



Research paper

Visitors' perceptions of religious tourism destinations

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of how contemporary visitors perceive the more commercial facets of religious destinations. The Four Great Buddhist Mountains of China provided subtly different contexts for the work, but the themes addressed have a broad applicability to the tensions between secular and spiritual features of such sites. Two rounds of detailed interviews in 2014 and 2016 were undertaken. The first identified four types of Buddhist site images: sacred with high spiritual values, cultural with long histories, attractive with natural features, and commercial with shops and restaurants. The second found that visitors' perceptions of these types of destination image contained both strong cognitive and affective reactions to the Buddhist sites. Such perceptions were strengthened by key site features such as an impressive atmosphere, attractive environment, personal beliefs, and loyal behaviors, but weakened by commercial activities, modern buildings, environmental pollution, and secular behaviors. The findings contribute to both theory and practice by clarifying the factors influencing visitors' perceptions about these Buddhist sites and providing further implications for the sustainable development of religious tourism.

1. Introduction

Religious tourist sites attract more than 300 million visitors every year (Gabor, 2016). Further, the annual value of the religious tourism industry is worth around US\$20 billion (Askin, 2012). The special qualities of religious tourism have attracted the attention of researchers from the fields of religious studies, psychology, leisure, sociology, and tourism (Argyle, 2002; Harris, 2004). Scholars have attended primarily to the classification issues separating pilgrimages from tourism activities, often by paying attention to visitors' motives and activities (Abbate & Nuovo, 2013; MacCannell, 1973; Oktadiana, Pearce, & Chon, 2016; Shuo, Ryan, & Liu, 2009; Smith, 1992; Wang, Chen, & Huang, 2016; Wong, Ryan, & McIntosh, 2013). Recent studies have also reflected a tendency towards dedifferentiation and broader interests in the tourists' experiences (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). In this study, an inclusive term, religious visitors, will be used to embrace a generic interest in the views of pilgrims, secular tourists, and local sightseers.

Although motivational issues have been thoroughly considered in religious tourism, studies of visitors' on-site experiences are less common. Only a few researchers have tried to analyze visitors' experiences (Pearce, Wu, De Carlo, & Rossi, 2013; Poria, Biran & Reichel, 2006; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). These studies have not explored

how visitors perceive religious tourism destination images. Further, little consideration has been given to visitors' views about new services that might affect religious experiences. For example, many more commercial and secular activities, such as entertainment facilities, brand-based shopping, expensive restaurants, and even luxury hotel facilities, are at or very near religious places. Religious commercialization and secularization do indeed seem to be growing issues (Huang, Pearce, & Wen, 2017; Kasim, 2011; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Singh, 2004; Wong et al., 2013). Sustainability challenges resulting from the over-development of religious sites can include heavy visitor-traffic, waste of resources, environmental pollution, food insecurity, and low service quality. This study seeks to understand how these problems affect visitors' experiences, especially their spiritual experiences, and how they react to these modern features of religious tourism destinations.

In China, many religious sites are experiencing these kinds of problems. Quite a few Buddhist temples have been converted from an exclusive religious function to one jointly serving spiritual and commercial goals (Liu, Zhang, & Zheng, 2009; Xiao, 2013). After the implementation of reform and the opening-up policy in 1978, numerous Chinese Buddhist sites were selected by the government as tourist attractions. Local governments often developed plans to protect traditional cultures and simultaneously develop their local economies. The economy-oriented policies stimulated the fast development of diverse

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commercial activities and dramatically changed the character of many Buddhist sites (Huang, 2011; Huang et al., 2017). The reaction of visitors to these sites has not been well documented. The specific context of the work will be the Four Great Buddhist Mountains of China, but the themes addressed reach beyond one country and one faith, and arguably apply to the tensions inherent at many religious attractions. The overall goal of the study can be articulated as to understand the ways in which religious visitors view contemporary and commercialized religious tourism sites.

Evidence suggests that many visitors seek spiritual support or are keen to advance their personal beliefs in religious places (Digance, 2003). This link suggests that the reactions of visitors to the current religious tourism sites may be moderated by the intensity of their religious beliefs. This issue will be considered further in the design of the study. The study also seeks to uncover the kinds of factors that will strengthen or weaken visitors' positive evaluations of religious tourism site images. A clear specification of these factors may offer directions for site managers to maintain the sustainability of religious tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourism destination image

Tourism destination image is a complex, relativistic, and dynamic construct (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002). Tourism destination image basically relies on two components: the cognitive evaluations and affective appraisals (Walmsley & Young, 1998). While the cognitive component refers to tourists' beliefs or knowledge about a destination, the affective dimensions reflect tourists' or would be visitors' feelings toward that destination. A favorable destination image formed by the two combined components can directly increase tourists' repeat visits and their intentions to recommend the destination to others (Giles, Bosworth, & Willett, 2013; Marchiori, Cantoni, Xiang, Tussyadiah, & Buhalis, 2015; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). Especially for religious sites, a positive image not only enhances personal beliefs and maintains mental health, but also promotes social harmony and ensures security and stability (Homayouni, 2011). It can be argued, therefore, that preserving or creating a favorable destination image is critical to sustain the development of religious tourism sites.

Tourists' perceptions of a destination are built on the associations they store in their memories (Cai, 2002). These memories can be affected by different information sources. Destination marketing organizations and commercial agents try to build brand image through advertising online (using popular media) and offline (developing travel guides and documents) (Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1988). Further, people can obtain information from their friends and acquaintances, or other visitors' post-trip blogs. Recent studies demonstrate that many tourists like sharing knowledge, emotions, and experiential moments in online communities (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). These studies all suggest that word of mouth is an important way to shape destination image (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

The information channels already mentioned provide secondary information for tourists prior to their visits (Pearce, 2011). Such information tends to be virtual and somewhat unreliable, so the destination image constructed from this kind of information can be easily overturned by the tourists' real-world experience. At different tourism destinations, tourists can obtain a variety of experiences, including both objective experiences and subjective experiences (Cohen, 1979; Wang, 1999a). The tourists' objective experiences are mainly associated with the hosts' behaviors, the commercial sector's promise, and the characteristics of the setting (such as history, culture, topography, and aesthetics). And the tourists' subjective experiences are closely related to their own characteristics (personality and prior knowledge). Together, tourists' experiences help further form their functional and psychological characteristics of destination images (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). While the functional characteristics are classified as objective or

measurable attractions, activities, costs, and the general tourism offer, the psychological elements are tourists' subjective feelings on friendliness, atmosphere, and quality of service. The functional characteristics can be thought as the traditional cognitive or knowledge-based facets of the tourism destination image (Stabler, 1995). More recently, an awareness of the importance of the affective elements linked with psychological characteristics of the tourism destination image has been stressed (Chen & Uysal, 2002; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Martin & Bosque, 2008; Qu et al., 2011). In addition to the cognitive and affective components, Son and Pearce (2005) have put forward a multi-sensory component, effectively an imaginative anticipation of the sensuous possibilities of a place, which can help provide a multi-faceted assessment of destination images.

