



Evolving pathways for spiritual tourism in protected areas[☆]

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1. Introduction

Spiritual tourism, which evolved from the existential forms of tourism in the modernist and early postmodern eras (Cohen, 1979), has become a prominent expression of contemporary tourism (Wang, Blasco, Hamzah, & Verschuuren, 2023). It encompasses activities such as New Age practices, secular pilgrimages, mindfulness, restorative retreats, and nature-based embodied experiences such as forest bathing; moving beyond the late postmodern focus on leisure and entertainment, these forms highlight tourism's capacity for spiritual enrichment (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Wang, Blasco, Verschuuren, & Hamzah, 2024). As with many emerging concepts, its development presents considerable challenges for both academia and practice, given the elusive and multifaceted nature of spirituality. Our article, *East Meets West: Spiritual Tourism in Chinese Protected Areas* (Wang & Blasco, 2022), published in *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights*, was the first academic study to explore spiritual tourism within Chinese protected areas. Its academic impact lies in introducing a new conceptual approach to tourism development in China and interpreting the philosophy of the unity of heaven and humankind (*Tian Ren He Yi*) for both Chinese and international audiences (see Pang, Wu, Xiao, Song, & Huang, 2025). By weaving together nature, culture, and spirituality, the study highlighted the interconnections between people and the natural world. It also challenged the traditional division between nature and culture, aligning with emerging “more-than-human” perspectives in tourism research

(Liburd, Blichfeldt, & Duedahl, 2021).

In this commentary, we extend academic contributions by reflecting on how spiritual tourism and the *Tian Ren He Yi* framework have been received in practice, and examining the ongoing transformation of protected area governance in China. We discuss progress to date, the challenges encountered in applying our original aims, and potential future directions across three interrelated dimensions: practice, philosophy, and governance. These reflections draw on empirical data and project experience from the past five years (i.e. interviews and personal communications with practitioners and protected area managers), relevant publications, and two semi-structured interviews conducted specifically for this commentary. One interview was conducted with a Chinese protected area manager, and the other with an international tourism practitioner based in Spain, whose extensive professional experience includes designing and operating spiritual practice initiatives across Europe, North and South America, and Asia. Our intention is to move beyond an academic dialogue by integrating practitioners' voices, thereby offering a more grounded account of how academic work is interpreted and applied in the world of practice.

2. Spiritual tourism practice in transition

Globally, tourism practitioners increasingly perceive spiritual tourism as a means of providing visitors with deeper and more meaningful experiences (Regenerative Travel & Destination Deluxe, 2023).

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Protected area managers may also recognise its value because such activities can foster understanding and care for nature (Liburd, Menke, & Tomej, 2024). Echoing Kato and Prozano (2017), who argued that spiritual walking tourism can support sustainable management practices, policymakers have begun to view it as naturally aligned with the guidelines for sustainable protected areas (Verschuuren et al., 2021). Although it remains a niche form of tourism, it is no longer entirely foreign to the Chinese context and has attracted increasing attention from scholars, practitioners, protected area managers, and tourists (Wang et al., 2024; Zheng, Chan, & Zhang, 2023). Forms of well-being tourism, nature education, and outdoor adventure have become more common in certain protected areas, often incorporating elements of spiritual growth.

We interpret this trend as early evidence of growing resonance between academia and industry. Many professionals recognised that spiritual tourism reflected aspirations they had long pursued, although they had not previously articulated them. Engagement with our work helped them clarify the concept and apply it in practice by introducing it to customers and positioning their products accordingly. For instance, after the interview in 2020, one practitioner reflected publicly on spiritual tourism through social media, emphasising the need to move beyond purely physical engagement with nature towards more contemplative and meaningful experiences. This shift has been particularly visible among providers of well-being tourism and outdoor adventure, who increasingly present activities such as forest retreats, hiking, mountain climbing, and camping as opportunities for spiritual encounters, rather than as experiences focused solely on scenic beauty or physical enjoyment.

