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**BEING A MONK FOR A DAY. REALLY?  
THE CASE OF PU-TUO-SHAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

It is possible for laypersons to purchase a tour package allowing them to ‘cross the line’ and for a day or two ‘live as a Buddhist monk’ in some Chinese monasteries, with the result that they might intrude into the life of its religious members much more deeply than a simple visitor with some degree of religious interest would. This paper investigates whether visitors who had chosen to experience the life a Buddhist monk for a day or two in a Buddhist monastery were looking for the opportunity of experiencing some degree of “peak/extramundane experience”. In Buddhism, a peak/extramundane experience is meant to be a truly meaningful religious experience that is a step in the direction of enlightened. It is also a core objective, to a Buddhist practitioner, of undertaking a pilgrimage to and spending some time in a monastery. Yet lay visitors with various degrees of faith in Buddhism may have different purpose(s) for living for a while in a monastery. Each case can put the resident monks in a particular situation. This paper reports how Buddhist monastic members rationalize their acceptance of such ‘religious-touristic’ experiments. The current study adopts a phenomenological approach based on participant observations, casual conversations and interviews with such visitors and with the monks who host them. The research locus is one of the four sacred mountains of Chinese Buddhism, Pu-Tuo-Shan, where about a thousand monks and nuns live in a large complex of monasteries and nunneries. The findings suggest that due to the inclusive nature of Buddhism, as stated in Buddhist doctrines, everyone is welcome to experience Buddhist monastic life in Pu-Tuo-Shan, to the extent that even visitors bereft of religious motivation can attend sacred religious rites.

*Key words: religious, pilgrimage, Buddhist monasteries, experience, Pu-Tuo-Shan.*

## INTRODUCTION

A priori, living in a sacred site of one's religion the life of a monk for a day or two has the potential of being a meaningful experience for one who spends one's life in the mundane world. This is even more the case if the experience takes place in one's religious 'center of the world' far away from one's secular world (Eliade, 1968). People who complete the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela often describe the experience as having a deep significance, or even as being a life-changing event. For Muslims, a pilgrimage to Hajj is actually supposed to be an extramundane experience and a watershed in the pilgrims' life. A number of concepts that are closely related to the idea of an exceptional, possibly life-changing experience, have first appeared in the psychology literature, and later occasionally applied to touristic experiences. Such life-changing experience is sometimes called 'extraordinary', 'extramundane' or 'peak' experience, to which the concepts of 'enlightenment' and 'self-actualization' are rather closely associated. According to Maslow, a "peak-experience itself can often meaningfully be called a 'little death' and a 'rebirth'". In fact, the concept of peak experience originates in the study of religion (Maslow, 1964).

Traditionally speaking, to search for 'peak experience' was exclusively for the adherents of a particular religious faith, in particular in the context of a pilgrimage journey that allows participants to share a communal life on their way to their center of the world. Atheists or believers in another religion would have little reason to visit and stay in such a particular religious site which is not sacred to them. It is no longer the case in the modern world, particularly in China. This study is a timely one, as today many ancient monasteries in China are significant tourist destinations. They are used by travel agencies to promote cultural tourism products. Religious places in China are also used as political and economic instruments to contribute to social stability, ideological control and economic development. Chinese Buddhist monasteries are therefore not only sacred dwelling grounds for their resident monk/nuns, but they are as well consumed as cultural attractions by all kinds of visitors.

Chinese Buddhism has four Sacred Mountains, one of which is Pu-Tuo-Shan, which is dedicated to the most renowned divinity in Chinese Buddhism, Bodhisattva Avalokitesava (Guan-Yin). The site receives large numbers of visitors, almost all Chinese, of different natures, going from the sightseeing tourist to the very devout Buddhist. The purpose of visitation also

varies considerably; it ranges from “relaxation, leisure sightseeing”, “eating seafood”, to “making wishes” and “learning Buddhism through meditation and attending Buddhist religious rituals” (Wong, McIntosh and Ryan, 2013). Urry (1995) says that it is the tourists’ curiosity for the unusual and quest for new forms of pleasure that lead to their consumption of the sites and activities of a destination. In this regard, the most profound religious experience that Pu-Tuo can offer to lay visitors is to dwell in a monastery for a day or two and participate to monastic life. Such a unique religious experience differentiates Pu-Tuo from other ordinary leisure destinations in China. If the visitors who stay overnight in a monastery also participate to the daily puja(s), then they come close to live, for a short while at least, the austere life that the monks withstand every day.

Apparently, anyone who wishes to live such an experience can pay for and join such experiential tours. Thus it is not necessarily the case that those who join such tours to stay in a Buddhist monastery are Buddhists who are in quest for a “peak experience”. Some might simply be motivated by cultural curiosity and consequently behave accordingly. Apart from the fact that it has been noted that this form of monastic hospitality brings income to the monasteries, which helps those who stay in a monastic cloister strengthen their religious faith (O’Gorman and Lynch, 2009), little research has been done to reveal how such a ‘religious/touristic’ product is perceived from a Buddhist monastic point of view, when a sacred monastic ground is at least partially transformed into a ‘laboratory’ where ‘tourism experiments’ take place. The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which visitors who had chosen to sample the monastic life in a Buddhist site had any thought of the possibility, even remote, of a meaningful religious experience, and more generally, how monastic members feel about such commercial experiential tours.