Overall, any tourists' perceived image of a destination is an ongoing and socially constructed affair (Henderson & Frelke, 2000; Pearce & Pabel, 2015; Son & Pearce, 2005; Stokowski, 2002; Trauer & Ryan, 2005; Williams, 2002). A destination image is built by the amalgam of the tourists' objective and subjective experiences (Son & Pearce, 2005; Wang, 1999a). A positively perceived image can significantly influence tourists' destination choices and recommendations (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Chen & Uysal, 2002; Ibrahim & Gill, 2005; Vela, 2009). This study will use the concept of destination image as a pivotal focus for the analysis of the religious visitors' views of contemporary Buddhist sites.

2.2. Religious visitor experiences

Five visitor experience modes, including recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental, and existential, have been identified by Cohen (1979). The existential one focuses on those travelling to sacred shrines for a quest of spirituality. In sacred places, people can experience unique culture, seek spiritual support and generate life meaning (Fletcher, 2004; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004).

Researchers have identified that both the cultural and natural environment play a direct role in affecting visitors' experience (MacCannell, 1973). Physical arrangements (such as natural beauties, traditional temples, statues and images) will influence visitors' perceptions of religious ideals, spirituality, and community (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). In such settings, visitors may generate a sense of enlightenment or existential authenticity (Wang, 1999a). Stokols (1990) found that environments with symbolic properties that generate strong affective reactions are of great importance in cultivating human values. For the present work, this emphasis leads to the view that specific religious places can help a person build their group and personal identity (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). Additionally, sacred places tend to be separate from the densely packed residential areas, so people can often use them to escape from the chaos of the secular world. The locations can therefore offer a time out from local annoyances and remind individuals of the beauty of ordered garden spaces or pristine natural settings.

It is also worth noting that the meaning of religious places can be generated through interpersonal interaction (Trauer & Ryan, 2005). In MacCannell's (1973) view, it is difficult for visitors to get access to back stages of a place and they can only experience staged authenticity. At most Buddhist sites in China, visitors can participate in traditional rituals (such as chanting and meditating), stay, and have meals with monks in temples. These kinds of activities provide opportunities for 'backstage' experiences. Communication with religious staff can deepen visitors' understanding of a place and such close encounters can create positive, even sacred, memories (Trauer & Ryan, 2005).

In addition to the interaction with hosts, religious sites create a unique space for shared experiences (Trauer & Ryan, 2005). In such a separated and sacred environment, visitors may be willing to express their feelings and thoughts to families, friends, and others who share similar interests and religious beliefs. A range of studies have emphasized that visitors' experiences are influenced by the behaviors of others

(Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008; Pearce, 2005; Wang, 1999a; Yagi & Pearce, 2007). Pilgrimage are often undertaken with others, and feelings about the destination and locations visited are easily affected, typically positively, by the behavior of like-minded companions. Thus, in many religious places, people are more likely to generate a sense of belonging by gaining respect and love from others (Fletcher, 2004; Madrigal & Kahle, 1994).

As a further consideration, the most meaningful experience for religious visitors may arise from the pilgrimage itself (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). The pilgrimage experience is affected by the characteristics of the visitors (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003), their spiritual or secular needs or motives (Hughes, Bond, & Ballantyne, 2013). Key visitor characteristics consist of the depth of the religious beliefs, gender and age (Fletcher, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). Religious beliefs provide answers for many people to questions about the fundamental meaning of life (Fletcher, 2004; Stark, 1999). Practicing rituals, engaging with symbols, and traditions, and feeling a sense of individual and community support build these positive outcomes (Hadaway, 1978; Hadden, 1995). There are two basic forms of religious orientation: internal and external religious orientation (Allport & Ross, 1967). The former tends to focus on the presence of god(s), whereas the latter is connected to utilitarian values, such as status, comfort, and social interaction (Allport & Ross, 1967). Only the internal religious orientation appears to influence positively the mental health of visitors (Bergin, 1983). More specifically, an internal religious orientation shapes attitudes because the power of faith makes a person hopeful and optimistic in the face of difficulties and frustrations (Homayouni, 2011). Likewise, Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) also asserted that people with a strong religious belief obtain greater life satisfaction and experience less anxiety, loneliness and depression, and physical illness compared to those with low or no religious convictions. Considering these predispositions to view the world in key ways, the degree of religious belief may influence visitors' appraisal of religious sites. This factor is directly considered in the present study.

Finally, visitors motivated by a variety of factors can obtain different experiences at religious sites (Chen, 2006; Hughes et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2013). Those undertaking a pilgrimage tend to be very loyal religious believers. In most pilgrims' minds, religious sites are sacred and separate from secular and commercial activities. Other visitors may have more diverse reasons motivating their travels (Rinschede, 1992; Shuo et al., 2009; Smith, 1992; Wang et al., 2016). As a result, these visitors can enjoy pleasant experiences from sight-seeing and shopping.

In summary, previous research has shown that visitors' experiences can be affected by many kinds of factor in religious places. These influencing factors will have further impacts on visitors' perceptions of religious tourism sites through their experiences. But rich answers to different perceptions about religious tourism site are not yet well established. The researchers therefore seek to explore how different factors affect visitors' experiences and perceptions of a group of major religious tourism sites. Specifically, this study seeks firstly, to address the general perceptions of visitors towards the Four Great Buddhist Mountains as religious tourism sites and secondly, to identify factors that strengthen and weaken their perceptions of these sites. Both informal and semi-structured interviews were used as key methods to undertake the research.

