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Religious Tourism and Beijing's 2008 Olympics: (Re)Imagining the White Pagoda Temple and the Huoshen Daoist Temple

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INTRODUCTION

This work is an applied study of two contemporary Beijing religious sites and their developments. Using socio-economic theories, I will explore how temples in Beijing were reconstructed in preparation for the 2008 Olympics, and how these reconstructions gave the sites new meanings and purposes. Temples for consideration include the White Pagoda Temple and the Huoshen Daoist Temple, both of which were spaces renovated with the help of the Beijing municipal government. Before the Olympics, each site was promoted as a marker of China's cultural¹ relics, and through tourism efforts, each location was perpetuated as such. This kind of religious tourism will be explored for the purpose of investigating how religion is at present used as a means for generating an "imagined" narrative of contemporary China.

In this article, religious tourism is understood as any travel motivated by religion, where the site at one point was associated with a religion.² Religious tourism, however, also includes activities not associated with pilgrimage to a sacred site. These include sight-seeing, religious cultivation, and recreation.³ Activities related to cultural consumption that occur at religious sites also fall under the umbrella of religious tourism. As such, there is no such thing as a "tourist." Instead, there are many contexts in which people participate in tourism. As Oakes and Sutton contend, these socio-economic situations in China have as much to do with state attempts at modernization as they do with a growing wealthy population that is increasingly interested in traveling.⁴ Activities at a religious site do not therefore distinguish pilgrim from tourist. Instead, in contemporary China, these

two categories converge. Pilgrims are becoming more like tourists, and tourists like pilgrims.

In the following, I will argue that recent promotions of religious sites, through the government supported tourist industry, encourage consuming religious sites as cultural artifacts. This encourages a convergence between tourists and pilgrims. Such an amalgamation increasingly occurs in what sociologist Fenggang Yang calls the “gray” religious market. After detailing Yang’s theory of a gray market, I argue that convergences of tourists and pilgrims reduce the costs (i.e., social costs) people incur when participating in religious activities. Government supported temple reconstructions further reduce potential costs. To evidence such activity, I will compare temple reconstructions occurring at two different Beijing locations. This will highlight narratives within China’s gray market that associate religions with commodities related to “pastness,” authenticity, and ideals of historical and contemporary customs.

CHINA’S GRAY MARKET OF RELIGION

The two Beijing sites chosen for this study are both temples in the historical sense, where a temple refers “to a building dedicated to housing a representation of a supernatural spirit (a ‘god’) before which offerings and prayers were made.”⁵ But contemporary activities at each site have altered each location to meet the needs of those investing in it, as well as those consuming it. Many of the transformations are due to practitioner patronage, but revitalization activities also occur because of government intervention. Although the Chinese government holds an atheistic stance, government projects co-opt religious sites for economic gain. Mobilizing religion for the state’s means, however, is not unique to contemporary times. Even ancestor worship in ancient settings reflected connections between religion, family, and the state, helping to create political alignments, territorial partitions, and authoritative organizations.⁶ Contemporarily, though, government intervention is more complicated. Specific religious organizations, believers, and religious activities are permitted, while others are banned. But the divisions are not always clearly marked, especially when religion is transmitted through discourses of “culture.” Religious practice is heavily regulated, but a milieu between what is legal and illegal exists. And when the government economically supports temple construction because the site is part of the nation’s cultural heritage,

the milieu expands. In Yang's terms, between the legal and illegal distinctions is a "gray" market where the legality of a religious activity remains ambiguous.

Yang's theory of religion in China incorporates three distinct categories: a red market, a black market, and a gray market located between the former two. The red market "*comprises all legal (officially permitted) religious organizations, believers, and religious activities...this may be called the 'open market,' because the religious exchanges are carried out openly,*"⁷ i.e., religious exchanges occur publically. This is not to say that all religious organizations have access to the red market, for religion is heavily regulated in China. Only those groups sanctioned by the government fall under the red market: Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam. If Chinese people associate with these traditions, and do not pose a threat to national unity, they have freedom of practice. This still comes with regulation, however. Yang calls this a religion's "red stain."⁸ Red market religions are government sanctioned, but heavily regulated. Contemporarily, "all religious groups and movements must be formally registered with the Bureau of Religious Affairs...directly under the supervision of the CCP and certified to be 'patriotic' before they can operate legally."⁹

Opposite the red market is a black one that includes, "*all illegal (officially banned) religious organizations, believers, and religious activities.* The black market exchanges are conducted underground or in secrecy."¹⁰ Black market religious activities are not government sanctioned, and if they are to occur, they must do so in private. In between the red and black markets lies a third—the gray market—that includes all organizations (spiritual and religious), practitioners, and activities that have an ambiguous legal status. "These groups, individuals, and activities fall in a gray area of religious regulation, which can be perceived as both legal and illegal, or neither legal nor illegal."¹¹ The gray market is central to Yang's triple market model because not all religious activities are either legal or illegal. Illegal activities occur within legal religions, and religion is often promoted as culture or science.

