Constructionism and culture in research: Understandings of the fourth Buddhist Festival, Wutaishan, China

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an interpretation of competing legitimacies at the 2007 4th Annual Wutaishan Buddhist Festival in Taihua, Shanxi Province. It suggests how spectacle, entertainment and performance spaces are condoned arenas of challenge and usage by mainstream and peripheral groups. The paper also discusses the methods employed in the framing and nature of interpretation, and possesses its own tension as the different cultural perspectives and voices are heeded. It concludes that the festival exists as a multi-layered event involving economics, politics, faith, entertainment and prestige – each of which creates its own set of interpretations contextualised in the evolving state of Chinese tourism. The paper is partially a response to the work of Hollinshead, Phillimore & Goodson and O'Dell that claim a need for a more reflexive voice in the tourism literature as a means of understanding the tourist experience. Its premises are based on thinking derived from multiple sources including symbolic interaction and Buddhist thought.

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1. Introduction

In a series of books and papers a continuing voice in the academic tourism literature re-iterates the importance of the emic in research and the location and role of the researcher as an actor within the research process. Phillimore and Goodson (2004:20) argue that a hybridisation of research methods has become increasingly common to the point where 'the presence of multiple realities is more accepted and the role of the researcher is sometimes questioned.' Such approaches represent a reaction to a previously perceived situation where, as Meethan (2001:161) argues, the majority of management and research activities in tourism were routinely carried out 'uncritically', by which he means researchers ignored complex symbolic values enmeshed in the presentation and experience of touristic performances and actions. Hollinshead (2004:73) goes further in arguing that one should not only consider these complexities, but do so within considerations of *methodology* 'where questions of a methodological nature are primarily 'paradigmatic' issues'. This is particularly true where the distinction between emic and etic breaks down, as it can when researching the experiencing of tourism events. The qualitative

researcher is part of the crowd that experiences the event. The researcher's own experiences may be representative of those experienced by other faces in the crowd, but the etic role of the researcher requires supposed objectivity or distancing from the personal on the part of the researcher. However, the gaze of the researcher is filtered through past knowledge, abilities to empathise with others, while the ethic of research transparency (Ryan, 2005) requires the researcher to locate themselves within the text when other than post-positivistic paradigms are voiced (and even perhaps also then). Thus, the researcher's own interpretations and experiences become part of the data set. Yet these events, experiences and touristic locations are complex social structures. Hollinshead (1999:15) notes five lessons for tourism researchers emanating from 'broader Foucauldian/Nietzschean understandings', of which, for particular relevance for this paper, is his comment 'the death of interpretation paradoxically occurs with the observer's or analyst's belief that there is indeed going to be something concrete *there* findable or viewable in the text, a hidden essence to be discovered and explained, at the culmination of the interpretative 'voyage' towards knowing something' (Hollinshead, 1999:18). As Ryan (2005) noted in his metaphor of the onion in research, the layers of truth are revealed within specific contexts, but the truth is the whole onion with layers seen and unseen. It will be argued within this paper that such an approach has validity from not only a western perspective, but also within Buddhist

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understandings of the event that forms the subject observed and which was the catalyst for this paper.

Consequently the purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse the Wutaishan Buddhist Cultural Festival with reference to the fourth such festival held in 2007 in Taihuai, Wutaishan, in Shanxi Province, China, and in doing so to comment on the role of the researcher as interpreter. The paper is divided into the following sections. After a statement as to the research position of the authors, a description of the cultural importance of Buddhism to this part of China follows; third, a description of the main festival event in 2007 is provided, and fourth, an analysis is derived from participant observation, formal announcements and secondary data. Photographic data are used in support of the contentions. Other subsidiary sections include a review of the official governmental stance and brief notes on the nature of interpretation as a form of social critique. It should also be noted that within the paper there is a change of voice from the third to first person as the authors state personal views, and then the text subsequently returns to the third voice.

2. Framing the research

The framing of the research is illustrated in Fig. 1. At the left and right hand sides of the extremities are the authors, but their detachment is reflexive for their role commenced as tourists. Each comes to the situation from a different background as briefly indicated. Each draws their own perspective, but as indicated in the bottom arrow, interact through the exchange of views and ideas. The subject matter is indicated by the overlapping circles – the event is a specific tourism event, promoted by a Communist State as part of its regional economic strategy, but influenced by Buddhist culture. The nature of the Venn diagram also seeks to portray the overlapping and hence complex sets of relationship that inform the offered analysis.

In undertaking this analysis it cannot be stated too clearly that the actual holding of the event with official governmental support (as evidenced below) would have scarcely been thought possible 3 decades ago, and the existence of the event is evidence of a new openness in Chinese political and social thought that commenced with the policies initiated by Deng Xiaopeng in 1978. However, the cultural festival is contemporaneous with the International Tourism Month held in the area, and in 2007 the 18th such festival was held. Indeed the opening ceremony for both events is the same and created the hybrid spectacle that initiated this paper. Indeed it is a key event for both festivals, and it can be noted that in Wutainshan cultural tourism cannot but help involve the Buddhist tradition as explained below. Indeed, the denial of Buddhism as playing a leading role in the cultural tourism month for 14 years is itself a statement of past perspectives. Yet, as Mao Tse-Tung (1942:70) wrote '(Our purpose is) to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component, that

they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and they help fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.' From this perspective a classic Maoist interpretation is that the incorporation of Buddhist culture into an entertainment idiom emasculates an alternative mode of thought and unites 'literature and art' into the creation of market product for the well-being of the people. Parallels with the role of carnival and the carnivalesque as described by Bakhtin (1982, 1984) may be found, wherein power structures permit inversion of accepted order to confirm the status quo by offering an outlet for alternatives – although for Bakhtin the carnivalesque is based upon the profane. In this instance it may be argued a secularisation of the sacred is presented as a spectacle to channel different perspectives of Chinese order. Yet can this interpretation be sustained? The theme of the festival Sacred Wutai Mountain: Harmonious Tourism is wholly consistent with the rhetoric of the Chinese State (Ryan, Gu, & Zhang, 2008) and its insistence on a harmonious society. 'Harmony' may be seen as an enhancement of an individual's relationship with others, nature, and by extension the divine as a series of mutually supportive relationships. A multiplicity of interpretations present themselves within this context. For example, with reference to death, the Confucian way is to preserve virtue, and thus life should not be prolonged by a non-virtuous act, the Taoist way is to perceive life and death as a shared natural process, and the Buddhist belief is that death is part of the process of rebirth (Zheng Xiaojiang, 1994). In life there is the ying and yang – an universe of positive/negative, wet/dry, cold/hot, light/dark, female/male, and minus/plus – not in processes of opposition but in mutual support to form the essence of being (Davis, 1983). Such thinking of harmonious dichotomies forms the cultural context of the festival given the nature of the audience as surely as does the economic rationale that was offered by governmental officials.