3. Methodology

The Four Great Buddhist Mountains (FGBMs) in China are Mount Wutai, Mount Jiuhua, Mount Emei, and Mount Putuo. All of them have a long and eventful history. They are places for publicizing Buddhism, mainly by different Bodhisattvas. Unlike significant churches and cathedrals that are predominantly built in major cities, most temples are in remote and mountainous areas. Monks have preferred to escape from earthly matters and political or ideological revolutions in these far-

flung settings. Now that mainstream religions in China are being revived, these mountains have become popular tourist attractions. In China, it is believed that mountains are places where earth and heaven and earth touch. Partly due to this symbolism, together the four Buddhist mountains attract approximately 10 million visitors annually (Xiao, 2011). Due to the high cost of both time and money, most people cannot visit these mountains repeatedly. As a result, they value any visit and one single experience may significantly influence their perception of these Buddhist sites. Due to the power of these places, they offer researchers a valuable context to address the concerns of the study.

In total, two rounds of fieldwork were conducted to complete the research. The first field trip was conducted at Mount Putuo and Mount Emei in October and November of 2014. This phase of the study sought only to identify general types of visitors' perceptions on the Buddhist sites. As Mount Putuo and Mount Emei are in different economic regions, by studying the two locations the researchers could include visitors from different domestic markets. The first fieldwork effort employed observation and informal conversational interviews (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). In the informal interviews, participants were asked to describe their on-site feelings and experiences, and then provide their perceived image of that mountain. Each interview was guided by general issues as follows: (1) please use as many words as you can to describe the cultural or spiritual aspects of this site; (2) please use as many words as you can to describe the commercial activities of this site; (3) are there any commercial activities annoying or bothering you at this site? and; (4) what is your overall impression of this site? Many unique or unexpected topics emerged during the conversation process. These topics were important for the researchers to generate new ideas about the study themes.

The selection of visitors at these sites followed a systematic process. The researchers approached every fifth visitor they met in the main scenic spots and explained their research to him/her. If the person contacted declined, they approached the next fifth visitor. Initially, 11 detailed and thorough interviews were conducted. In the interviews, male visitors were more willing to express their feelings about the Buddhist sites. The participants with different levels of education worked in companies or operated small businesses for themselves. Most participants visited the Buddhist sites with their families or friends. Nearly all participants came from nearby cities or developed regions. By analyzing the content of interviews, four general types of visitors' perceptions of the Buddhist sites were identified. These classifications were clear and repeatedly offered by the small set of interviewees. The distinctions made were sacred sites with high spiritual values, cultural settings with long histories, attractive locations with natural features, and highly commercial places with many shops and restaurants.

Based on the above findings, the research team employed semi-structured interviews in the second round of fieldwork. The aim of this phase of the study was to obtain more specific information about visitors' perceptions of the Buddhist sites (Gideon, 2012). On this occasion, the researchers asked the interviewees to choose the destination image category that they thought closely reflected their own perception. Next, the researchers asked the interviewees to describe specific factors that strengthened and weakened their perception of that mountain. The interview questions were: (1) what kind of image do you have of this Buddhist site? (2) what contributes positively to your perception of this Buddhist site? (3) what contributes negatively or spoils your perception of this Buddhist site? and (4) how strong is your belief in Buddhism?

In June and July of 2016, 60 visitors participated in the research at the FGBMs. The researchers used a set of codes to identify the respondents at each location. The interviews were conducted at the main scenic spots. Each interview lasted from 10 to 40 min. Most of those willing to participate were reluctant to have the interviews recorded so the researchers took summary field notes of the conversations. As soon as each interview ended, the researchers added more details to their notes to collect as much information as possible.

After the second round of fieldwork, all the handwritten notes were

transferred to text as descriptive words and phrases. The interviews were firstly coded as MEI: 1–15; MPI: 1–15; MJJ: 1–15; and MWI: 1–15. Then the number and percentage of interviewees with different types of perceived Buddhist site images were calculated. For the perceived Buddhist site image, the key influencing factors were recognized and clarified into several themes. The primary strengthening factors were typical temples and statues, unique Buddhism culture, strong religious atmosphere, loyal behaviors, and natural attractiveness. The main weakening factors were commercial activities, low quality of services, Buddhists' secular behaviors, environmental pollution, and unmatched modern buildings. The frequency of both strengthening and weakening factors was also counted for each type of perceived Buddhist site image. To ensure the reliability and validity of the research, the interview contents were checked repeatedly to reduce misunderstandings and any statistical counting errors.

The data again revealed that more male visitors were willing to participate in the project and most were under 40 years old. In this part of the research visitors were asked to express the strength of their Buddhist beliefs. The levels of Buddhist beliefs were divided into three categories, from weak to strong. The results showed that about half of the participants held a neutral attitude towards Buddhism, while around 22% of them were loyal believers.

4. Results

The first aim of the study was to assess the perceptions of visitors on the FGBMs. Four general orientations to the sites were extracted from the initial interviews. The categories applied by the visitors were not necessarily tied to any one of the mountains as different types of religious visitors viewed the mountains in different ways. As noted in reporting the methodology used in the second study, the perceptions were organized as follows: sacred with high spiritual values (Type 1); cultural with long histories (Type 2); attractive with natural features (Type 3), and commercial with shops and restaurants (Type 4). The researchers built these four categories by considering the internal consistency of the remarks about the places.

4.1. Exploring visitors' perception on the Buddhist sites

Table 1 provides a more detailed overview of the frequencies of the classifications. The information in Table 1 cross-references the religious beliefs of the visitors with their perceptions and provides the raw material for considering the second aim of the study where the researchers sought to determine how the degree of religious belief affected visitors' perception of these sites.

Generally, visitors used the more positive classifications (Types 1, 2 and 3) to record their overview of the FGBMs. Half of the interviewees treated these mountains as sacred and cultural places (Type 1 and Type 2). These respondents emphasized experiencing the unique religious culture and noted the importance of interacting with Buddhist believers. In addition, many other visitors enjoyed the natural environment at the FGBMs (Type 3). The setting and the value of local plants

and wildlife attracted around 45% of interviewees. However, some visitors (5%) responded to the questions about their overall perception of the site by nominating Type 4. This answer reflected their experience of feeling distracted from their intended religious goals because of diverse commercial activities.

