

Commercialization and Sanctity of Religious Tourism in The Da Ci'en Monastery, China

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Abstract: *The Da Ci'en Monastery annually attracts millions of visitors from around the world. However, the over commercialization of these sacred places may contradict the values and philosophies of Buddhism. This study aims to comprehensively understand the balance between commercialization and sanctity. Different Studies shows that the Participants articulated their expectation to avoid over commercialization, and they discussed the conflicts between commercialization and sanctity to further explore on how to mitigate over commercialization. Based on the study findings, a balanced model of religious tourism development is proposed and specific recommendations are offered to sustainably manage religious sites.*

Key Words: *Da Ci'en monastery, Culture, Religion, Commercialization, Sanctity*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Da Ci'en Monastery located at South Yanta Road in Xi'an, 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) from the city center, Da Ci'en (mercy and kindness) Temple is one of renowned Buddhist temples in China, where the landmark of Xi'an, Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, is situated. In 648, the emperor Li Zhi ordered to build the temple to commemorate his dead mother. Four years later, the hierarch Xuanzang dwelled here to take charge of the temple's business. Under Xuanzang's supervision, the pagoda was constructed to keep the Buddhist statues, scriptures, classics and Buddhist relics (Sariras) he brought from India. Da Ci'en Temple also became a famous site for Buddhist sutra translation and the birthplace of the Faxiang (Dharma Characteristics) School. Da Ci'en Monastery, a conglomeration of Buddhism is commonly recognized as a representative of Chinese culture. Thus, this monastery has attracted millions of visitors from around the world every year [1]. The active involvement of the Da Ci'en Monastery in commercial activities such as tourism development has generated several concerns on the long-term practice of its core values, such as Buddhism, meditation, and spirituality [2]. The multitude of tourists who visit the Da Ci'en Monastery annually and the rapid development of the local tourism industry (e.g., hotels, restaurants, and entertainment attractions) have induced the over commercialization of this religious heritage site [3]. The commercialization of sacred places, particularly the Da Ci'en tourism business, may contradict the values and philosophies of Buddhism. As such, the core values of Buddhism may be compromised over time if Da Ci'en tourism is not sustainably managed. The case of the Da Ci'en Monastery is not solitary because finding a balance between preservation and development is a major management challenge for religious sites regardless of religion. However, [4] noted the limited academic attention on the complex management issues in religious sites. Therefore, this study aims to explore the multiple meanings of the Da Ci'en Monastery as a carrier of Buddhism and Chinese culture in terms of tourism development. [5] suggested that an in-depth exploration of one typical example can support and enhance the understanding of the general phenomena. Thus, the present study also intends to broaden the understanding of the dilemma between commercialization and sanctity in the context of the Da Ci'en monastery, which is a conglomeration of Buddhism, and tourism. The findings derived from this representative case, which accommodated an overwhelming number of tourists, can generate important implications for the sustainable development of other religious sites; the results from this case study will also have implications on other culturally-sensitive sites that experience a high number of visitations with similar management struggles.

1.1. Quest for sanctity in religious tourism:

Sanctity is central to the maintenance of the religious sense or authenticity of a place [4], and it is commonly used interchangeably with authenticity in religious tourism. Both sanctity and authenticity are regarded as the counterpart of commercialization of religious sites [6]. Applied the concept of sanctity in a study of 43 cathedrals and pointed out some elements in creating sanctity, such as "a closeness to God" and "the gaining of spiritual merit" (p. 345). From a managerial perspective, [4] identified several managerial suggestions to maintain sanctity, such as distancing from commercialization, restricting some areas from visitors, introducing religious knowledge by specialized guides, and controlling overcrowding. Charging entrance fees can damage the sanctity of believers who