3. Research approach

This belief in the harmonious presents interesting issues of interpretation to the western mind, and as in any acts of interpretation, the reference sets of the observers are fundamental to the understanding of a resultant text. Consequently this paper represents a reflexivity arising from observation of a partially understood event on the part of the two authors. Its writing is filtered through their discordant lens of western education and understanding in the case of the first author, and a Chinese cultural perspective and training, generally divorced from the Buddhist traditions displayed within the festival, on the part of the second writer. Both then sought advice as to Buddhist content. Both obtained their data by attending the Buddhist Festival in 2007, and not only watched the events described below, but travelled through various parts of Wutaishan visiting temples. In this they were aided by a Buddhist lama from a monastery in Gansu whose belief system was based on Tibetan Buddhist beliefs and by a nun and her daughter at various times. This helped provide an insight that otherwise might have been denied to them, while subsequent to the visit secondary research has also been completed. Additional to these sources of information our observations are informed by an immersion in the study of tourism for several years, a training in observation aided by past experience of ethnographic work and a wish to reflect on what it is that has been observed. Both writers interacted through the process of writing to express separately a series of statements, and from their separate viewpoints move towards a fusion that is hybrid in nature, just as the observed event itself represents a hybrid functioning of the secular and the religious.

In the instance of this research, the first author was aware of how his very presence became part of other observers' experiences
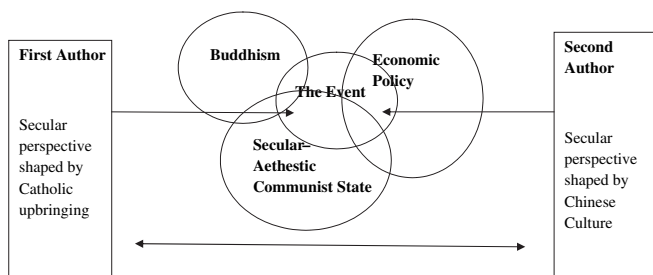
First Author

Secular perspective shaped by Catholic upbringing

Buddhism

Economic Policy

The Event

Secular-Aethestic Communist State

Second Author

Secular perspective shaped by Chinese Culture

Fig. 1. Framework of the paper.

of the event. During the time spent at the festival, only one other European person was identified. The fact that he was present in a seemingly private capacity with a female Chinese person was itself unusual – his ability to crush a plastic stool when sitting clumsily upon it (due to his wishing to protect a camera – an object of framed gazing itself that informs the paper) became a source of amusement to others seated around him. To add to the interest, the writers' familiarity with a Buddhist lama and nun also added curiosity value, while, as noted above, this relationship added to insights gained into the location through access and interpretation. This paper thus arises from a situational context recorded through notes and photographs, and subsequently recalled and recorded in the writing of this paper. Yet to make sense of an event traditionally represents a distancing from the emotion of participation as part of an audience, and a tension exists between the recall of a lack of understanding at the time of the event, and the partial acquisition of subsequent understanding through a 'making sense process' incurred in writing. Equally, the writing represents a movement from the 'private self' to the 'public self' as author and researcher – but the latter is premised upon the former. Angrosino and de Pérez (2000) also raise the issue that validation arises in the way in which cues are created in settings that have meanings for others. An extension of this is that one validation of an interpretation lies in its recognition by the reader, so thus another dialectic arises – that between authors moving from private to public selves to address the private understandings of the reader through their access to the public media. Yet the movement to the public from the private is shaped not only by the observations noted above, but by participation in ritual at various Buddhist temples that involved private meditation. Between such action and environment new constructions emerge (Mead, 1934).

It thus becomes evident that the writing itself is part of the mode of enquiry. The writing aids the recall of the experience, translates the visual record of the more than 400 photographs into a text to be shared with readers, represents the positioning and re-positioning of the authors, and orders the text and that which is reported into a sequence. Any sequence implies a serial prioritisation, and the need to commence with an explanation of the process itself represents a key decision by the authors as a statement of difference that is contrary to the past dominance of quantitative methodologies espoused by many manuscripts. That this specific paper is confused as to the nature of that voice only adds further to the hybrid nature of research both in general and in a manner specific to any pairing of authors of mixed culture and background. Need it therefore be stated that this paper eschews construction of social science theory of form, foundation and structure in favour of CAP Ethnography – that is Creative Analytical Practice – espoused by Richardson (2000) by which a drama unfolds of micro-actions with as yet unknown macro implications in the setting of official Chinese Communist Party endorsement of Buddhist religiosity for touristic purposes in Wutaishan.

Consequently the discourse within this paper is not informed by an empiricist research tradition, but a subjective tradition of observation that Adler and Adler (1994:389) maintain serves as 'the most powerful form of validation'. It is a form of validation of narratives able to persuade, and it is the telling of the story that offers its own validation as much as the content. In a post-modernistic critique, the lens of the observer is as much empowered as a research tool as is the detached objectivity of a scientific experimenter – indeed in the social constructions of space, events and meaning, the dialogue between the gazer and that which is gazed upon is a dynamic of uncertain outcomes. Urry (2002) popularised, as far as the academic literature relating to tourism is concerned, the Foucaldian concept of 'The Gaze', but locates the tourist gaze as being differential, multiple and in comparison with a non-tourist gaze. He notes that the gaze 'presupposes a system of social activities and signs which locate the particular tourist practices, not in terms of some intrinsic characteristics, but through the contrasts implied with non-tourist social practices' (Urry, 2002:1–2). He subsequently lists different forms of gaze, for example the romantic, environmental and mediatised. Adopting perspectives derived from Mead's (1934) work it can be argued that this gaze is not uni-directional, the gazed upon will respond to the gaze and gazer and gazed interact to generate new images, each arguably the subject of, and the means of manipulation. It is this process of manipulation that generates new structures of perceptions of place, events and culture.