In an analysis of the interviews, Mount Putuo was thought to be the most sacred Buddhist site. The perception of this mountain may be dependent on its unique geographical location. Mount Putuo is located on an isolated island, where developing substantial commercial activities has been challenging. The island is very small, so that all temples have been built together in a tightly circumscribed area. This feature of the layout of the site might explain why many visitors identified a dominant religious atmosphere at this mountain. Mount Wutai and Mount Jiuhua tended to be seen as cultural places, with many traditional buildings, statues, and historic stories. But it is worth noting that Taihuai Town is at the center of Mount Wutai and shops, restaurants, and hotels are prominent. As a result, a few visitors thought it was over-commercialized. Compared with the other three mountains, Mount Emei was regarded as a wonderful place for leisure and sightseeing. Although Mount Emei was traditionally famous for both its cultural and natural attractions, visitors stressed the natural rather than the cultural elements.

The visitors' Buddhist beliefs were associated with their classifications and evaluations of the FGBMs. Non-believers paid more attention to the natural features of the mountains. Possibly these visitors did not care about Buddhist culture and they visited the sites mainly for sightseeing or entertainment. For visitors who held neutral attitudes, their perceptions included responses across all the classifications. Most of them treated the FGBMs as cultural and sacred places. Finally, an unexpected result was that the more loyal believers thought the FGBMs were cultural or beautiful rather than sacred. Additionally, a few loyal believers expressed the view that these Buddhist sites were too commercial.

4.2. Specific factors influencing visitors' perception of the Buddhist sites

The third aim of the work examined which factors can strengthen and weaken perception of these sites. The results are presented according to the specific findings for each type of setting.

4.2.1. Type 1: sacred with high spiritual values

Visitors' perceived images of the FGBMs could be strengthened and weakened by various factors (Fig. 1). For Type 1, the favorable destination images were closely associated with the affective elements of the FGBMs. These affective elements increase visitors' objective experience and further improve their positive perceptions of the FGBMs. Such perceptions were mostly enhanced by others' on-site behaviors (MWI: 13). For example, respondents reported being deeply moved by the loyalty of their companions. Visitors had good impressions of the Buddhists' and residents' friendliness. Due to the kind words and deeds of others, visitors felt more devoted and respectful to Buddha. The ways to worship Buddha were different at each Buddhist site. Thus, visitors

Table 1
The frequency of visitors' perceptions on the FGMBs.

Type	Degree of Buddhist belief			Classification for each mountain				Total sample (N = 60) (%)
	Weak (N = 15) n	Neutral (N = 32) n	Strong (N = 13) N	Putuo (N = 15) (%)	Jiuhua (N = 15) (%)	Wutai (N = 15) (%)	Emei (N = 15) (%)	
Type 1	2	10	1	40.0	20.0	20.0	6.7	21.7
Type 2	2	10	5	20.0	40.0	46.7	6.7	28.3
Type 3	11	11	5	33.3	40.0	20.0	86.6	45.0
Type 4	0	1	2	6.7	0.0	13.3	0.0	5.0

Note: Type 1: Sacred with high spiritual values; Type 2: Cultural with long histories; Type 3: Attractive with natural features; Type 4: Commercial with shops and restaurants.

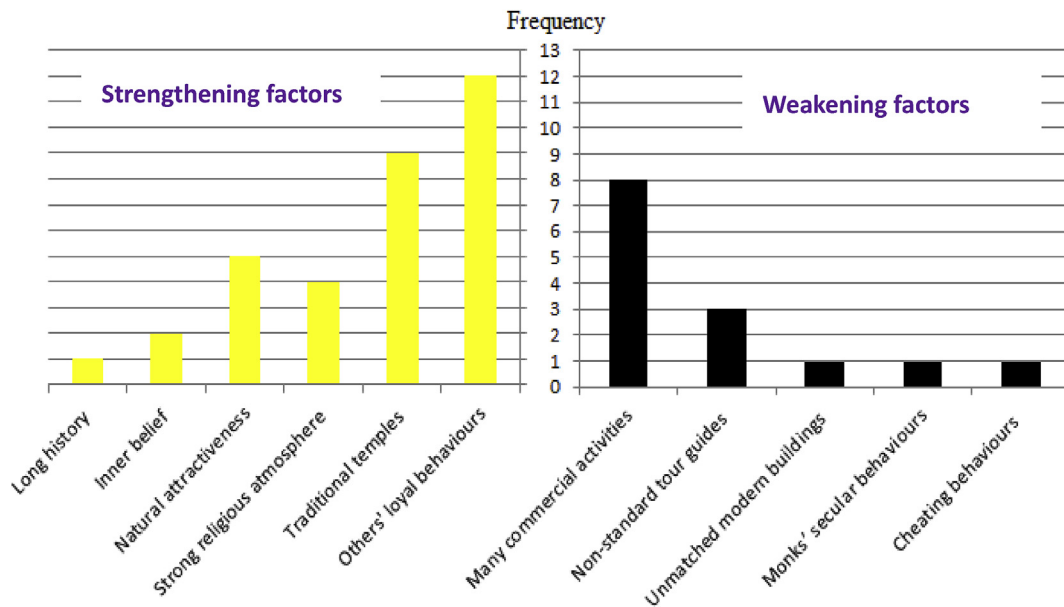


Fig. 1. Strengthening and weakening factors for Type 1.

paid attention to acts of worshipping, because they were afraid of being disrespectful to Buddha. In addition, these visitors enjoyed the wonderful environment at the FGBMs, since there were so many traditional buildings and picturesque scenery. As one visitor remarked:

When I kept chanting Amitabha, time had passed for an hour. I dared not to move my body obviously, because it showed no respect to Buddha. I sneaked a peek at my friend, she was still chanting, but she also moved her body lightly sometimes. I only dared to move my body after her. Finally, I stood up and joined in a line. Everyone was focused on chanting, and they walked around the chapel slowly and quietly. I was deeply moved by them, and I found true peace in mind for a moment. By chanting, I could experience a strange strength, which makes me calm and strong (MWI: 13).

Finally, the internal factors seemed to affect visitors' perception as well. These internal factors, including strength, courage and hope, could increase visitors' subjective experience and then enhance their favorable perceptions of the FGBMs. Some interviewees noted that their strong beliefs provided them with continuous inner resources (MJ:11). Such character strengths generated a strong sense of security and supported a positive orientation to life and the sites. As one stated:

Since secular society is very complex and chaotic, land of Buddha can be simple and sacred. By chanting sutras in temples, I can seek for spiritual support which makes me relaxed and quiet. Furthermore, I obtain inspiration and become more open-minded. I prefer a peaceful life without haggling over every ounce. Also, I will not feel tired or depressed about life and I know the meaning of happiness in daily life (MJ: 11).

