in various calligraphic styles. However, these elements, together with Tier 1 and Tier 2 elements, create a collective historical and cultural atmosphere that visitors can enjoy. Among the 685 visitor comments, "history" was mentioned 59 times (8.6%) and "culture" 31 times (4.5%), showing visitors' overall expectation for and impression of this place, which cannot be formed by only a few elements at Tier 1 and Tier 2. As one visitor commented:

This scenic area has collected quite a lot of stuff. Besides its gist, i.e. FAN Zhongyan, TENG Zijing and An Account of Yueyang Tower, it has the story of the Taoist LV Dongbin, LU SU and Younger QIAO at the Three Kingdoms period, DU FU, LI Bai, MAO Zedong's calligraphic work of DU's poem, etc. Although it is quite a mixture of different stuff, it is in this way that the history of more than two thousand years has piled up here. Walking out of the scenic area gate to the Dongting Lake, there is a Dongting poetry promenade. In the lakeside breeze, read some poems, enjoy some calligraphic works, it is quite nice! (MC198).

Tourists' experience and satisfaction seem to vary among the collective presentations, most of which are created in recent tourism development. The bronze towers of five dynasties are a frequently mentioned set in visitor comments (33 comments, 4.8%), often in a positive tone. For example, one visitor suggested: "Another spot worth your attention is the small models of Yueyang Tower from five dynasties upon entering the park. There are variations in every period, and you

may have a good look” (MC611). Another commented: “The five towers are meticulously designed based on paintings of Yueyang Tower passed down from different dynasties and relevant architectural symbols, with a strong historical and artistic flavor” (MC323). Overall, the models are quite informative, interesting, and worthy for visitors.

4.2. Continuity and change of value assessment in the tier structure

4.2.1. General continuity in the tier structure: inherited value assessment

In the tier structure, the position of cultural heritage elements in tourism production is in general congruent with that in tourist consumption, both of which are, in turn, in congruence with the position of cultural heritage elements in history, showing general continuity from traditional China to modern China. It is important to note that this congruity/continuity is structural: that is, it refers to the structure of cultural heritage in history and in contemporary society as reflected in the tourism field, rather than a certain cultural heritage element or form as examined in many previous studies, such as those listed in Table 2.

The contemporary Chinese have largely inherited the value assessment in history and make production and consumption decisions accordingly, in a collectively unconscious way. Such acceptance is shown in the direct citation of ancient documents in culture presentation on-site and in interpretative materials for Yueyang Tower (Chen, 2013; ECLRHP, 2016; Zou et al., 2008). For example, couplets are usually succinct and offer an exquisite summary of the main characteristics or attractions of a place. A couplet from the 19th century hangs on the first floor of Yueyang Tower and describes its cultural accumulation in the first line (and its geography in the second line):

What is the wonder of this tower? DU Fu's perfect five-character poem, FAN Zhongyan's two caring words, TENG Zijing's revitalization of all those neglected, and LV Dongbin's three drunkenly pass-bys. Is it the poem? Is it the Confucian? Is it the official? Is it the immortal? I cannot see the ancients before me. That makes my sorrowful tears roll down! (by DOU Xu, 1804–1865).

Yu and Xu (2018) discussed in more detail how such historical assessment was made with regard to FAN and his prose under the influence of the Confucianism focus on morality. Similar moral, literary, artistic, and spiritual assessment criteria and processes put DU FU's poem, ZHANG Zhao's (1691–1745) calligraphic work of FAN's prose, and LV Dongbin's legends in a high position, while leaving many others unknown in the Chinese mind. To understand such value assessment and its influence on contemporary society and tourism, one has to delve deeply into the relevant fields and understand the thinking and history (Yu & Xu, 2018).