In terms of symbolic interaction the gaze upon minutiae is a means towards better understanding (e.g. see Denzin, 2001). It is an examination of the 'lived in' experience and the detail of daily interaction, or in this case the act of spectating that creates an understanding of the phenomenon. As Anderson and Snow (2001:396) comment 'Symbolic interactionists make a major contribution to understanding inequality by illuminating the various manifestations and contexts of inequality at the micro, everyday level of social life'. The analysis is directed to situated action – in this instance the events of the opening ceremony. In examining the event and relevant literatures different themes come to be weaved within the project from a multiplicity of sources, and parallels between patterns of thought emerge. In the Buddhist world 'I' is the active, possessive source of *dukkha* which diverts one from enlightenment because of desire for things, experiences – which things are as illusions (Mills, 1999). 'Me' might be said to be the start of reflexivity as mediation becomes a means by which the third noble truth, the cessation of *dukkha* commences. Mead's (1934) theory of social action makes similar distinctions. Chang (2004:409) comments that Mead placed at the core of his conception 'the "I," the acting aspect of the individual or collective self, which is informed and regulated by the "me," the reflexive aspect of the self. The stance of the "I" in interaction centres on its attempt to control and manipulate the environment.' In Hollinshead's observation noted above (Hollinshead, 1999:15) the relationship between 'I', the active interpreter, observer and distant researcher requires the 'Me' as the reflective participant – it is this tension from which emerges the understanding of the event. Mead's (1934) understanding of 'emergence' is apposite to the tourism researcher adopting such roles. Mead argues that the actor operates with pre-existing conditions that include character, personality, role taking capacity, past experience, position *et cetera*. Emergence arises from interaction with an environment that also has its pre-existing conditions. These conditions include structure, culture, and power relationships – but what emerges is interactive with both actor and environment. The actor is creative, the environment is responsive. While 'I' is constrained by the environment, there exists space for novelty, and what emerges are new compromises and social entities generated through new interpretations (Mead, 1934). It is this approach that informed the authors' reactions to the event in question.

4. The location

Wutaishan is located in the Northeast of Wutai County in Xinzhou Region of Shanxi Province. As its name implies, it is a mountainous region and is famous for its five peaks which, because of their plateau like nature are often referred to as the 'five platforms'. Hence, Wutaishan can be translated as 'The Mountain of the Five Terraces'. The northern platform reaches a height of 3058 m (10,032 ft) and is the highest mountain in Northern China. Because of these topographical features and the beauty of the scenery, it was designated as a 'national scenic spot' by the State

Council in 2000, and has subsequently been categorised as one of the Top Ten Famous Chinese Mountains in 2003 and a National Geo Park in 2005. The height of the Park also largely protects it from the polluted air that is characteristic of the lower altitudes of Shanxi Province, which is heavily industrialised and based on coal and chemicals.

However, the region is equally famous for its 2000-year-old Buddhist heritage, and one local estimate provided to the authors indicated that 3000 temples exist within the region. The very peak of the North Terrace is marked by a Buddhist Temple, Lingying Temple, which, in 2007, was undergoing a major restoration. Most visitors congregate around the township serving the Taihuai Temple Cluster where there exist 26 monasteries, each with its own cluster of temples. Several of these are notable in their own right. For example one (at Dailuo Terrace) requires the visitor to climb 1080 steps unless a cable car is taken, while another, Shancai Cave, requires a visitor to slip through a narrow cave entrance of symbolic rebirth.

The festival itself is held in Taihuai, which is about 150 miles northeast of Taiyuan city in Shanxi Province. The town is at an altitude of about 9000 ft, and is surrounded by five peaks up to 11,000 ft in height.

The current promotion of the Wutainshan Buddhist Festival would only be possible on its current scale with official Chinese Government support – and that support is contextualised within a policy of the use of tourism for rural development. Tourism is a means of not simply enhancing rural economics but is also a way of stemming illegal migration from the countryside to the larger cities (Ryan, Gu, & Zhang 2008). Shanxi Province was, in the nineteenth century, at the heart of the Chinese Industrial Revolution. Indeed, the first Chinese bank was established in Pingyao in 1823 (Knapp, 2000). However, as in other countries, by the end of the twentieth century the former industrial centre had become economically, and thus politically, marginalised and the Province is now regarded as one of the poorer parts of Mainland China (Olivia, Gibson, Rozelle, Huang, & Deng, 2008). Additionally, one of its main sources of revenue is having a doleful impact upon the natural environment as evidenced by its coal dust laden air and the smogs that lie in the lower altitudes of the province. Shanxi is a centre for coal mining and quarrying, and its roads are often choked by large lorries carrying coal to the power stations. Not all of this coal is of high quality, and coal dust laden roads are common. Coal is also the main source of heating, and throughout the Province coal burning is evident. It is not without reason that *The Rough Guide for China* characterises the province as one, which around Datong and Taiyuan, is where 'open-cast mining has obliterated large parts of the countryside' (Leffman, Lewis, Atiyah, Meyer, &Lunt, 2005:228).

5. The festival – an official perspective

Given this situation, this description of the fourth Buddhist Festival commences with the official opening and the statements of representatives of the Provincial political elite. Their presence in itself is of importance. The festival is endorsed by them for the reasons given below. It is claimed by the authors that their endorsement thereby legitimises the festival as an officially sanctioned expression of cultural aspiration of conjoint festivals – namely the 4th Buddhist Festival and the 18th Cultural Festival. This fusion is discussed below.