A major challenge, however, lies in the scarcity of practitioners who are both skilled in guiding visitors effectively and willing to commit to such work. Improving access to nature alone is insufficient to promote deep immersion (Duedahl, Blichfeldt, & Liburd, 2022). The international professional interviewed for this commentary, who has promoted spiritual tourism in many regions of the world, attributed his success to theoretical study, deep immersion in nature and continual experimentation with tourists. As we also observed in China, he reported that relying solely on this work for income is difficult. His practice is sustained by passion, complemented by consultancy and other revenue streams. This shortage of dedicated practitioners makes it difficult to translate highly individualised approaches into standardised practices that can be replicated across protected areas.

3. *Tian Ren He Yi*: from ancient philosophy to contemporary practice

Spiritual tourism is often discussed alongside religious tourism because the term *spiritual* is sometimes used interchangeably with *religious* (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Religion remains an important pathway towards profound experiences through its established theological traditions and sacred sites. The *Tian Ren He Yi* framework, grounded in Taoist philosophy and Confucianism, offers an alternative perspective that is particularly relevant in secular societies where institutional religions have become more individualised or are viewed as unsuitable for commercialisation into tourism products (Wang & Blasco, 2022). The governance teams of some protected areas we studied place considerable value on Taoism, which they interpret primarily as a philosophy of life that encourages authentic living. Visitors travel to Taoist temples to experience hermit life for a few days, to learn Taoist philosophy and to reflect on their own lives.

Applying the *Tian Ren He Yi* framework in a replicable manner remains challenging. During our fieldwork at Wuyi Mountain, a UNESCO World Natural and Cultural Heritage site associated with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, we found that its philosophical atmosphere was not always evident at mass tourism sites. At first glance, this may seem to indicate shortcomings in tourism planning, yet the reasons are more complex and relate to a fragmented cultural and historical narrative.

Wang (2024), for instance, examined competing hypotheses concerning the identity of Wuyi Jun, an ancient figure associated with the legends of the Wuyi Mountain immortals and one of the site's longstanding natural-cultural mysteries. These unresolved questions continue to challenge historians and complicate tourism interpretation at the site. Developing spiritual tourism from such a foundation requires extensive interdisciplinary research and careful visitor guidance. Several tour guides noted difficulties in delivering high-quality interpretations of traditional Chinese philosophies, citing limited expertise and uncertainty about tourists' receptiveness. Their reflections echo those of the international practitioner.

Although these challenges are significant, they do not diminish the practical impact of the framework. It encourages an ontological shift away from anthropocentrism and towards a more-than-human mindset. Such a shift opens new possibilities for tourism development and protected area governance (Liburd et al., 2021; Pang et al., 2025). Chinese philosophical traditions, including the principle of *Tian Ren He Yi* as an expression of harmony with nature, are gaining international recognition, particularly within the emerging field of regenerative wellness travel. In this context, innovative tourism practitioners are developing approaches inspired by spiritual tourism in natural settings, creating opportunities for innovation and transformation (Regenerative Travel & Destination Deluxe, 2023).

The influence of the *Tian Ren He Yi* framework extends beyond tourism and informs nature conservation policy and practice (see De Pater, Verschuuren, Greil, & Wals, 2024). Earlier work by Hamzah (2016) highlighted how ancient philosophies can underpin nature conservation by fostering a sense of reverence for the natural world. Building on this, the cultural and spiritual significance of nature embedded in the *Tian Ren He Yi* framework has been shared globally through our continued engagement with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), where we contribute as consultants and commission group leaders. This aligns closely with the mission of the IUCN WCPA Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas Specialist Group, which aims to integrate cultural and spiritual values into conservation policy (Verschuuren et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, Wang and Yuan (2025) caution that such approaches may unintentionally reinforce dichotomies such as East versus West or tradition versus modernity. Overemphasising the uniqueness of Chinese philosophy risks falling into cultural determinism or essentialism. The Western nature–culture divide developed through late medieval Scholasticism and was reinforced by Enlightenment rationalism, which accentuated a dualism between humanity and nature. Yet, pre-Socratic and classical Greek thought, together with contemporary Western philosophies such as posthumanism and new materialism, also emphasise human–nature interconnectedness (Pang et al., 2025; Zhang, 2004). Our focus on *Tian Ren He Yi* is therefore not intended to disregard Western perspectives but to advocate for an inclusive understanding of human–nature relations at a planetary scale.