By way of contrast, visitors thought their perceptions could be seriously weakened by diverse external factors. These unfavorable factors were mainly related to the cognitive or functional characteristics of the FGBMs, such as commercial activities, high cost of food and beverage, and Buddhists' secular behaviors. These functional characteristics decreased visitors' objective experience and further negatively affected their perceived Buddhist site images. Firstly, visitors had to pay high prices for entry tickets, parking, accommodation, food and drinks, candles and incense (MWI: 11). The strong commercial atmosphere negatively affected their on-site experiences. Further, they were often annoyed by mobile vendors. These vendors took various means to persuade visitors to stay in hotels, go shopping in stores or have meals

at restaurants. Visitors sometimes had a sense of being cheated or forced to consume. Likewise, in some participants' view, tour guides acted more as commercial agents rather than interpreting Buddhist culture clearly. Finally, visitors emphasized that some monks' behaviors were decidedly secular. For example, monks drove luxury cars, played with mobile phones, and talked about fashionable topics. In visitors' opinions, these secular behaviors were unexpected and damaging to their view of the character of the sacred mountain. One visitor stated that:

I have thought Buddhist sites are better than other scenic spots. But too much expectation finally makes me disappointed. I know the price at scenic spots is higher than that in normal living places. But the price of food and beverage here is far away from what is normal. It's too commercialized and I cannot accept the reality (MWI: 11).

4.2.2. Type 2: cultural with long histories

The results for the influential factors at the Type 2 sites were somewhat different from Type 1 (Fig. 2). For Type 2, the destination images were highly linked with the cognitive or knowledge-based facets of the FGBMs. The most significant facet was symbolic signs of Buddhism (MWI:12). The signs consisted of temples, rituals and statues, and they created a powerful local cultural atmosphere. Meanwhile, visitors were also interested in different histories and stories about Buddha. Possibly owing to the attractiveness of Buddhist culture, these visitors did not pay much attention to the natural environment. In addition to cultural elements, visitors' perceived image of these Buddhist sites was positively influenced both by their religious belief and others' behaviors. One said that:

In the setting sun, the thousand-year-old trees look golden on Dailuo summit, while chanting sounds of monks come out from old temples. All of these create a context for tranquility and peacefulness (MWI:12).

In terms of weakening factors, again cognitive or functional elements, such as commercial activities and uncivilized tour guide behaviors, negatively affected visitors' perceptions of the Buddhist sites (MPI: 7). Visitors thought it was not reasonable for Buddhist sites to make profits in the name of Buddha. In some visitors' views, religious culture should not be entwined with commercialization, otherwise Buddhism would become a professional money-earning tool. Further,

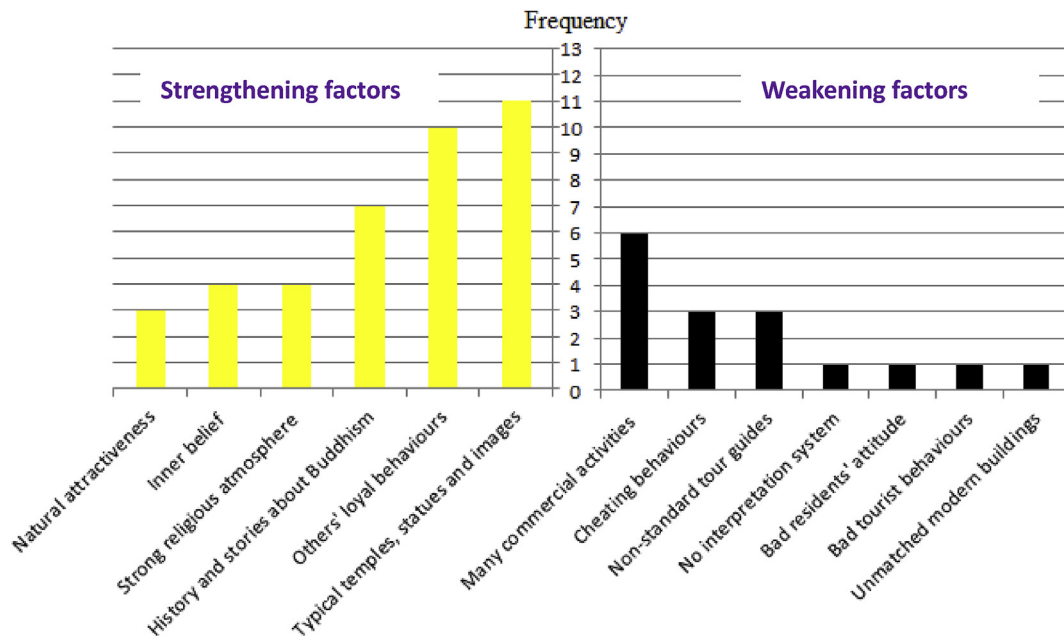


Fig. 2. Strengthening and weakening factors for Type 2.

the pursuit of economic growth may result in cheating behaviors by residents, tour guides and religious staff. It was worth noting that the architecture of modern buildings and unattractive, antisocial visitor behaviors also downgraded the Buddhist site image. As one visitor stated:

The inherent Buddhism culture is very strong at this mountain, so it's beneficial to cultivate mind in this place. Without being disturbed by secular affairs, I feel completely relaxed and tranquil. If there were more commercial behaviors occurred in this place, it would lose its unique artistic image (MPI:7).

4.2.3. Type 3: attractive with natural features

Most visitors' perceived images for Type 3 were also dominated by cognitive or functional characteristics of the FGBMs (Fig. 3). Unlike the results for the Type 2 category, these cognitive or functional characteristics basically referred to natural features, such as plants, creeks, blue sky, and wildlife. Visitors thought that these mountains were beautiful places for sightseeing and entertainment (MWI: 17). Owing to the noise and pressure of living in cities, visitors really enjoyed the peaceful and quiet life at these secluded places. They could breathe fresh air, look at green plants, play in the creeks, and feel the power of pure nature. Visitors described the wonderful experience of climbing the rock stairs, having a rest in pavilions, and talking with friends or families all the way to the top of the mountain. Additionally, the presence of wildlife was an attractive feature of these sites. The plants and wildlife made these Buddhist sites more colorful and animated. For example, visitors were deeply impressed by monkeys at Mount Emei, because they could touch and feed them. One visitor stated that:

During worshipping, I have met fog, rain, mountain, flowers, cows, monks, and Buddhism. The journey of this year is not for pilgrimage, but for meeting you. When I go downhill, I have an unforgettable adventure. It's so unimaginable that fog and mist are changing into each other in turn, with a waving sea of clouds in the sky, colourful flowers dancing and cattle eating quietly on the grass ... This is a Wonderland, and I'm not sure which Buddha has passed by and drawn such a wonderful picture for us (MWI: 17).