Given a perceived need to generate revenue and employment that are, at least potentially, more environmentally friendly for the Province, tourism was added to the portfolio of industries to be developed in the 11th and last 5-year plan developed by the Provincial Government in 2006 (National Development and Reform Commission, 2006). The official stance was enunciated by leading

political figures at the 2007 Festival. For his part, Song Beishan, Vice Governor of Shanxi Provincial Government, stated that tourism was 'prosperous, sustainable, full of potential and playing a leading role in the whole economic structure'. He argued this was recognised by it being included as one of the four newly supported industries in the Province's 11th 5-year plan. He characterised the festival as being consistent with the nature of Wutaishan, for it was 'not only a tourism celebration but more importantly a cultural celebration' (Beishan, 2007).

Gen Tong, in 2007, was the Deputy Director of the China Buddhist Association and Director of Shanxi Buddhist Association. As holding this post by reference to both secular and religious directives, in his opening speech he made specific reference to the 2000-year-old tradition of Bodhisattva Wenshu tradition in Wutainshan. He sought to also create a complementarity between faith and economic well-being in his remarks, saying 'This celebration is not only a major event in tourism circles, but also in Buddhist circles. It will, beyond doubt, make Wutainshan yet more famous and help boost its tourist development but also it will expand Buddhist culture. It will help build a more harmonious society by spreading the Buddhist spirits, thus benefiting all humankind'. The reference to harmonious society is important given both the traditional desire for such society in Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian thought, but also in the prominence given to such an objective by the current government. Theologically, harmony is created through a structured sense of being – a stance consistent with the wish for ordered development by the Chinese government (for example see the Taoist philosophy of Guo Xiang, circa 300CE and Haocai, 2004). Thus, slogans relating to the Beijing Olympic Games also seek that the Games create harmonious friendships (Official Website of the Beijing Olympics, 2007). The Chinese understanding of 'harmony' requires a mutual relationship between people and places within the context of 'enhancing in the right way' – for example with reference to the natural environment a harmonious natural setting is nature enhanced by the construction of a human edifice, and so a harmonious society is one enhanced through 'right' thinking of the nature of inter-human relationships by which a man complements the natural – not by leaving the natural alone (for example see Haocai, 2004; Ma, Ryan, & Bao, 2008, and Sofield & Li, 2007 for a discussion of these issues).

To this context of religion, economic development and harmonious development was added the theme of cultural exchange in the speech given by Gen Huaiying, then Mayor of Xinzhou Municipal Government. His speech is of interest in the juxtaposition provided by regional pride and competition, appeals to tradition, current planning and the creation of brand image in tourism and regional promotion. He notes that Shanxi is rich in scenery, but 'Xinzhou possesses even more beautiful sceneries'. He adds, however, that Wutainshan is the head of five separate tourism districts – each with their own characteristics, but which mutually complement each other. He evokes 'the five elements' of traditional Chinese culture for each of the five zones – whereby Wutainshan, the symbol of gold (metal), represents wisdom and good fortune – while the other regions are symbolised by wood, water, fire and earth. Xinzhou is thereby, he concludes, 'a place of five kinds of happiness and fortune'. He next refers to the planning undertaken by the Xinzhou Municipal Committee and Xinzhou Municipal Government, and its efforts in restructuring industries. He notes the expansion of the coal, power generation, aluminium and chemical industries but offsets these with new initiatives in forestry, grass plantations and agriculture – implying that not only are the latter important for their produce, but also as a means of mitigating the environmental damage caused by the former. From these initiatives he notes that the Municipal Government has created a brand image – *Wutai Holy Land and Five Happiness*

Xinzhou – and under this brand the government is commencing work to meet the standards inherent in the classification of 'Excellent Tourist Cities in China'. The Buddhist Festival is thus revealed as a means within a strategy to attain this classification and the support it would then engender from central government – and he went on to state the Municipal Government would wish to achieve the status of 'World Cultural Heritage' – a reference to UNESCO recognition. But, if this is thought all too functional, he adds 'By hosting these activities of celebration, we wish to show the profound Buddhist culture, boost economic and cultural exchanges, create the '*Five Happiness*' tourism brand and push the development of Xingzhou by establishing such an opening platform'.

6. The festival programme

Given the rhetoric it may seem initially strange that one of the key events of the Buddhist Festival itself was, in 2007, quite short in duration. It lasted 2 h. After the initial formal introductions which lasted approximately 30 min, the festival proper started with a short, but spectacular firework display that momentarily left the arena awash with the colours of white, grey, yellow, red and green smoke, as coloured papers were hurled into the sky and pigeons released. The colours themselves are symbolic as representing colours of different sections of Buddhist life, and of course represent different desires within wider Chinese culture. For example monks from the Han people of China wear light grey robes, those of Tibetan origin wear red and the yellow is associated with Thailand. More generally red means celebration, good fortune and happiness, yellow is the colour of nourishment and care, blue is associated with immortality and traditionally yellow is a colour connected to the imperial and power.

After the opening speeches the choir of the Monks of the Temple of Pushou sang the Song of Wutaishan and a Blessing for the World. This was followed by a solo singer offering a song of thanks to Buddha, and then the Wutaishan Cultural Art Group danced a performance for which the literal translation is 'Happiness among mankind and heaven'. Tibetan Buddhist monks then gave an instrumental rendition followed by the Buddhist Art Group from Jiangsu Province performing to words from the Buddhist texts. And so the various acts followed, each with a theme selected from or applying to Buddhist thought.

Figs. 2 and 3 illustrate both the nature of the formal opening and the size of the crowd, and the colour and spectacle, of which the audience itself was part. Prior to the start visitors were given commemorative baseball style caps of red and yellow, and the crowd was estimated at some 5000 made up of both local townspeople, provincial and inter-provincial visitors. Very few international visitors could be identified – and as previously noted the first author of this paper was himself a subject of many photographs, stares and television coverage as he in turn took photographs of not only events on the stage but within the crowd. Figs. 4–7 provide evidence of the nature of the crowd, and indicate the strong representation of those of the Buddhist faith present in the audience and separate from those who appeared in the performance arena.