4.2.2. Change of position in the tier structure: a negative case

Alongside this general congruity and continuity under the influence of inherited value assessment, however, there are also changes. LV Dongbin is such an example. LV's position at Yueyang Tower has been downgraded in the tourism production. In ancient Chinese culture and history, LV seemed to be a very important figure. LV was widely popularized in countless oral and writing texts of various styles (Li, 2007), including folk stories (Li, 2010), poems (Zhang, 2007), and traditional operas (Chen, 2014). Overall, LV Dongbin has been one of the most popular immortals in ancient China. LV and his stories and poem below are also important in Yueyang Tower cultural heritage: “Roaming the north sea at dawn, I reached Cangwu in the south at Dusk. With the Green Snake sword in my sleeve, I am fearless and bold. I got drunk three times at Yueyang but no one noticed me. Chanting poems aloud, I flew across the Dongting Lake”. The poem shows a Taoist pursuit for personal freedom and immortality that transcends limited secular life and also refers to LV's wish to preach to and save people from such a life.

As an important part of Yueyang Tower culture, LV has been

worshipped at the top floor in Yueyang Tower for a thousand years (Chen, 2013). As shown in Table 5, he was frequently cited in ancient poems related to Yueyang Tower. However, LV's statue was first removed to the Drunken Immortal Pavilion in 1984 and again moved even further to the northwest corner of the park in 2006, which reflects a downgrading of his status at this place, while FAN's Confucian ideal is maintained as the core of its ethos. In explaining this decision, ECLRHP (2016, p. 40) directly cited Chen Yuyuan, who became the county magistrate of Yueyang in 1802: “It is regrettable that no place is left to celebrate loyal souls, as the magnificent hall is occupied by a Taoist.” Chen proposed that the loyal, righteous, and those talented in literature like Qu Yuan, DU Fu, and FAN Zhongyan should be worshipped at Yueyang Tower to promote Confucian ethics. Such proposal coincided with the decline of Taoism after the 19th century (Nan, 2013). However, traditional Chinese culture in general has suffered a decline under the challenge of Western culture. It is only in recent years that attention to and interest in traditional culture has reignited nationally (Liu, 2017). However, critical analysis and creative adaptation of traditional culture in modern life is still much needed.

In tourist consumption, LV seems to play an even smaller role. Few tourists visit his temple. As shown in Table 4, only seven (1.0%) visitors mentioned him in online comments. As a Tier 2 element, however, LV is well-known to the Chinese, for example, through the story of “The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea”. However, his image does not seem related to Yueyang Tower in the contemporary Chinese mind. For the authors, it was surprising to find that he is so distinctively represented onsite and so important in Yueyang Tower history and culture. Some visitors accepted his presence as a part of the history (e.g. MC198 cited earlier), while others criticized it, especially for forcing consumption. For example, one visitor commented: “There are staff guiding visitors into a temple commemorating LV Dongbin, saying that it is for free. But if you don't leave a donation, the staff inside will show you a quite icy face” (MC95). What is interesting here is that the beneficence box set up in LV's temple indicates an “assumption” that Chinese still hold a belief in LV and the efficaciousness of this specific temple, but visitors don't seem to share that assumption.

Such incongruity between the provision and the consumption and their different degrees of discontinuity with history in the case of LV-related cultural heritage contrasts with the great congruity and continuity in FAN-related cultural heritage at Yueyang Tower, suggesting the ongoing evolution of culture in this tourism field and in Chinese society in general.

4.3. Relationships and functions in the tier structure: value transmission and value thematization

4.3.1. National value transmission: across the country, throughout the history

Values such as FAN's Confucian moral ideal and LV's Taoist pursuit expressed at Yueyang Tower are not local values. Instead, they are national values. A check on the identity of the individual creators of cultural heritage at Yueyang Tower reveals the national nature of culture at Yueyang Tower. None of the 580 poem authors or the 83 prose authors across the different dynasties (Table 5) was a local; instead, almost all were traveling scholar-officials (PCHCTP, 2015; 2016). They left their footprints not only in Yueyang, but also in many other places in China. Such mobility of the literati is typical in Chinese history (Wang, 2009). It is likely that in traveling across ancient China mainstream culture was spread to local places like Yueyang and cultural creations at Yueyang Tower were brought to national attention, especially the Tier 1 and Tier 2 elements. However, the Tier 3 elements are also important in that they likely played the role of a transmission mechanism that spread the Tier 1 and Tier 2 elements across China and throughout the ages. This role is reflected by the 132 (14.3%) poems and 52 (61.2%) prose pieces listed in Table 5 that refer to FAN and his prose and pass this heritage down from generation to generation.