Yang's triple market model of religion in China is useful for determining how government regulation influences religious exchange. He contends that religious exchange is limited by China's political situation. The gray market, however, is an ambiguous space where religion is disseminated as culture. This allows religious activities to appear innocuous to political regulation, and makes them difficult to regulate.

Interestingly, government supported tourism developments perpetuate China's gray market of religion, for they encourage amalgamations of pilgrimage and tourism. Temple rebuilding leading up to the 2008 Olympics exemplifies such development projects.

THE GRAY MARKET AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM

Temple reconstruction activities can be traced to the 1980s when the government made tourism a priority, for it was a means for economic growth. In recent years, China's economic developments have influenced state approaches to, and regulations of, religion with Beijing's tourism administration being responsible for tourism planning.¹² Most of China's travel agencies are still state owned, and tourism decisions trickle down from the top level of tourism administration. Once decisions are made, the tourism administration implements policies, and in the case of resistance, the government revises the decisions.¹³ The Chinese government is responsible for making, implementing, and monitoring tourism policies, and its decisions for how to develop tourism shape the consumption of religious sites.

Olsen contends, "To be competitive in a global tourism market, many national and regional governments use religious heritage to attract tourists. These sites, then, are treated as a key component of the cultural landscape...."¹⁴ Leading up to the Olympics, the Chinese government attempted to restrain religious tourism by marketing religious destinations as "cultural," as opposed to "religious." As a result, the value of heritage became embedded into religious tourism. When this occurs, religious sites are visited by as many curious tourists as spiritual pilgrims. Sites then become places where religious traditions and rituals are exchanged as cultural commodities, creating an ambiguous market. Government attempts to control tourist activities at religious sites encourage it to become a supplier of religion, resulting in tourist agencies mediating exchange relationships between temples and visitors. Temples themselves supply visitors with what theorists Stark and Finke term "supernatural, generalized compensators,"¹⁵ referring to other-worldly rewards that people seek. Religious specialists supply religious commodities, but experiencing supernatural compensators is broadly mediated through the tourism industry.

Within the gray market, religion manifests through culture in many different ways, with religious tourism expanding contemporary offerings. While the tourism industry does not supply religion in the

way a religious specialist does, it participates in supplying and promoting religious spaces as national cultural places. This promotion is based on the idea that people rationally seek out China's historical locations for their heritage value. Blackwell contends, based on a theory of motivation, "religious tourists may be motivated by the opportunity to gain recognition of their achievements, perhaps by a photograph of their participation in a religious ceremony that they can show to friends at home."¹⁶ The rationale for visiting a historical site includes both the experience and the subsequent documentation. Furthermore, Digance argues that all visitors are searching for a religious or mystical experience.¹⁷ Be they curious tourists or spiritual pilgrims, visitors want a moment out of the ordinary, an experience that transitions from the mundane to the special: sacred. China's religious spaces are increasingly marked as such experiences because they embody China's past. Because of this, they have a sense of permanency, and as artifacts, they are able to help people transcend into another time. Sites within this investigation will evidence this, and I will show that the context through which a site is promoted inherently influences a visitor's experience. The tourism industry, as a participant in such offerings, is thus a contemporary supplier of the experience of religion.