7. The nature of the festival performance (first author's interpretation)

It should be noted that at this stage of the text the two authors revert to the use of the first person singular. The nature of the following text notes my immediate interpretations, before I had a translation of the actual programme, but while I had copies of the opening speeches in English. After the speech making the stage was cleared of the speakers, who were replaced with approximately

Fig. 2. The official commencement of the festival.

200 Buddhists who commenced the chants *Song of Wutaishan* and *Blessing for the World*. They remained on stage as a backdrop to the first of a series of cultural dances, which were performed by young women, so the gaze is of a scene of counter-distinction between Buddhists in grey robes forming a backdrop to a graceful dance performed by females dressed in green and yellow as shown in Figs. 8 and 9.

Fig. 3. An overview of the crowd.

Fig. 4. The nature of the crowd.

Fig. 6. The nature of the crowd.

Figs. 10 and 11 illustrate two further scenes – the first of Tibetan Lamas playing traditional musical instruments, thereby, arguably, locating their music originally located within the religious domain into a secular dimension of other traditional music, and also in Fig. 10, a counter-position with a solo singer of popular music.

Finally, in the tradition of a Broadway Musical, the finale is of a large song and dance routine as shown in Figs. 12 and 13 in which the stage becomes filled with movement, colour and action as monks provide a backdrop chorale to athletic dancers.

Thus, from my perspective the components of the performance might be said to comprise:

Spectacle – the performance is colourful, tuneful, and popular in nature;
A fusion – it brings together different traditions – both secular and religious in a mélange that entertains;
Equalisation – by subjecting performance to entertainment values it legitimises as of equal value the popular, religious and packaged tradition; and
Commodification – while no payment is required to enter the performance arena, the traditions are offered as performances blended into a show of 2 h – a time period consistent with 'show time'; that fits into coach itineraries (that bring many visitors to

Taihuai) and which serves a purpose of generating economic returns based on tourism as people stay over night.

However, yet again, alternative constructions might be offered. From the viewpoint of the religious authorities, the performance might be said to:

Bring a previously marginalised, peripheral belief system (from the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party) into a main-stream arena – its very presence evokes a past tradition that may initiate a questioning of the status quo;
Provide a rationale for many of the Buddhist faith to travel to Taihuai and to interact and confirm their beliefs in the surrounding monasteries and temples; and
Act as a focal point for a public display of faith.

Additionally, as a tourism event the festival

Generates economic benefit for Taihuai;
Adds to the portfolio of tourism product in Wutaishan and Shanxi Province and acts as a catalyst for the timing of visits – thereby fitting into a calendar of events;

Fig. 5. The nature of the crowd.

Fig. 7. The nature of the crowd.

Fig. 8. Counter-distinction of Buddhist chorale and traditional dance.

Fig. 10. Traditional Tibetan music.

Legitimises the Provincial and Municipal governments as being pro-active and developing processes of economic and cultural benefit for the communities they serve;

Provides a rationale for the continuation of traditions, albeit in a commodified and popular form as illustrated above. However, this maintains a vibrancy of folk art tradition, offers the potential for a future rediscovery of the 'original and authentic' and is a statement of identities for those involved as performers.

The different constructions of the events of the festival thereby illustrate the multiple faces of festivals in general. They (that is, festivals) are means of enhancing communities through people coming together with a common purpose (many of the performers are from schools), generating economic returns, and restating personal and group identities. But they are also venues of interactions of power whereby dominant groups seek to legitimise themselves even as subordinate groupings seek recognition of their own identity and aspirations. The space of the performance arena is a condoned place of challenge, and the power play is one of the attempts to emasculate the alternative through the medium of entertainment, while in turn the alternative life style negotiates its way through a performance of entertainment to retain an authentic

tone through which to entice the onlooker into a more serious consideration of differing perspectives. It is not for nothing that festivals are derivatives of carnival, which Bakhtin described as life-affirming (see Caillois, 1979) sanctioned challenges to dominant power structures made safe by fun and an eschewing of violence (Bakhtin, 1984).

Subsequent to this I began to perceive these interpretations as definitely shaped by a western perspective and literature. First there had been a perceived oppositional text between the presence of monks and nuns on the one hand, and cultural groups comprising dance performers who presented spectacle. The titles of the songs and dances are homages to Buddhist traditions. For example, the Wenshu Buddha Art Group's performance was entitled *Praise to God*, while the finale (performed by the Miaoyin Art Group of Wutaishan) that seemed to me to be a dance spectacular of the order found in the theme parks of Shenzhen, was entitled 'Harmonious Family'. Thus, again one returns to the conceptualisations of harmony – a concept reinforced by the logos of 'harmonious tourism' that appeared on the sides of large air blown pillars sited at the perimeter of the performance arena. However, adding to the possible complexities of interpretation is the realisation that Communism began not in China but in the industrialisation of Europe in the mid nineteenth century, and Marxist

Fig. 9. Example of spectacle.

Fig. 11. Popular music.

Fig. 12. Finale.

thought was predicated on a class conflict that was taken into Maoist thought. In 1940, Mao stated that 'Communism is at once a complete system of proletarian ideology and a new social system… The ideological and social system of feudalism has a place only in the museum of history' (Mao Tse-Tung, 1940:360–361). Religion was part of that feudal society – and yet here was the Communist Party happily promoting a Buddhist Festival. That this was the case could be explained by the pragmatism of the speeches reported above – this was good for tourism and thus good for the local economy. But did that mean a willingness to promote religion? Certainly the Communist Party of China is aware of the power of Buddhism to attract adherents in the new China, as evidenced by its appointment of Gyaltsen Norbu as the Panchen Lama, who spoke against the riots that occurred in Tibet in March, 2008.