Although today many of these literary works only play an atmospheric role at Tier 3, their historical role cannot be ignored and may be further applied in the conservation of cultural heritage and creation of the tourist experience.

4.3.2. Local value thematization: culture in different forms and cultural heroes in different ages

Values are thematically expressed in different forms of culture heritage at Yueyang Tower. For example, FAN's moral ideal is expressed in his prose, handwritten by famous calligraphers, engraved in wood or stone, housed in a tower that has been repeatedly rebuilt as a symbol of this moral ideal (Yu & Xu, 2018), and recollected in various genres of literary works by subsequent generations (Table 5). In this way, a certain value becomes a generative theme that gives rise to and ties together diverse forms of cultural heritage and practice, generating a meaningful whole. Here the generative theme is a Tier 1 element, which induces many Tier 2 and Tier 3 elements.

A basic shared value may also tie together cultural heroes and their words and deeds in different eras of history at a place. According to Hofstede et al. (2010), heroes “are persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as models for behavior” (p. 8). While FAN is the one whose prose has made Yueyang Tower nationally famous, his spirit of ‘being the first to worry and the last to enjoy’ is taken as representative of the words and deeds of multiple heroes related to Yueyang Tower in the interpretation of this place as a “spiritual holy temple of Chinese people” (Chen, 2013, p. 17). Specifically, in temporal order, they include LU Su (172–217), who with a worrying spirit established a military defense system at Yueyang; DU Fu (712–770), who cared more about his country than his personal misfortune, as expressed in his poem; then FAN Zhongyan (989–1052) and TENG Zijing (990–1047); and Chairman Mao Zedong (1893–1976), whose calligraphic work of DU's poem hangs on the third floor of Yueyang Tower (ECLRHP, 2016). In this way, the Tier 1 element plays the role of an overarching and culminating value theme that can be extended to incorporate some Tier 2 elements, making the value theme even stronger. Potentially, many Tier 3 elements can also be incorporated too: as shown in Table 5, FAN is a repeated theme in these cultural elements.

As a value theme at a place becomes strong through its continuous expression by cultural heroes and in various cultural forms and practices at this place, the place may become thematized. This is the case for Yueyang Tower, which has become a symbol of FAN's moral ideal (Yu & Xu, 2018). Today, this value theme is further extended to the tourism production and consumption of this place.

5. Conclusion and discussion

In the face of the richness of heritage, this study aimed to develop a holistic and structural understanding of the roles and positions of specific cultural heritage elements at a tourism place. A tripartite framework was proposed to analyze the phenomenon from the perspective of three cultural heritage tourism parties: cultural heritage, tourism production, and tourist consumption. Multiple methods and data sources were employed to implement the framework, using the case of Yueyang Tower. A list of eight dimensions was developed and used to evaluate and classify cultural heritage elements at this place, whose consistent positioning along these dimensions in the three parties led to construction of a three-tier structure.

Tier 1 includes the dominant element that occupies the dominant position in cultural importance, contribution to place, onsite physical presentation, interpretation, general importance to tourists, tourists' prior knowledge, motivation to visit, and onsite experience. Tier 2 includes the distinctive few and Tier 3 covers the nebulous plenty that play lesser roles in these dimensions but nevertheless contribute to the historical and cultural atmosphere of the place and enrich the tourist experience. Inherent in this tier structure is that the positioning of

cultural heritage elements in history and culture is generally inherited by the contemporary tourism field, including both tourism production and tourist consumption of cultural heritage tourism. This is summarized in the concept of inherited value assessment. However, there is also discontinuity between cultural heritage and tourism and incongruity between tourism production and consumption, as shown in the case of LV Dongbin heritage. Furthermore, two functions are proposed to explain the mechanisms working in the tier structure: national value transmission and local value thematization. The value expressed in the Tier 1 element may be transmitted by Tier 2 and Tier 3 elements across the country and over time. The value in Tier 1 can also be thematically expressed in different forms of cultural heritage and by cultural heroes in different ages (many Tier 2 and Tier 3 elements). The accumulation of such themed cultural heritage can thematize a local place.