As noted for the Type 1 and Type 2 mountains, commercialization was also a critical issue for Type 3. Visitors identifying this

categorization cared more about the protection of natural environment. Their perceptions on the FGBMs were also badly influenced by environmental pollution. For example, construction trash which had been casually thrown to one corner of a mountain and into a creek was seen as a very negative outcome (MEI: 11). The destruction of parts of the mountains in order to build more roads, hotels and restaurant was also seen as detracting from the visitors' enjoyment of the sites. Further, a mix of construction dust, vehicle exhaust, and the smoke of burning incense could weaken visitors' experience as well. Finally, some visitors were concerned about the safety and health of wildlife. For example, they emphasized that it was not good to feed too much unhealthy food to monkeys. One visitor noted that:

To save time and money, the construction trash was casually thrown into the mountain. Meanwhile, the roads built from the bottom to top of the mountain have destroyed the forest and plants. The local environment has been seriously polluted and it further weakens our perceptions of this Buddhist site (MEI: 11).

4.2.4. Type 4: commercial with different business activities

Very few visitors treated the FGBMs as over commercialized places. But some fundamental concerns about religious commercialization did exist (MWI: 5). For those who had visited the FGBMs for many years, the religious atmosphere had almost disappeared in recent times. As a result, they felt disappointed about the current situation of these Buddhist sites, because they could no longer feel the sacredness in the religious places. One visitor suggested that:

There are so many fake monks at Mount Wutai. I was 'forced' to accept an amulet and donate money to them. Besides, many staff from hotels and restaurants standing on both sides of road persuade tourists to have meals or stay in their places ... There are too many people begging for money along the way to temples. They have become professional beggars (MWI: 5).

5. Discussion and conclusion

The study achieved its first aim of identifying visitors' general impressions on religious site images. The results revealed that many religious sites are no longer simply perceived as sacred places. Traditional

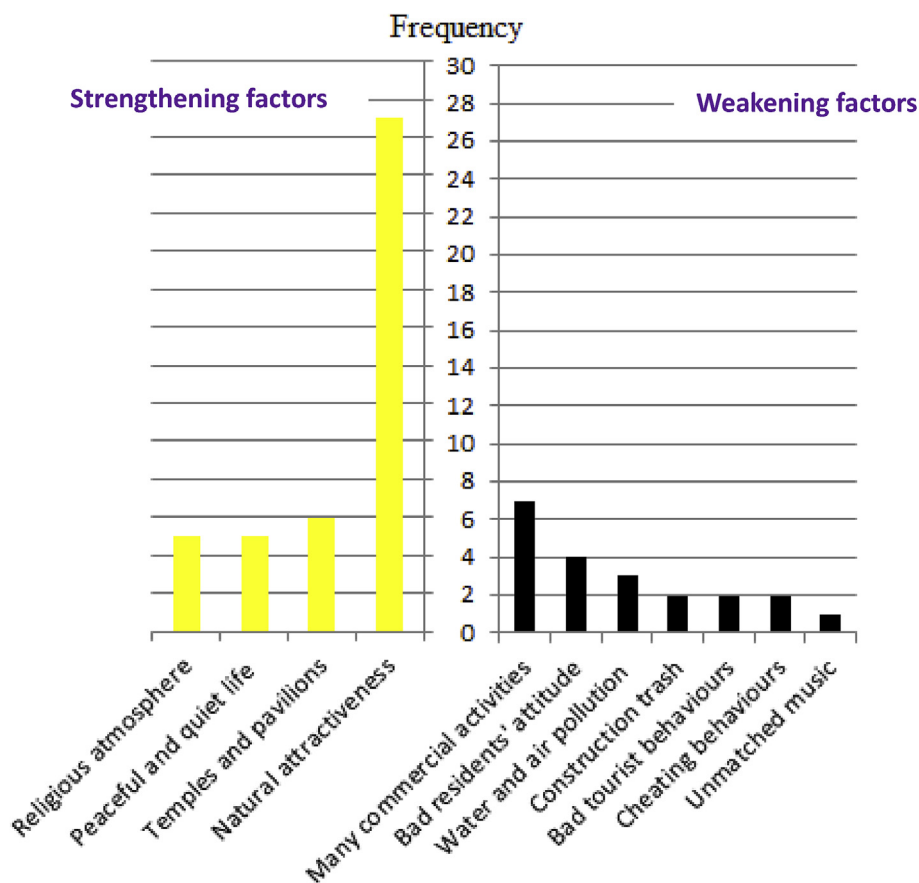


Fig. 3. Strengthening and weakening factors for Type 3.

perceptions of religious site images are gradually being challenged by modern consumption patterns. Visitors' perceptions of the Buddhist Mountains in China were complex and dynamic. Such perceptions were affected by both cognitive and affective components of the Buddhist sites.

It was found that the sacredness of the religious sites has been influenced by a variety of factors. Many visitors are still attracted by cognitive elements of the FGBMs, such as local cultural symbols and the mountains' natural features. As Wang (1999a) has suggested, visitors' objective experiences are closely associated with environmental resources. These resources are regarded as traditional cognitive components of tourism destination image (Stabler, 1995). Most visitors had a good impression of the natural and cultural environment at the FGBMs. Meanwhile, the affective elements, such as religious atmosphere, residents' attitudes, and quality of service, can also greatly influence visitors' subjective experiences and further shape their perceived Buddhist site images. The results showed that visitors' impressions through the affective elements varied because of their different subjective experiences. While some visitors were moved by the monks' and Buddhist believers' loyalty and friendliness, others could be annoyed by residents' indifference and low quality of service. It is noteworthy that a few visitors were very sensitive to the trends in religious commercialization and secularization (Huang et al., 2017; Kasim, 2011; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Singh, 2004; Wong et al., 2013). The commercial activities and secular behaviors do appear to weaken the sacredness of Buddhist site for sub-samples of the visitors.