have to “pay to pray” [6]. The physical effects of overcrowding destroy reverent and peaceful atmospheres [4]. Notably, sanctity, as part of an authentic religious experience, appeals to both “sacred” and “secular” visitors. The quest for sanctity in a religious site journey has been widely acknowledged in religious tourism studies. Religious tourism has been traditionally defined as “a form of tourism where people of a particular faith travel to visit places of religious significance in their faith” [7]. Thus, religious sites are socially constructed as sacred; however, for non-believers, these sites do not necessarily embody intrinsic holiness [8] [9]. Four common distinctions in the types of religious sites, namely, pilgrimage shrines, religious structures, festivals and purpose-built attractions are identified in the literature [10] [11] [12]. Whereas pilgrimage shrines primarily serve spiritual journeys, religious structures are common places of worship and festivals are often religious gatherings. Pilgrimage shrines are also considered inherently sacred [3]; however, purpose-built religious attractions are designed to draw visitors for tourism.

Consequently, a common dichotomy of religious attraction has emerged based on visitors’ travel motivations, namely, pilgrims and tourists [13] [14]. Pilgrimage, commonly defined as wandering toward sacred sites as an act of will or religious obligation, has been at the core of religious tourism since ancient times [14]. In recent times, this phenomenon has experienced a global revival and an increased interest as a form of tourism [15]; however, this phenomenon lacks related empirical studies [16]. Pilgrims are commonly labeled as “believers” who celebrate their faith [17] and search for meaning and authenticity [18]. In contrast, traditional tourists visit religious heritage sites for other purposes, such as those related to nature, culture, history, beauty, leisure, adventure, and amusement [9] [19] [20] stated that visitors who adhere to a religion relevant to the site can be labeled as pilgrim-tourists, whereas non-believers are considered traveler-tourists [21] developed a related continuum model in which pilgrims and tourists are at the opposite sides labeled “sacred” and “secular,” respectively. An almost infinite number of combinations are assumed between these two extremes, representing the visitors’ often-changing travel motivations to religious sites [22]. Most religious tourism are believed to fall in the middle of this continuum, in which tourists are neither firm believers nor totally secular [15] added that only a few tourists claim to be pilgrims, whereas most expect certain types of emotional experience upon their visit.

Recent studies have failed to distinguish pilgrimage from traditional tourism [23]. Stated that “there is no hard and fast dividing line between pilgrimage and tourism, that even when the roles of pilgrim and tourist are combined, they are necessarily different but form a continuum of inseparable elements.” Subsequently, a pilgrim can be defined by the collective experience and the common identity [24]. Furthermore, argued that the pilgrim experience can be shared even without the sense of belonging to any established religion. He defined pilgrims based on their participation in a certain activity, the feeling of being part of a group, and the recognition as pilgrims by both group members and non-members. Following this line of thought, [25] introduced the concept of “new” pilgrims, who are both modern and secular in character. This new form of tourism borrows from the New Age movement in following a personal spiritual path outside the mass pilgrimage tradition and organized religious tendencies [25] indicated that secular tourism can be transformed into spiritual tourism if a traveler perceives the former as an authentic journey. Scholars have identified a wide range of secular travel motivations to religious heritage sites that are often combined with spiritual needs. These motivations include “cultural and historical interest” [26], architectural interest, spur-of-the-moment decisions, and group travel, as well as visits to graves or ancestral monuments and famous people connected with the site [13] added that the pilgrimage experience today includes elements of culture, secularity, nature, education, and even religious devotion. Several studies have indicated that worshippers are often part of the minority of religious site visitors [27] explained that although the interpretations of sacred sites are often negotiated among different types of visitors, they often establish communication bonds showing their collective appreciation of the sites. From a supply perspective, sacred sites welcome visitors for several reasons that are not always necessarily related to faith. The common alternative motivations to hospitality include displaying buildings, generating cash, or enhancing a sense of community [19]. From a different perspective stated that in modern times, most people with pilgrimage as their major travel motivation are also tourists when visiting sacred sites. Thus, a spiritual journey can also include traditional secular sightseeing, such as simply enjoying the scenery at a pilgrimage site.