8. The nature of the festival performance (the second author's interpretation)

First, it is interesting to see the interpretation offered by my co-author and it raises many issues in my own mind. The trip to Taihuai for those travelling there today still has remnants of degrees of discomfort unless perhaps travelling by private car. Even then the roads from the national and provincial capitals were, at least during

Fig. 13. Finale.

this trip, uneven, subject to building and often jammed with large lorries carrying coal and quarried materials. As one climbs into the mountains there is a sense of leaving behind the industrialised present into an area of cleaner air, and as the temples become visible, of a movement into a special past. If travelling, as we did, by public transport, the buses become full of local people, pilgrims, monks and nuns, and every so often the bus stops for local vendors to sell drinks, fruit, bread and cakes. At the time of the festival as one approaches Taihuai an air of expectation grows, especially in the morning of the festival as the crowds converge on the arena. Again, by the side of the approaches, local vendors can be found. A sense of occasion hangs in the air. As described above, monks and nuns are present in their hundreds, the crowd in their thousands, and all ready themselves for the opening performance.

The festival opening is very representative of the way in which Chinese festival and event organisers combine the modern and the traditional. In western literature there exists a tension between the 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' with the traditional often being regarded as the more 'authentic'. This stance has been queried by various authors, with varying modifications being suggested, e.g. as to the authentic being at an emotive level, e.g. Wang (2000) has suggested experiential authenticity and Taylor (2001) an authenticity of sincerity. For his part Ryan (2002) has suggested that 'authorisation' is possibly a better direction for enquiry. From a Chinese perspective, and the motive of creating a harmonious tourism, the combining of traditional and modern taste is consistent with a 'harmony' that does justice to the heritage of the past while meeting the wants of the present, which desires on an occasion such as this a 'show' that involves spectacle. From one perspective this hybrid nature of the occasion is the expected unfolding of events such as this festival. From a conceptual viewpoint, this possesses interest as a commentary on modern China. The architecture of the past was one of honour to the past masters – if an ideal had been achieved the role of the present was to sustain and support the tradition of the past, to copy the architecture of the past, not to create new interpretations. Yet here, in Taihuai there is an expectation that the temples will be as in the past, and temples that, because of tourism, are being reconstructed and refurbished as at Lingying are in that tradition.

Hence to first 'issue' with the opening ceremony is the apparent isolation of the 'show' from a continuing sense of festival that is supposed to follow. The opening ceremony serves as a stage within which government officials are present, and their presence is important in bestowing importance to the festival. Such things are common in China, and many an event commences with speech making. Equally, as perhaps is best exemplified not only by the Olympic Games but also in many cultural stage performances, the Chinese love the spectacular. Colour, music, song is a representation of vigour, life and pride in place, and a failure to provide this would be a loss of face and subsequent potential erosion of guanxi (relationships within a group). Hung (2007) analyses a Maoist tradition of spectacle, arguing that prior to the 1920s few large-scale parades were organised by the state. In part the tradition was borrowed from Soviet influence (Hung, 2007). Yet ritual has for long been written into the Chinese character. Zito (1997) presents an analysis of how the Qianlong Emperor used yearly Grand Sacrifices to exhibit power, and in more popular classic literature Cáo Xuĕqin's novel, *The Dream of the Red Mansion* demonstrates the power of spectacle, performance and ritual as means of maintaining social structures. Performance is thus entertainment and reinforcement of social bonds. *Guanxi*, *bao* (reciprocity) and face are important Chinese social norms (Fahr, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998 and Hwang, 1987) and today failure to provide spectacle would involve social loss. For me my questions related to the pragmatic. Does the festival achieve its stated aim of generating economic opportunities for the

local people? Taihuai was crowded on the morning of the Buddhist festival, 2 days later the township had returned to quieter ways. The cultural festival was supposed to last for a month, but details and advertisements relating to the festival were difficult to find. Given that the purpose of the festival was to create economic opportunities the questions that came to my find included:

a. Where was the follow up of the festival?
b. What was the local involvement in the festival?
c. How was the local community being linked to the outside world? And only then
d. How does one balance authenticity with the commodification of a culture?

An issue began to emerge as all these questions became inter-related as finding information on the festival on arriving back in Beijing proved difficult. Was this a show? Wang (2000) writes of the lure of consumption whereby cultures are commodified, and thus subjected to the marketing forces of segmentation, branding, and the experience of consuming. The spectacle, music and colour were consumed by the thousands present, but as a commodification of culture the festival might be said to be only partially successful given its apparent short duration of 'intensity' and the inability to promote the remainder of the festival. Wang then goes on to concern himself with the lure of the sign value – namely the consumption of the symbolic. He cites Baudrillard (1988:21,22), thus: 'Hence for Baudrillard, 'consumption is neither a material practice, nor a phenomenology of 'affluence' … (but rather) … a systematic act of the manipulation of signs. Consumption is therefore a socially meaningful and culturally signifying semiotic practice (Wang, 2000:201), and as noted, important in the social Chinese context. What possibly is being represented in the festival is a representation of status and status giving. A number of factors operate. The speech giving is formal; it is also subject to media coverage. In China with a state run television station, the media coverage is itself an important means of confirming the importance of the event, and those who participate. Yet I did wonder whether the hybrid nature of the show as a piece of spectacle, as a mixture of words, texts, actions and colour, was this contrary to the Buddhist ways of peace and serenity? Is it, one wonders, an instance of cultural trivialisation where, in the name of economic development, a production is created for an external audience. The event is a mediation between forces of modernisation perhaps as yet unsure of how to utilise a tradition in the service of much needed economic development. Modernisation by its nature represents a de-traditionalisation – yet curiously the act of de-traditionalisation calls attention to the traditional which may yet still have an appeal. These questions are important in Chinese rural tourism policies because (a) the Chinese authorities perceive tourism in rural areas and particularly those involving minority peoples as important economic measures to improve living standards and (b) because slowly the market place will not only grow in numbers but also increasingly involve overseas visitors with expectations and perceptions different to those of the Chinese, as is demonstrated by my co-researchers' comments. How one manages such a festival as this raises not simply philosophical questions, but also the practical.