Further, this study has examined how religious belief affects visitors' perceptions of the FGBMs. In addition to the external factors, inner belief plays an essential role in the construction of religious tourism destination image (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). The results showed that most non-believers enjoy the natural beauty, and do not care about the

cultural or religious elements. These visitors focus on sightseeing and social interaction (Shuo et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2016). By way of contrast, strong believers are very interested in Buddhist culture. They know much more about the history and cultural symbols of Buddhism. Such believers may keep visiting Buddhist sites for many years. As a result, they are more likely to construct sacred or cultural images of Buddhist sites. However, the recently emerged commercial activities have downgraded their experiences. It is one possible reason why some strong believers are quite sensitive to commercial activities. And in their opinions, Buddhist sites have become commercial places.

Visitors who hold neutral attitude towards Buddhism are the most complex group. While one-third of these visitors perceive the FGBMs as natural attractions, another one-third are impressed by the local cultural atmosphere. The rest feel a strong sense of sacredness. It is puzzling that many more visitors in this group believe that Buddhist sites are sacred with high spiritual values. One possible reason is that destination-image creation is strongly linked to prior knowledge (Henderson & Frelke, 2000; Son & Pearce, 2005; Stokowski, 2002; Trauer & Ryan, 2005; Williams, 2002). Unlike strong believers, many of these visitors are new adoptees of Buddhism, and they do not have too much knowledge and experience about Buddhist sites. Consequently, it is easier for them to be strongly stimulated by religious symbols and the visible behavior of other devotees. They do tend to have better impressions of the FGBMs.

An important aim of this study was to identify specific factors that strengthen and weaken visitors' perceptions of the religious tourism sites. The number of Type 4 visitors in this study was limited, only accounting for five percent of the total sample. Meanwhile, the Type 4 visitors were mostly concerned about the over-commercialized activities and secular behaviors. These negative elements have been fully analyzed in other three types of visitors' perceptions on the Buddhist

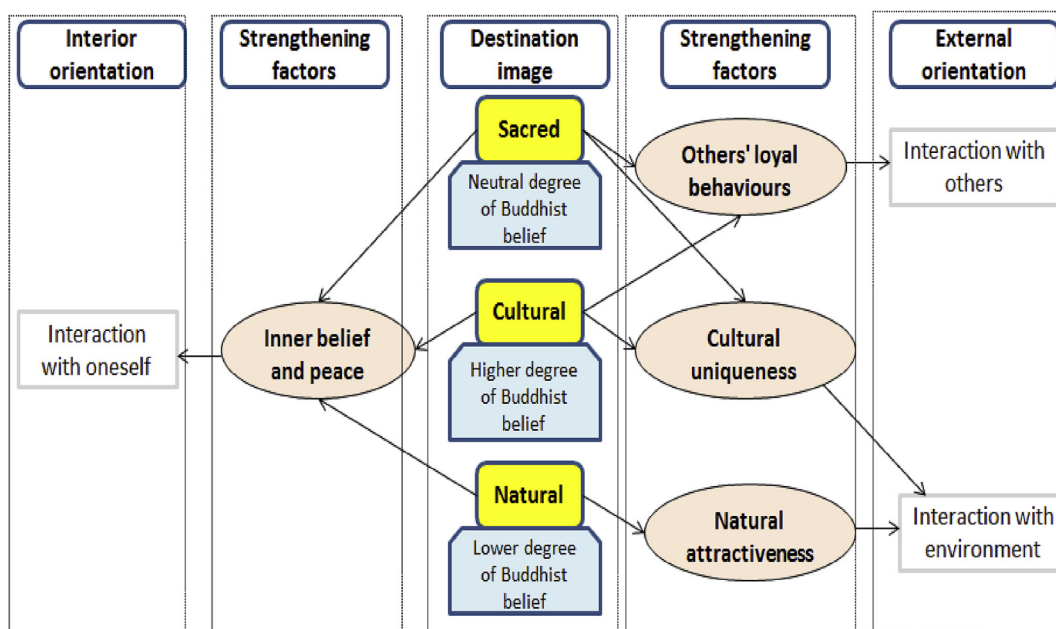


Fig. 4. Systematic strengthening factors for visitors' perception on the Buddhist sites.

sites. Therefore, four types of visitors' perceptions have been identified, but only three of them will be discussed in detail. Fig. 4 provides a visual illustration of the dominant issues.

Visitors' perceptions of the Buddhist sites can be strengthened by both external and internal factors. The external factors consist of others' loyal behaviors, cultural uniqueness, and natural attractiveness. For Type 1 visitors who perceive the sacredness of Buddhist sites, the influence of the behaviors of others is strong (Belhassen et al., 2008; Pearce, 2005; Wang, 1999a; Yagi & Pearce, 2007). Since most visitors venture to these Buddhist sites with companions, it is easy for them to imitate and be influenced by their companions' behaviors. Moreover, Buddhist sites provide a separated space for shared experience (Trauer & Ryan, 2005). At the FGBMs, visitors can build a mobile community, where they can share the same interests and common beliefs. The shared experience increases visitors' knowledge about Buddhism (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012), and further enhances their affective feelings towards that mountain (Qu et al., 2011).

Second, the positive influence of cultural elements on visitors' perceptions in Type 2 is important. The cultural elements, such as traditional temples, Buddha's statues, and rituals, leave a good impression on visitors (MacCannell, 1973; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). These objective buildings and traditions are important cognitive or perceptive component of destination image (Stabler, 1995). Being exposed to such settings, visitors can experience authentic Buddhist culture. Additionally, these symbolic properties further cultivate their spiritual values and personal identities (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004; Stokols, 1990).

Third, the natural environment is another important cognitive component of destination image in Type 3 (Stabler, 1995). Owing to the unique geographic location, Buddhist sites are also well known for their natural scenery. In these environments some visitors can have a quiet and peaceful trip. Further, there are many insects and some wildlife at the FGBMs, and the presence of these forms of life fits with concepts of harmonious living in the natural world. These natural elements shape visitors' impressions on the FGBMs.

Visitors' perceptions can also be deepened by their inner psychological characteristics (Fletcher, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). As Collins-Kreiner (2010) has found, meaningful experiences arise during the pilgrimage itself. Although not everyone is motivated by religious reasons at the FGBMs, most of visitors aim to seek spiritual support and

comfort (Digance, 2003). Inner beliefs do contribute to visitors' understanding of the FGBMs in a positive way. Even sightseers seek to experience peacefulness without being disturbed by secular chaos.