Therefore, the simplified notion that faith merely drives the religious tourism process should be questioned because religious and traditional tourism are interconnected [28]. Existing literature also reflects that religious beliefs are not the only reason tourists visit or host open religious sites for tourism, instead, the quest for sacredness is a common motive across all religious site visitors. This situation presents a dilemma on the role of sanctity in commercializing a religious place via tourism.

1.2. Commercialization of religious heritage

Commercialization and commodification are concepts that have mostly emerged through postmodern ideas, such as skeptical views on power relations, nostalgia, and perceived loss of authenticity. Commodification is typically defined as tourism that transforms a culture or heritage into a commercialized product, which is packaged and sold to tourists for their consumption [29]. Similarly, commercialization involves rendering tourist sites available for profitable purposes. Both concepts are believed to diminish authenticity (Taylor, 2001) and to ultimately reduce the

value of a tourism product [30]. Commercialization critics argued that tourism products have become simply another commercialized commodity, which are bought and sold on the market for financial gain [31]. Elaborated on the two stages of this process which ultimately transforms places into commercialized attractions. In the first stage, non-commercial products such as places are transformed into tourism products. This transformation occurs by naming an attraction and separating it demographically from its surroundings [32]. In the second stage, non-tourist attractions become tourism products through the acquaintance on the new meanings projected on these attractions. The latter is commonly enforced through marketing, image building, and branding efforts using tools such as music, literature, television broadcasts, and movies [33].

Nevertheless, several scholars have regarded the commercialization of culture and heritage as merely a destructive, oppressive, and negative concept. In contrast, commercialization is believed to have positive aspects particularly on the local people at the heritage sites [29]. A major benefit of commercialization is its capacity to aid in the survival of folk customs and traditions. Several related success stories have been narrated, such as the case of Cuban music and the traditional performances in China [34]. By showcasing local traditions, the young members of society are introduced to and learn to appreciate such traditions, which ultimately guarantee their future survival. The commercialization of tourism sites also generated economic opportunities, particularly for local businesses. Other scholars have argued that local communities can be empowered through commercialization [35]. Hence, marginalized communities can reaffirm their identity and maintain their sense of autonomy by showcasing their culture to the outside world. Aside from traditional tourist attractions, commercialization has also affected religious heritage. The latter shares several common features with the former; however, the special context of religion and sanctity of a site requires further consideration when investigating commercialization. Explained that the borders among different types of religious attractions start to overlap with the heavy touristification of religious heritage sites. Promotion-aimed marketing efforts particularly create confusion between religion and tourism, as well as between heritage and leisure relative to these attractions. The significant increase of tourism activities in certain sites has also led to leisure-oriented visitors effectively outnumbering the worshipper. Religious items also often lose their original purpose and become souvenirs, which can eventually harm the religious sense of the place [36]. [37] Indicated that tourist-related facilities, such as hotels and other lodging structures, can also seriously damage the religious landscapes and the surroundings of an attraction. [38] added that overcrowding and increased consumerism often transform religious tourism into mass tourism because significantly more secular visitors are also attracted to religious tourism sites. In this case, the tourism business itself acts as a direct commercializing agent of religious heritage attractions.