9. A Buddhist perspective

One of the issues arising in research of this nature is that the immediate experience and questioning in turn produces a sequence of subsequent immersions, and hence there was felt a need to find more about the Buddhist experience. From the perspective of the first author, questions directed at our companions produced unhelpful answers, but subsequent research indicated that the questions being asked were often without meaning to the recipient of the question. Thus, to ask 'what do Buddhist believe?' implies the existence of a dogma, but Buddhism is an awareness of a journey – which journey may not be of this life time only – and it provides a series of practices that aid the individual on that journey. It is not a system of belief as understood within a Christian context. Earlier in this article reference was made to dukkha. The spectacle of the opening ceremony is an example of what Choga (2004) terms 'ego-clinging'. From the inter-pretation of the festival exhibiting relationships, then from a Buddhist cosmological perspective, the festival is about dukkha and its cause through attachment. To paraphrase Choga (2004), through the power of delusion, ego-clinging, obscurations, habitual patterns, and karma, the enlightened qualities are not manifest but remain hidden. Ego-clinging collapses and enlightened qualities gradually manifest as a practitioner of Buddha's teachings develops a virtuous mind, gathers the two accumulations, and purifies the two obscurations.

To revert back to Cáo Xuěqin's novel, The Dream of the Red Mansion, Levy (1999:64) makes the reader aware of the Buddhist underpinning of the novel when noting Cáo's intention 'to help those of us "who are still in need of awakening". The promise of the inscription is that even people who lack Bao-yu's karmic heritage of needs and propensities can reach enlightenment through reading his story.' From the karmic perspective the story is that through the experiencing and understanding of emotional attachment, only then can detachment that is necessary for enlightenment be achieved as Bao-yu renounces his wealth and becomes a monk.

Within the Buddhist life an important means that might be adopted is what is commonly known as meditation. Colleagues who are Buddhists saw no incongruity in the pictures reproduced above, although different views were elicited. One suggested that the monks and nuns could insulate themselves from the event, partly through the practice of meditation which for some could be aided by the nature of the chants and songs being sung. Another suggested that one does not close down the sensory system, but accepts the contemporary state for what it is, simply a further example of the impermanence of things. Further enquiry however indicates that the word 'meditation', though commonly used in Western thought, is deficient in conveying the Buddhist sense. The original Pali and Sanskrit terms might perhaps be better rendered as mental development, collectedness, or absorbed concentration (Mills, 1999). This is no vacation of the mind, but is purposeful, intense mindfulness developed through training based on often what are termed the classic 40 subjects of meditation. Indeed, for a Buddhist monk, to be faced by dancing girls could evoke images of the Bodhisattva Gotama's revoking the images created by the Evil One while sitting below the bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment. This is a common theme in Buddhist art; either in the abstract or representational (for example see Huntington, 1990 for a discussion of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism and early representations of the Buddha).

Another issue is that the festival serves as a reason for Buddhists from all over Asia to travel to Wutaishan. Not only are there monks and nuns in the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna traditions from Thailand and China, respectively, but also their counterparts in the Tibetan Vajrayāna-Nālandā approach. The festival thus represents a significant opportunity for sharing, teaching and study, and indeed Shi (2008) in her study of this area refers to large meetings of Buddhist believers that occur outside of the official festival programme. Nonetheless this too is part of the total part of the event, although outside of the experience of the researchers.

10. Conclusions and discussion

The involvement of minority groups and their culture for the purposes of tourism has long been recognised as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that involves (a) the organisational, (b)

economic impacts, (c) issues of commodification, representation and interpretation of culture, (d) the recognition of social and political aspiration on the part of the minority, (e) a selection of voices and of silences that both articulate the festival – that is – what is *not* said is as important as that which is given voice (and sight), (f) a political process of condoning, recognising, and silencing different views, (g) differential acts of interpretation by the different stakeholders including participants, sponsors and spectators, (h) the emergence of hybrids of representation and new modes of thought and action for festival, stakeholders and the culture that is represented, and (i) an evolution of representation and potential external involvement as an event or festival matures (or decays) over its life cycle. In short, attendance at 1 year of the festival is in itself a limitation in offering an interpretation of what is occurring. Additionally, as noted at the commencement of the paper, the interpretations are filtered through processes of understanding, but a question arises as to whether such limitations invalidate the process of interpretation. To this question various responses can be made. First, the authors are as figures in the crowd of spectators – we do not claim to speak for them, but we possess the same rights to articulate our observations. For many, indeed it is suspected the majority; their experience was even briefer than that of the researchers. Second, in seeking to better understand the nature of the phenomenon, the writing of the paper has raised several issues about the nature of research in tourism. O'Dell (2005) has drawn the tourism researcher's attention to the 'experience-scapes' – landscapes of experience – shaped as imagined worlds and developing into new forms of social practice. He notes that experiences are highly personal, subjective, ever-fleeting and continuously on-going. Ephemeral in nature, they are anchored in spaces – and those spaces are manipulated by commercial, political and social forces. The authors have sought to assess such an experiencescape.

In one respect the event represents a classic example of Mac-Cannell's (1976) stages. The festival is the front stage, an event to attract and retain visitors through a spectacle. As Shi (2008) has noted, the majority of visitors are not Buddhists, and the event has parallels with the Mazu tourism described by Yeh, Ryan, and Liu (2009) in that only a small proportion are devoted adherents to the *dhamma*. Thus, it is possible to interpret the event in terms of the front and back stages. The back stage relates to those times when religious visitors engage in *pujas* to consider the teachings of the Bodhisattva Manjushiri – which events are often marked by stillness and may last for several hours. The monastic orders have little wish to be a 'tourist object' during these times, and equally the secular visitor may become quickly bored. Religious visitors can enjoy the show as a show, and then commit themselves to their devotions at a later stage.