HISTORICAL BEIJING AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM

Because tourism affects how visitors come into contact with religious sites in China, the government, as a supporter of tourist agencies, does so as well. Government investment in religious sites is generally implicit, though allotments of funds for temple reconstruction are explicit. Such efforts have historical ties, especially to Beijing's Ming and Qing periods. During these times, when temple development occurred, temples were used and maintained as sites of community building and for the preservation of culture. In Ming Beijing, they were places of assembling and were anchored in society through governmental support and city resident patronage. "Not only were temples used in an organized fashion for festivals, charity, hostels, and politics, but they also served a diverse public as libraries, museums, and parks."¹⁸ Broadly speaking, their spaces housed deity representations, while they were also used in conjunction with cultural activities. Not unlike today, patronage was an important means for temple maintenance, but market related activity was also vital for economic stability. Ritual performances generated revenue, but temples, especially those

in scenic areas, largely benefitted from sightseers, “especially those that were...centrally located, or convenient to transportation routes in and out of Peking, [and] turned themselves into inns and rented rooms to short- and long-term visitors.”¹⁹ Ming Beijing temples accrued many expenses, so income from a variety of sources was necessary. The relationship between patrons and clerics, based on Buddhist piety, enabled temples to become locations for communal activities, group formations, and general public use. These various activities helped interweave temples into Beijing’s city life, and temples were socialized through both religious and socio-cultural events.

Following the Ming, Beijing’s Qing period patronage of religion expanded the city’s number of temples, as well as their properties. Patronage during this time helped form community associations, as well as neighborhoods. Diverse groups began meeting each other, and, as Naquin²⁰ has shown, much of this activity was led by imperial officials. Temple purposes, therefore, came from diverse groups of people, and such uses of temple space socialized each in manners beyond religion.

This brief overview of Ming and Qing Beijing indicates that temples have historically been spaces of varied cultural and religious activities. Activities resembling religious tourism are therefore not unique to China’s contemporary age. However, the temples are understood and experienced in different ways with each time period. By detailing two different Beijing temples, I investigate socio-economic activity related to religious tourism and how such activities mobilize and promote religion as a cultural commodity. Both temples in the following analysis have received reconstruction appropriations, and at each site, China’s past is marketed and sold. As discussed above, China’s gray religious market is government perpetuated via tourism organizations. In its supply of religion, tourism promotes religion as a marker of China’s national past. Oakes writes that “pastness” is a product in contemporary China’s marketplace in the midst of public culture and commercial tourism.²¹ Pastness is a commodity, for it is an object through which consumers can gain cultural capital.²²

WHITE PAGODA TEMPLE

Located in the western part of Beijing, the White Pagoda Temple dates back to the Yuan dynasty and is one of the temples that still stands close to the former Qing inner city.²³ Originally known as the Temple

of the Marvelous Powers of Manifestation (妙应寺), it was installed in 1092 by a Liao emperor. Following this installation, the next major reconstruction occurred in 1271 and took eight years to complete. Kublai Khan reconstructed the temple in Tibetan style. Jiang notes that when this reconstruction was completed, the pagoda became the largest and oldest of its kind in China. Kublai Khan's effect on the site was thus quite considerable, with the sheer size of the pagoda marking the temple in a new way.²⁴

After its completion, the White Pagoda Temple's fairs were significant in Beijing. They were momentous events for local residents, and were saturated with buyers and sellers of various commodities. In general, during the Ming, temple fairs were places where devotion to deities, sight-seeing, and trading occurred. The temple was open once or twice a year for visitors to pay tribute to deities. These days included an influx of tourist activities, and both bartering and business fairs were frequent.²⁵ Following the Ming, temple fairs decreased, but trade (i.e., commercial) fairs remained. Temples in both Ming and Qing thus provided space for economic activities. Devotion to deities occurred, but historical accounts indicate market activities were equally prominent.

Following the Qing, temple fairs declined, and by the 1960s, fairs at the White Pagoda Temple had ceased. Across Beijing, temples were replaced by shopping centers as sites for buying and selling. During this time of religious prohibition, the White Pagoda Temple suffered financially. However, following a 1976 earthquake, revival began, and damage was repaired to protect the site's heritage.²⁶ Designated as a cultural site, renovation again continued at the temple before the Olympics. Over four million dollars went into the site's relocation, with almost five million dollars going to its restoration.²⁷ Provided by the Beijing municipal government, this investment helped the site retrieve what was lost. The temple is once again a place for market activities. What differs today compared to imperial times, however, are the commodities that are bought and sold, and one of the prime temple commodities today is China's "pastness."

Using Pierre Bourdieu's framework, what makes the White Pagoda Temple attractive in terms of cultural commodification is the potential to acquire cultural capital. Cultural capital is one form of economic capital, along with symbolic and social, and commonly refers to prestige, reputation, fame, and so forth.²⁸ Bourdieu writes that people's embedded tastes influence their actions, and one's tastes are

subsequently influenced by the person's place within the social space. A person's tastes are essentially results of one's social class. To raise one's social class, one must be able to apprehend greater amounts of cultural capital. One manner for doing so is having the ability to use *objects* of cultural capital, i.e., cultural goods. Cultural goods are "objects, such as books, works of art, and scientific instruments, that require specialized cultural abilities to use."²⁹ Extending this notion to the White Pagoda Temple, physical locations are cultural objects through which individual consumers acquire cultural capital. In China's gray religious market, religious sites are increasingly mobilized to act as such objects—to represent cultural objects. And by having the ability to consume such objects, individual consumers gain cultural capital and elevate their social status.