Identified another type of religious heritage commercialization, which is commercialization through religious groups. In this case, religious groups “sell” their beliefs and customs for economic purposes. Certain attractions related to the Roman Catholic Church, such as the Vatican City, are mentioned as an example. In this case, even religious artifacts are sold as souvenirs, thereby defying their original meanings [39]. Despite the often criticized negative effects, the religious commercialization of tourist attractions is believed to have a positive aspect. In practice, the commercialization of religious sites has proven vital to a substantial number of attractions. Aside from the financial gain of commercialization, the stimulation of certain types of site interpretations may also interest diverse religious groups and authorities to promote their religions [40]. This situation can eventually induce friction between two related groups that promote diverse interpretations of the same attraction, as well as among diverse religions that worship the same site for different purposes. Other organizations, such as New Age movements, also commercialize religion by adopting and selling items sacred to others' faith for financial and economic gains [41]. [26] highlighted that in practice, the revenue from tourist visits in the form of donations, admission fees, catering, or merchandising has frequently proven crucial for the survival of a religious site. Explained that although external observers frequently criticize the financial demands of visitors, religious institutions can limit the number of visitors and control the overcrowding of a site. This situation is a direct consequence of religious institutions generally not enjoying the exceptional status they experienced during the last millennia; they have often struggled to overcome financial and management issues [4], as well as sought new members to join their community [10]. The awareness of local people as stakeholders in religious tourism attractions is also noted. [42] indicated that both locals and tourists can be considered indispensable to a religious attraction. Accordingly, although tourists guarantee financial survival, local community involvement guarantees that the sense of place and the religious traditions are maintained to limit the effects of commercialization. The commercialization of religious heritage sites can be considered a highly complex issue, which involves several threatening and beneficial aspects of the attraction, as well as the issue of striking a balance between the commercialization and sanctity of a site [43]. Therefore, understanding this issue is important because tourism and pilgrimage as well as commercialization and sanctity are continuously blurring topics in the context of religious heritage.

2. DA CI'EN MONASTERY:

Da Ci'en Temple, now located in Yanta Road, Xi'an City, about 4 km from the urban centre, was on Jin Chang Street in ancient capital Chang'an of Tang Dynasty. [44] The Temple was originally named Wu Lou Si Temple in the

Sui Dynasty but became derelict in early Wu De Years in the Tang Dynasty (618 A.D.). In the 22nd of the years of Zhen Guan Reign (648 A.D.), [44] Emperor Li Zhi, then still a Crown Prince, issued an order to reconstruct the temple to memorize his late mother, Empress Wen De, for praying her happiness in other world. Hence, the temple was known as Da Ci'en (meaning great kindness) [45]. The Temple stood in the picturesque place of ancient Chang'an City, near Xingyuan Garden, on the bank of Qujiang River, facing the Zhong Nan Mount in the south, the royal garden Hanyuan of Da Ming Palace in the north, with Huangshui canal running beside. According to *The Legend of Ci'en Temple* and *Annals of Chang'an County*, it had the greatest scale, covering nearly 400 mu, about half the area of Jin Chang Street, with more than 10 compounds and 1897 rooms. After Master Xuan Zang hosted the temple, the public worship and incense burning practice was prosperous and the Buddhist study atmosphere could be compare favourably with Nalanda Monastery, the highest Buddhist college in India. Apart from translating, the master spared no effort to educate successors, lecturing on new sutras and answering their questions. His disciple, Master Kui Ji, studied and had a good command of the whole Tripitaka and then create the theory of the Dharmalaksana School. During the five Dynasties, the temple suffered from wars and was reduced to ruins, but the pagoda still survived. From Tianshun 2nd year to Chenghua 2nd year in the Ming Dynasty (from 1458-1466) [46], Xing Ping Duke ordered to rebuild the temple with eunuchs Chen Bao and Deng Ming as supervisors. Up to Chenghua 2nd year, the front and rear halls, each with five rooms, had been reconstructed after the old structures taken apart and rotten parts abandoned. New temple-gate, side buildings, the head monk room and monk's houses were completed then. In Jia Chen Year of Wang Li Reign (1604A.D.) [47], the temple was repaired again, in which stairs were added and access to the top was made.