So, the Wutaishan Festival event initiated on the part of the writers, as tourism researchers, a wish to better understand the nature of the tourism event. However, the researchers came to it with no research agenda and an open mind. Unlike many pieces of research, the process was wholly inductive, but in this instance there is no end theory. To paraphrase the statement made by Hollinshead (1999) as cited above, what was thought to be, disappeared the harder we looked. Hollinshead has been influenced by post-modern traditions, and thus it may be apposite to cite Bauman's (2005:1095) observation 'Society is truly autonomous once it "knows", must know, that there are no "assured" meanings, that it lives on the surface of chaos, that it itself is a chaos seeking a form, but a form never fixed once for all.' Is this not an echo of the Buddhist detachment? In such a situation, to continue Bauman's treatise, research is a process rather than a project. 'To create (and so also to discover) always means breaking a rule; following a rule is a mere routine, more of the same – not an act if creation. For the exile, breaking rules is not a matter if free choice but rather an

eventuality that cannot be avoided' (Bauman, 2005:1092). Ryan (2005) argues that the reflective researcher is a creative researcher, and vice-versa. Is the researcher an 'exile'? By the act of reflection the researcher may stand apart – the *bricoleur*. Such a stance need not mean a lack of rigor (Kincheloe, 2001).

Certainly the more this event was gazed upon, the more opaque and complex became the subject of the gaze. Such a finding is consistent with much of what is written by qualitative researchers. The certainty of inductive modes of questioning implied by Ryan and Stewart (forthcoming) is thus often absent. However, Hollinshead (2002:172) offers warnings about the 'tyrannies of the post-modern discourse.' Under such discourse does meaning destruct, is there the triumph of obscure metaphysics, is there a selective choice of epics and does it deny emancipation by being negative? Bogard, as early as 1987, in a response to Denzin, critiqued post-modernism (and Denzin's symbolic interactionism) as diverse, atheoretical and in containing the means for the deconstruction of sociological theory offering only the abandoning 'of the sociological project' (Bogard, 1987:208). Huber and Mirowsky (1997:1423) write that Denzin 'holds that fables are superior to facts because appropriate interpretation enables one to make anything of the facts that one chooses'. They believe such views 'animates anti-rationalist thought in academia and threatens and concerns many sciences' (Huber & Mirowsky, 1997:1423). These are challenging words, and go to the heart of the matter, for are there facts independent of researcher, or are the facts consensual constructed truths subject to change. In one way Kincheloe (2001:680) provides a response in his comment that much of scientific research is 'jerryrigged to a degree'. Indeed, one questions whether there is a single gaze. The first author has been the subject of a gaze as an object of curiosity. The gaze reflects MacCannell's (2001) second gaze – namely that tourists are aware of staging, are not uncritical and have a sense of agency. The third gaze is that of the authors' reflections (Law, Bunnell, & Ong, 2007), while there remains a fourth gaze. Willeman (1995:114) notes 'Any articulation of images and looks which brings into play the position and activity of the viewer … also destabilises that position … the viewer [therefore] runs the risk of becoming the object of the look'. In this case there is now the gaze of the reader.

The modes of staging adopted in the festival also pose interest. Li Zehou (1987, cited by Kang, 1992:127) is one among many commentators that refer to 'the drama of intense conflicts between Chinese tradition and western influence'. Hence, the staging adopts an almost Hollywood influence of pop singers, dancing girls, baseball caps along with spectacle and fireworks. An example possibly of *xitizhongyong* – western modes, Chinese application.

This is not the place to extend that debate, but various observations arise from the above paper. First, one might question whether it is appropriate for such a paper in journal entitled *Tourism Management* with the emphasis upon the second of these two words. Certainly, there are management implications for the festival in the above text, but that is not the immediate concern of this paper. The journal's editor has stated in different forums that the title is to be interpreted from the perspective of management of the tourist *experience*, which in view of his own writings is at least a consistent stance. But such a stance raises questions – whose experience, are experiences consistent, how are they constructed, shaped and indeed managed? And in turn, as Hall (2004) has argued, such considerations raise other questions related to the nature of capitalism, and the university academic. The context of this study is a location in China. For the current authors it seems sensible to query the nature of the different realities in such a setting. Within the wider tourism literature there is a questioning of the nature outlined above, and much of it is to be found in considerations of tourism and minority peoples. Thus, to again paraphrase Hollinshead (1999) the dominant perspective is that of

the North Atlantic academic tradition. Does such a tradition transfer easily to a location in provincial China, which is representative of many of the earth's population, and where it might be claimed it is that North Atlantic tradition which is the minority perspective. The current authors believe that new articulations may be required born in different cultural traditions, even while much of their own past research has been (safely) ensconced in a post-positivistic quantitative tradition. As China, and other parts of Asia emerge, while new fusions as indicated by Herbert (1934) will in all probability emerge, there arises a need to understand the 'pre-existing conditions'. Gergen (1985:266) has noted that 'What we take to be the experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood.' One referee commented that if the purpose of the exercise was to achieve a 'better understanding' of the event, what was that better understanding? In one respect the harder the researchers 'gazed' the more it emerged that understandings are negotiated and critical in social life, and that the event can best be understood as a performance resulting from negotiated social interactions. The evaluative process was not simply carried out post hoc, but continued from the journey to the event to the writing of this article. To achieve any understanding of the event requires a synthesis between rhetorical questioning and scientific thinking achieved through a reflexive process that itself must be tested at each stage. To specifically answer the question – what now is understood about the event, a continuity between two dichotomies exists. On one hand there are the specific interpretations listed above, that is, for example, a secularisation of the sacred for political and economic reasons, or the legitimisation of a culture for purposes of a catalyst for meetings about Buddhist thought. At the other extreme the picture becomes one that is characterised as 'messy, creative, fragmented and complex modes of reality' (Bailey, White, & Pain, 1999:172), and which almost, as Hollinshead (1999) notes, becomes opaque the more one looks. The gazer, or researcher, assumes there is something there, but perhaps it is a series of somethings linked in a transient way by temporary interest or coincidence.

A final thought. A metaphor, or a fable. Just prior to writing this conclusion the authors took a stroll around the University lakes reflecting on the paper. It was a pleasant late winter evening and a couple were noted walking with their dog. The owners threw a stick for the dog to collect. At one point the stick was thrown high, got lodged in a tree, and the dog stood below, puzzlement written into its very stance. Puzzlement, it is believed, is a good starting point for research. From the Buddhist stance – unknowing is the commencement of creation (Mills, 1999).

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