The White Pagoda Temple architecturally represents the past, and contemporarily, it is promoted as an artifact of China's past dating to Kublai Khan. In particular, Olympic promotions elevated the site because the pagoda is the largest and oldest preserved from the Yuan dynasty.³⁰ With this connection to China's past, the temple holds cultural significance, and by consuming it one gains cultural capital. Its values include historical lineage and the preservation of impressive objects. The site's connection to Buddhism was not lost in government promotions, but was instead presented as a vehicle for espousing values related to national loyalty and unity.

By marketing religious sites through the value of pastness the gray market manifests itself in China's contemporary marketplace. The gray market is both ambiguous and difficult to restrain. In accordance with this view, one could argue that, although a site is embedded with cultural symbolism through government promotions, it does not have to be consumed as such. Visitors have the freedom to consume a site however they wish. This study does not argue against this idea; instead, my purpose is to point out how reconstructions at, and promotions of, Beijing temples resemble gray market activity. Doing so focuses the attention on the numerous manifestations of religion in Chinese culture, and what the White Pagoda Temple indicates is that religious sites are increasingly commodified as locations of China's past, as opposed to China's religion.

HUOSHEN DAOIST TEMPLE

The Huoshen Daoist Temple is an additional example of a space that is commodified as an object of pastness. Dating to the Ming dynasty, with reconstructions in 1605 and 1770, this temple is one of the country's oldest Daoist temples. At one point, it shared the stage with eight other Beijing temples dedicated to the god of fire. Regular offerings on the god's birthday were received at the temple, primarily because many buildings in Beijing were constructed from wood. Damage by fire was a concern of Beijing citizens, and the Huoshen Temple offered a place where people could seek protection.³¹

It was renovated by the government, as well as the China Daoist Association, in the contemporary period. This relationship between the Daoist temple and the government marks China's contemporary age, and Lai notes, "Whatever the relationship between the government authority and religious bodies in China, it is a fact that basic religious activities in Daoist temples have been considerably revived and continuously expanded."³² The Huoshen Temple signifies such a revision, and before the Olympics, the temple was refurbished with over five million dollars.³³ It is described as a key historical site, with connections to the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. The site's architecture visually connects it to historical artifacts, making it an appropriate place for cultural relic protection. Its architecture is additionally significant because through consuming it an individual receives cultural capital related to cultural objects. Imperial architecture allows the visitor to experience historical China, and consuming the site's architecture requires cultural abilities. The Huoshen Temple and the White Pagoda Temple are similar in this manner. Both are cultural goods due to their connections to China's past. What must be considered, however, is how this connection comes about. Visually, both of the locations embody imperial times, but they do so because their reconstructions were meant to retain the architecture's authenticity. This is an important point revealed in examinations of both locations. Before the Olympics, both were promoted as authentic representations of China's past, and such promotions identified each as a demonstration of imperial China. Physical temples provide spatial structure for the exhibition of national history, but to do so, reconstructions must retain historical "authenticity."

Authenticity, a value in religious tourism, was critical for promoting these sites. Bremer contends that tourists seek authentic places

because they “attribute significant value to authenticity; the most authentic experiences are the most aesthetically pleasing.”³⁴ Tourist and religious perspectives regarding a physical space are equally important because religious places must also be appealing travel destinations. For the Huoshen Temple to be an aesthetically pleasing destination, it must remain authentic. This includes both its religious connections and its imperial architecture. What is deemed authentic is based on the consumers’ values and tastes—their embedded cultural capital. However, tastes are learned and acquired. Promotional material espousing Huoshen Temple as authentic serves to re-imagine the site as significant to contemporary times. This printed material congratulated the local cultural relic protection administrations for rescuing the site and preserving the original appearance and structural materials of the temple.³⁵ This kind of government language upheld the Huoshen Temple’s connections to authenticity, while creating a structure for defining what was and was not authentic. The consequence of such language was an elevation of the site’s original, imperial architecture. Such structures visually located the temple in China’s imagined historical narrative, and within official language, this location was necessary for the temple’s authenticity.