In the 10th year of Kang Xi, Qing Dynasty (1671 A.D.), Governor Wang Shuxian of Chongqing, Sichuan, built Yu Xian Bridge in front of the temple across Huangqu canal and added front curtained carriage between the canal and the temple gate in Kang Xi 17th year [48]. Three other temple gates were constructed; the bell and drum towers were also built and 26 rooms were completed, including three Heavenly Guardians Halls, guest rooms and wing- rooms in Dao Guang 12th year (1832 A.D.) [49]. The temple was again burned to ashes by the war during the Muslim Uprising in Shaanxi in the first year of Tong Zhi Reign (1862 A.D.). In the 13th Year of Guan Xu Reign in Qing Dynasty (1887) [50], Ye Boying, the Military Minister, sponsored three million stringed coins to build the five-room gate house, two Buddhist halls and the bell and drum towers within nine months. In the 19th year of Republic of China (1930), a great philanthropist, Zhu Ziqiao, invited Master Baosheng from Wu Tai Mount to be in charge of the repair and the fixing of the temple and the pagoda, setting up five more Buddhist halls, one exhibit hall ten houses of monks. After the liberation, the people's Government put more efforts into the protection and maintenance of Da Ci'en Temple and retained the temple as it was in late Qing Dynasty [51]. Since 1990s, under the direction of Master Zeng Qin, the work of environment green and complete repair of the temple has been done, and newly constructed office-yard, monk compound, head monk compound, historical relic hall and as well as Tang Dynasty Style group buildings for Master Xuan Zang Tripitaka, thus making the thousand-year-old temple grander and more magnificent than ever before. Xuanzang presided over the temple affairs here, led the Buddhist scripture translation field, and founded one of the eight sects of Chinese Buddhism, known as the knowledge-based clan. The Dayan Pagoda in Da Ci'en temple was supervised and built by Xuanzang himself. Therefore, Da Ci'en temple has a very prominent position in the history of Chinese Buddhism, and has been valued by the Buddhist circles at home and abroad [52]. Now the temple cover 76 mu. On March 4, 1961, the Dayan Pagoda of Da Ci'en temple was announced as a national key cultural relics protection unit by the State Council [53]. Master Xuan Zang was a great Buddhist philosopher, translator and traveler. He won the support of the Tang royal family, and founded a Buddhist scripture translation workshop an unprecedented scale, assembling great learned monks from all over the country. As chief translator, Xuan Zang translated 75 buddhist sutras in 1335 volumes and wrote a book, *Travels in the Western Regions*, recoding the historical developments, local customs, natural conditions as well as cultures and religions of 138 countries in the Western Regions. He and his disciple, kui ji, created the Dharmalaksana School (also named as Ci'en School), which made great influence on the development of Buddhism and ideology in China [54].

2.1. Religion and Tourism

In the context of contemporary China, the complex separation of secular tourism from spiritual tourism has been indicated because the former is closely bound to its political, social, and economic conditions [55]. Accordingly, Chinese visitors to religious heritage sites are highly aware of the rapid and safe means of transportation, commercialization, secularization, and government intervention in restoring and promoting both the national and local identities. The religious tourism sites in China are often promoted to fulfill spiritual needs and to educate visitors about patriotism and China's national history [55]. Given the emergence of religious tourism, several discussions of pilgrimage and religion tourism have been initiated in the past literature. Several scholars have suggested that pilgrimage and religion tourism are at the two ends of a continuum, with the former referring to traveling to religious destinations primarily for religious pursuits and the latter pertaining to traveling to religious sites principally for personal pleasure. Regardless of the category to which tourists belong, holy experiences are expected by all of the

concerned travelling parties, including pilgrims, tourists, and those in between [56]. Such holy experiences are explained in study as expected emotional experience and in [19] research as spiritual needs. Therefore, retaining the religious charm of the Da Ci'en Monastery is vital to sustain its tourism development. Olsen (2003) mentioned that not every religious tourism site is considered sacred. The participants view the Da Ci'en Monastery as one such site despite its potential to regain its charm. This monastery is widely believed to be the most famous Buddhist temple in the world [1]. Its popularity can help broadcast the Buddhist message and values to a broad community via tourism. Thus, tourism is a channel of communication between religious sites and the interested public. Although commercialization may be inevitable in tourism development, over commercialization should be avoided and the sanctity of the religious site should be protected. Doing so is necessary to sustain tourism and to promote the ultimate purpose of developing tourism at a religious site.