4. Integrating spiritual tourism into Chinese protected area governance

As noted earlier, innovative and passionate tourism practitioners remain central to translating the spirituality of nature for visitors. Their efforts, however, are insufficient on their own. Support from policymakers and the public bodies responsible for managing protected areas is essential. Over the past five years, Chinese protected areas have undergone significant transformation with the introduction of new protected area system guidelines that formally acknowledge the role of tourism. In our earlier article, we identified this as an opportunity to legitimise spiritual tourism within protected areas (Wang & Blasco, 2022), potentially shifting a governance paradigm that had long prioritised environmental conservation over tourism. Although managers expressed interest in our work, improvements at individual sites have

been limited.

The protected area manager identified several reasons. Protected areas must submit a ten-year plan to the central governance body covering ecosystem conservation, scientific research and community development. Tourism forms only a small part of this plan. Preparing such a document demands expertise, time, and often external consultation. Once approved, managers may initiate a bidding process to select an agency to support operations, since public management bureaus cannot engage directly in business activities. Local communities also require time to accept new tourism products. As a result, developing spiritual tourism from the ground up is difficult for many bureaus, particularly those in remote areas with limited staff and declining populations. However, when spiritual tourism initiatives do not require construction in natural areas, managers tend to show greater willingness to collaborate with external professionals.

In protected areas where tourism already exists, managers face challenges associated with multi-level governance, benefit sharing, conflict management, funding and limited capacity. Many management teams acknowledge that they currently lack the operational capability to support new initiatives. As one chief executive officer responsible for protected area tourism operations commented: *"I know our protected area has everything required for developing spiritual tourism, including history, culture, and spirituality, but I do not think this is something my current team can achieve. It is beyond our current capacity"* (CEO, personal communication, 2022). Another persistent challenge concerns environmentally unsustainable visitor behaviour, which has troubled Chinese governance teams for many years. When new sites open to the public, large numbers of visitors, often influenced by social media, frequently leave waste and disturb ecosystems through actions such as feeding wildlife or picking plants. In some cases, protected areas have been forced to close sites temporarily or permanently. Addressing this issue requires a shift in visitor awareness and the cultivation of environmental responsibility. The *Tian Ren He Yi* framework may play a constructive role in this process.

5. Conclusion

Over the past five years, spiritual tourism has evolved from a largely academic concept into an emerging global phenomenon. Our research has attracted attention from scholars across tourism, conservation, and related fields, as well as from practitioners working in the sector. Several practitioners who participated in our studies have begun to communicate the value of spiritual tourism to their clients. Their efforts help translate the concept into practice, although they must balance aspirations for spiritual engagement with visitor preferences and the economic realities of niche tourism. From a policy and governance perspective, our collaboration with international organisations such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has enabled us to present the philosophy of *Tian Ren He Yi* to global audiences. Influencing policy in Chinese protected areas remains challenging because of the highly centralised governance structure and strict regulatory conditions. Even so, spiritual tourism has begun to inform hosting practices in these areas. Emerging approaches rely on shared spaces for iterative experimentation, which allow practices to accumulate gradually into new habits, as noted by [Guia, Ferrer-Roca, and Blasco \(2026\)](#). The boundaries of tourism impact are inherently fluid ([Becken, Miller, & Banhalmi-Zakar, 2016](#); [Tribe & Paddison, 2024](#)) and rest on a positive normative assumption ([McCowan, 2018](#)). Nonetheless, our inquiries into spiritual tourism among protected area managers and nature-based practitioners have already gained promising traction.

In the tourism academy, our original article was the first to address spiritual tourism in China's protected areas. It initiated a dialogue between spirituality, tourism, and conservation. Although profound transformation unfolds slowly, we believe our work has initiated a subtle but enduring process of change that continues to influence how people, places, and policies engage with the spiritual dimensions of

travel and nature. The grand challenges of the twenty-first century—climate change, biodiversity loss, plastic pollution, and global inequality—are deeply interdependent, representing different facets of a single crisis rooted in human perception and consumption. At the heart of this crisis lies a forgotten truth: humans are nature too ([Liburd & Duedahl, 2025](#)). The evolving pathways of spiritual tourism in protected areas remind us that the journey towards harmony between humanity and nature begins with awareness and changing practice, long before it is echoed in policy.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Shaohua Wang: Writing – original draft, Resources, Conceptualization. **Janne Liburd:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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