This explicit staging of religious sites as national cultural relics occurred extensively before the Olympics, but it is not a phenomenon limited to Beijing sites during that time. Instead, this kind of gray market activity is proliferated within the tourist market across China. Oakes’ work in Guizhou has shown that the tourist desire for authenticity, along with state-sponsored economic developments, have resulted in elaborate exhibitions of tradition, consumption, and commerce where tourists consume local traditions and local residents consume tourists as exotic objects.³⁶ Through tourism, locals consume tourists, and tourists pay for experiences of authentic places. Their search for authenticity elevates the status of ordinary places to “where they are ‘more real’ than the reality of modern life itself.”³⁷ The resulting paradox of this elevation is that, as places are marked and marketed as authentic, they are spoiled. When a setting is marked as authentic, it is also mediated. Much of this occurs through tourist agencies, and in doing so, the location is not authentic in the sense of being unspoiled. Rather, as the Huoshen Temple demonstrates, locations are often purposefully restructured to represent an authentic past.

Authenticity is an important gray market value. Through marketing sites as authentic, the tourist industry draws eager visitors. Within this buying and selling of a site, however, it seems that the site loses its genuine authenticity. Reconstructing temples furthers this, and what is left is a representation of China's past. These representations are nevertheless promoted as authentic, historical displays, and in staging temples as cultural relics, tourism participates in rewriting China's past onto its present. Bremer contends that a site's temporal location gives it its significance, and a place's commemorative value comes from its different temporalities.³⁸ Spatial locations include pasts, presents, and futures, yet it seems at the Huoshen Temple, the past dominates. Pastness is rewritten into the site's present significance. Its spatial location and inner display of imperial architecture connect it to historical Beijing, while its temporal location socially confirms its position in China's grand narrative. Promotions of the site give visitors the perception they are stepping into China's past, and this commodification implies that the site has a sense of timeless permanence. Before the Olympics, the temple's image as an authentic representation of imperial China was proliferated. Because it evidenced Chinese national culture, the religious site became significant to state projects of national unity, and was promoted in religious tourism as a signpost of cultural unification.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have investigated the White Pagoda Temple and the Huoshen Daoist Temple to demonstrate how Beijing's religious sites have been commodified to meet the needs of a state-run tourist market. I argued that the tourist industry increasingly supplies the experience of religious sites, and this supply occurs in China's gray religious market where religion manifests as culture. Religion as culture promotions influence the meanings and uses of religious sites and artifacts, but in commodifications related to religion as culture, individual consumers are able to acquire higher volumes of cultural capital. Pastness has been shown in this investigation to be a commodity through which one gains cultural capital. But in order for tourist organizations to sell the past, a location must authentically represent it. Government projects thusly renovate religious sites to meet this requirement, and they do so by rewriting the past onto the present—creating a “present past” commodity.

NOTES

1. "Cultural" in this context refers to a constructed "national" cultural identity, i.e., Hanness, as opposed to discourses of popular culture.
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5. Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 19.
6. Anthony Yu, *State and Religion in China* (Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2005).
7. Italics are in the original. Fenggang Yang, "Triple Religious Markets in China," *Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 93–122, 97.
8. Ibid.
9. Yu, *State and Religion*, 140.
10. Yang, "Triple Religious Markets in China," 97.
11. Ibid.
12. Chris Ryan and Gu Huimin, "Destinations and Cultural Representations: The Importance of Political Context and the Decay of Statism," in *Tourism in China: Destination, Cultures and Communities*, ed. Chris Ryan and Gu Huimin (New York: Routledge, 2009), 139–176.
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17. Justine Digance, “Religious and Secular Pilgrimage: Journeys Redolent with Meaning,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36–48.
18. Naquin, *Peking*, 57.
19. *Ibid.*, 71.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Tim Oakes, *Tourism and Modernity in China* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
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32. Lai Chi-Tim, “Daoism in China Today, 1980–2002,” in *Religion in China Today*, ed. Daniel L. Overmyer (New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2003), 107–121, 112.
33. Official Website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.
34. Thomas S. Bremer, “Sacred Spaces and Tourist Places,” in *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 25–35, 32.

35. Official Website of the Beijing 2008 Olympics.
36. Oakes, *Tourism*, 11.
37. *Ibid.*, 25.
38. Bremer, "Sacred Spaces and Tourist Spaces."