3. RELIGION AND CULTURE:

The analysis of the meanings of the Da Ci'en Monastery as a carrier of Chinese culture indicated that its religious values share the same core values as Chinese Confucianism, particularly the "moderate" philosophy. The Da Ci'en Monastery is evidently regarded as a representative of Chinese culture. This finding echoes previous studies that have examined the appeal of the monastery [57]. The same finding also confirmed the finding of [58], in which contemporary pilgrimage experiences include the elements of culture, secularity, nature, and religious devotion. China's religious tourism has seldom been the focus of studies in the tourism and hospitality literature. Research on the Da Ci'en Monastery is even scarce, which contradicts its popularity among the general public. Another research shows that the focus group discussions reflected that Da Ci'en tourism cannot depart from the broad Chinese cultural context because Da Ci'en is a component of the national culture and its presentation in tourism should reflect core Chinese values. A similar association between religion and general culture was also observed in the studies of [55], in which the discussion of religious issues is closely linked to culture. In the case of the Da Ci'en Monastery, the unconventional or deviant behaviors related to it are unacceptable to the participants who value the "moderate" Confucian philosophy. However, the integration of Chinese culture in the development of religious tourism remains unexplored. Although past literature have argued that religion and tourism are interlinked because the proper use of religious resources in tourism development can benefit both parties [28]; furthermore, the discussion of religion, culture, and tourism in the same context has not been established.

In line with the literature, the continuity of religion is another major concern of the participants [42]. Knowledge on Buddhism and its promotion to both believers and tourist groups are suggested. [6] Indicated that this lack of spiritual depth in religious tourism sites often results in leisure tourists outnumbering worshippers. As a religion, Buddhism is based on achieving a state of enlightened consciousness for which the achievement of wisdom is an essential feature [4]. Consistent with this concept, sufficient knowledge of Buddhism and dedicated behaviors of both the abbots and monks are expected. Buddhist practitioners often visit the temple multiple times a year, whereas leisure tourists normally visit the temple only once; hence, visitor motivations for religious sites tend to be complex and are often not worship-related [13]. Therefore, the respondents suggested exerting more marketing efforts to attract religious believers and to cautiously draw sightseeing tourists.

4. CONCLUSION:

Based on the case of a famous Chinese monastery, the findings of this study reflect the dilemma involving the commercialization and sanctity of Da Ci'en tourism. Sustaining the religion is regarded as the key to all tourism practices. The connections of religion to tourism and culture are identified to facilitate the conceptual understanding of religious tourism development in China and the practical implications of the study. The management suggestions can be modified to suit the nature and context of other religious sites. The findings from previous studies, such as the overarching of culture and religion [58], highly valued sacred experience [56]; [38], and continuity of religion [42]; [10], have also been noted in the Chinese Buddhism context. Connecting these findings in a country where only a few studies on the issues related to religious tourism have been conducted contributes to international scholarship. This study is not against commercialization and tourism development at a religious site; however, we advocate a religious center management approach when developing tourism at religious sites. This study is firmly embedded in the context of the Da Ci'en Monastery and the related cultural and religious principles. A study in another context concerning the same topic may yield different results.

Further research can investigate the implication of the results of this study for the specific management of the monastery. The results of this study can be compared with those on other religious sites in other contexts. Our results also help understand whether differences in sites related to their religious affiliation exist. A comparison between Hindu, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist sites is particularly interesting as well. Finally, further studies can investigate the perception of the Da Ci'en Monastery site from a Western perspective. The Chinese respondents frequently mentioned that the Da Ci'en Monastery is famous for the related movie *Xi you ji* (Journey to the West) inspired pop culture in the West. Investigating this issue can better explain the issue of religious tourism from a cross-cultural scale.

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