In summary, the positive image of these Buddhist sites is built on a comprehensive range of factors from interior resources to features of the external environment. The perceived sacredness and cultural atmosphere in Type 1 and Type 2 is the result of visitors' interaction with other Buddhist believers and religious environment. Type 3 visitors tend to immerse themselves in the natural environment. Besides the interaction with external circumstances, nearly all visitors can communicate with their inner selves. Both the cultural and natural environment help visitors better understand their true selves (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). Additionally, strong inner beliefs improve visitors' perceptions of the FGBMs.

In terms of the weakening factors, visitors' perceptions are mostly related to the cognitive components of the FGBMs (Fig. 5) (Belhassen et al., 2008; Pearce, 2005; Wang, 1999a; Yagi & Pearce, 2007). These cognitive components can be divided into three categories: commercial behaviors, secular behaviors, and uncivilized behaviors. First of all, it is a widely agreed issue that religious commercialization can overshadow the religious spirit of places (Huang et al., 2017; Joseph & Kavoori, 2001; Kasim, 2011; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Singh, 2004; Wong et al., 2013). Many visitors do complain about the unclear price of tourism goods, cheating behaviors of locals, and the poor service quality of religious staff. As a result, commercial behaviors do weaken, though to different degrees, nearly all visitors' perceptions on the Buddhist sites.

In addition, secularization of religious places seems to be another issue (Chen, 2006; Cohen, 1979; Hughes et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2013). At Buddhist sites, visitors think monks should be well-behaved. But it appears to be hard for monks to maintain traditional life habits without driving cars or using cell phones. Both commercialization and secularization are typical characteristics of modernity (Wang, 1999b). It is difficult for religions to survive without being connected to modern society. The combination of religion and tourism is only one way to develop religion sustainably. However, owing to visitors' original and traditional views, they are still opposed to the secular behaviors of religious staff.

Finally, it is worthwhile noting that a few visitors are very sensitive to others' attitude and behaviors (Pearce, 2005; Yagi & Pearce, 2007). In these visitors' opinions, locals should be friendly, and kind-hearted,

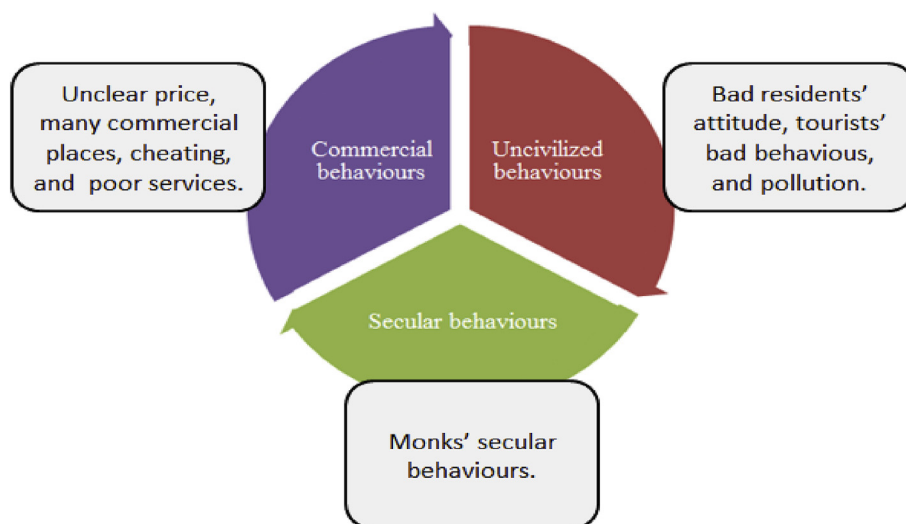


Fig. 5. Systematic weakening factors for visitors' perception on the Buddhist sites.

because they have been educated by Buddha's teachings. But the reality is that more and more residents have participated in the tourism economy, and they pay much attention to economic benefits. Further, these residents have not been well trained in doing business. That is why visitors find that residents' attitudes are not as expected. Furthermore, visitors cannot put up with others' uncivilized behaviors, such as littering and feeding wild animals. Visitors' uncivilized behaviors can result in the environmental pollution and further distort the image of the FGBMs.

This study contributes to academic theory and tourists site management by identifying the strengthening and weakening factors that affect visitors' perceptions of religious tourism destination. In terms of theory, it was revealed that both cognitive and affective components are strongly implicated in the visitors' perceptions of the FGBMs. Visitors' perceptions can be enhanced by the external environment (such as cultural symbols and natural features) and internal communication with themselves, other people and even wildlife. But unlike the strengthening factors, visitors' perceptions are mostly weakened by the cognitive components of the Buddhist sites. Nearly all visitors are concerned about the commercial activities, as well as uncivilized and secular behaviors.

In terms of on-site management responses, several steps could be taken to promote the destination image of these religious sites and develop tourism more sustainably. On one hand, it is necessary to improve the religious atmosphere by keeping the traditional cultural symbols and protecting the natural environment. For example, many modern buildings can be moved to peripheral areas, and construction trash should be cleaned promptly. Meanwhile, different types of visitors can be encouraged to participate in religious rituals and experience the monks' daily life. This is beneficial for the active interactions among individuals. Most importantly, it is imperative for these Buddhist sites to control commercial activities and standardize tourism services. Notably, the secular behaviors of religious staff should be managed as well.

Another potential contribution of this study lies in applying the categorizations of the sites to other religious settings in Asia and beyond. Together with the listing of influential factors shaping visitors' views, it can be suggested that the wider implications of the work lie in providing a style of research design easily transferred to other locations. The construct of the strength of faith or religious commitment in determining visitors' views was shown to be important in the context of these Buddhist mountains in China and can be promoted as a critical variable for assessment of visitors' perceptions in other contexts.

In conclusion, the exploratory nature of this qualitative study

provides some implications for the sustainable development of religious tourism. The present work is built on detailed interviews and the approach worked well in the settings studied. Nevertheless, possibilities for using surveys and adopting observational analysis might be further tools to explore religious visitors' behaviors and perceptions as researchers develop a deeper understanding of the interplay of tourism and religion around the planet. There were, predictably, some limitations in the current study. In the interviews, male visitors were more active than females in taking part, presumably because Chinese females appeared to be afraid of strangers in religious tourism destinations. Meanwhile, it was hard to communicate with a few visitors who had strong local accents. These limitations should be considered and ways to overcome them with more interviewees and a sensitivity to local dialects could be helpful in further work.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100371>.

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