This study contributes to the understanding of the entirety of cultural heritage elements of a place and their interrelationships and roles in tourism. The analytical framework, the revealed tier structure of cultural heritage elements and its value-related mechanisms have implications for research and practice in this field. First, the analytical framework for cultural heritage elements takes into consideration three key stakeholders, i.e. cultural heritage, tourism production, and tourist consumption, and is specified by eight dimensions based on available data in the field. This framework can help destination managers grasp the entirety of their cultural resources in an approach that goes beyond mere inventory and expert-dominated assessment, enable them to understand and address the values of cultural heritage elements to these stakeholders.

Second, the application of the tripartite framework to the case of Yueyang Tower reveals a clear and meaningful tier structure in the thick and murky accumulation of cultural heritage at this place. The structure may be used by destination managers to exploit their resources more fully and adequately in tourism product development. Specifically, the relationships among Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 elements revealed in this study may be presented and explained more clearly in the physical design of the site and its interpretation. Furthermore, currently, Yueyang Tower has focused only on the theme of FAN Zhongyan and his Confucian prose (Yu & Xu, 2018), and other themes, such as one related to LV Dongbin and the Taoist culture, may be more extensively developed. Such holistic usage and themed design may help improve the currently fragmented and superficial experience in cultural heritage and make it deeper, richer, and more meaningful for tourists (Song & Tan, 2012).

Third, values and evaluation seem to be at the core of cultural heritage and the tier structure. As the concept of inherited value assessment points to a relatively passive stance, it may inspire tourism researchers and managers to be more reflective and proactive about what values to transmit, promote, or inhibit in cultural heritage tourism, especially in a transitional society like China. On the other hand, managers may consider taking a value-free approach and present cultural heritage in an objective way as historical facts. These approaches may be explored in the field and in future research.

Fourth, the tripartite analytical framework proposed in this study can be applied to research on cultural heritage elements in tourism in other places to obtain a holistic and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. A limitation of this study is that the tier structure based on this framework is constructed based on only one case. But we propose that this structure and its variations may also apply in many other places in China because it reflects national historical and cultural processes. That is, the processes of inherited value assessment, national value transmission, and local value thematization underlying the tier structure are processes common in Chinese history and culture that may continue to have wide influence on cultural heritage tourism on a national scale today. Not all places will find the exact three-tier structure; some may have more than one dominant element and some may be missing one or two tiers. For instance, a Tier 1 element must be culturally important at the national level and recognized as such by

Chinese people in general. Hence, the approach that leads to the tier structure is unlike the approach that leads to the core-periphery structure in tourist destination image as used by Lai and Li (2012), in which items ranked high by tourists naturally become the core and those ranked low belong to the periphery. For example, places like White Emperor Town in Fengjie, Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan (Yu & Xu, 2016), and Teng Prince Pavilion in Jiangxi may have a three-tier structure, as each of them has a poem that has made the place nationally valued and themed. Like Yueyang Tower, all of them are seated along the Yangtze River and hence were visited by innumerable traveling literati who left a rich cultural heritage. In contrast, Autumn Wind Pavilion in Badong (Yu & Xu, 2016) may lack such a powerful Tier 1 element and be much less known to Chinese people. Hence, the specification of the tier structure of a place relates to its position in the total field of cultural heritage tourism in China. Future research in this direction may help in understanding the totality of cultural heritage tourism in China. Application in other countries may also improve cross-cultural understanding, and this can help reduce the fragmentation of research on visitor attractions in the subfield of cultural heritage tourism (Leask, 2010, 2016).

Declarations of interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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