The visitors of Pu-Tuo who chose to dwell in the monasteries have the opportunity to participate in a morning puja (a two-hours Buddhist ‘mass’) at 3:30 am, together with the monks of the monastery where they overnight. Attending this puja is by no means compulsory and most visitors who join such tours and stay in the monasteries in fact do not attend. On the other hand, participation to the puja requires overnighting in a monastery, because the puja takes place when the entrances of the monasteries are locked. Participation to the puja is thus used here as the litmus test of whether or not a visitor was actually trying to experience monastic life. Those

visitors who attended this morning puja were accordingly chosen as the subjects of this enquiry; in addition Buddhist monks were interviewed to share their comments on such experiential tour which takes place in their sacred world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is sometimes viewed as the pursuit of dreams that are difficult to realize in daily life (Wang, 2017). An attempt at an extraordinary experience can be demanding, but it is always prone to failure. To take an extreme example, attempting to reach the summit of Mount Everest often qualifies as an extraordinary experience as it is the Holy Grail of mountaineering. It attracts a large number of climbers: the summit has been reached more than 6000 times (547 times in 2012 alone) (National Geographic, 2013). Historically, the rate of mortality among climbers reaching at least base camp is a non-negligible 1.3% (Firth et al, 2008). Circumnavigating the globe or crossing an ocean on a sailing boat is a pursuit of the same nature, including the risk of loss of life.

The variety of tourism experience, as seen from the tourist's point of view has naturally led to the construction of tourist typologies on the basis of what a tourist aspires to. In the early literature on the sociology of the tourist, such as in Boorstin (1964), the tourist is often viewed as someone who wants superficial, contrived experiences. In contrast, different views subsequently appeared in the literature to the effect that the universe of tourists is populated by humans with a variety of motivations, and some may search for authenticity (MacCannel, 1976). The recognition of a variety of tourism experiences naturally spurred research into tourist types. Starting with the seminal work of Cohen (1979), there is now a rich literature on the typology of tourist, either in general or at a particular site. The quest for an extraordinary experience does not seem to fit in anyone of those typologies, possibly because it is a relatively marginal and an extreme pursuit, but it is not completely unrelated to some tourist categories that have been considered. Cohen, for example, settles for five types of tourists, or more exactly for five modes in which a tourist can be: the Recreational, Diversionary, Experiential, Experimental and Existential modes.

In tourism literature, Nolan and Nolan (1989) identify pilgrims as being religiously oriented towards a religious/sacred site and they long for visiting shrines and having chances to pray and meditate, while tourists visit a religious/sacred site for the purpose of leisure and want

to see the world, to experience the ambience and the historical and cultural significance of the site. Griffin (2007) argues from a very religious point of view that a religious journey to a sacred site can only be called a pilgrimage if it is undertaken in search of an extraordinary experience. While much has been canvassed in tourism studies about pilgrims and non-pilgrims experiences in religious grounds and their respective behavior on-site, little is revealed about visitors' experience at living like a monk in a monastic site, and consequently how monastic members comment on such experiential tours. An article written by Ryan and McKenzie (2003) is an exception. They report that the Benedictine monks manage to transform a village town where they have their monastic life, into a successful cultural village. The transformation sustains the continuity of their monastic life while commodification is at the same time taking place in the village of New Norcia. Monastic members were happy with the tourism development as it is in line with the traditional Benedictine hospitality. It is reported that thirty thousand tourists visit the town each year to enjoy the hedonistic resources of the village as well as partially experience the monastic life.

How about Buddhism? Only a few scholarly studies report on Buddhist monastic members' perceptions of receiving visitors at Buddhist sacred sites. One of the reports is Shackley (2001). She says: "The attitude of [Buddhist] monastic authorities to visitors is ambiguous. Most welcome increased 'foreign' attendance principally for the chance of gaining cash contributions and the opportunity to display local traditions and promote Buddhist principles" (Shackley, 2001, p. 112). Wong, McIntosh and Ryan (2013) document the perceptions of Buddhist monastic members at Pu-Tuo towards tourism. Their findings show that, at least in a Buddhist context, the religious hosts' perceptions towards tourism vary on the basis of their own depth of understanding Buddhism. This paper is the first attempt to document Buddhist monks' perceptions specifically on a religious-touristic product that allows visitors bereft of religious motivation to stay overnight in a monastery and attend sacred religious rites.

## **INTRODUCTION TO PU-TUO-SHAN**

There are four Buddhist Sacred Mountains in China and they are the key Buddhist pilgrimage destinations of the country. They all have a large monastic community. They are Wu-Tai, Jiu-Wa, E-Mei and Pu-Tuo (Eiki, 1987; Naquin & Yu, 1992; Z. Y. Wang, 2002). Pu-Tuo is by far the sacred mountain that receives the most visitors (Pu-Tuo Tourism Bureau,

2015). It is due to a number of reasons, some mundane and some religious. A mundane one is because of its geographical location. Pu-Tuo is an island with an area of only 12.5 square kilometers located close to the East coast of the Zhejiang province of China. Unlike the other sacred mountains of China, it is easily accessible from major cities, a factor that undoubtedly contributes to its popularity with visitors. Pu-Tuo is promoted by the local authorities as “not only a place for pilgrims to go and worship Guan Yin (Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara), but also a place for leisure travelers due to the scenic beauty of the island and the extensive tourism infrastructure available to accommodate the tastes of non-religious visitors” (Xiang, 2006, p. 2).

From a religious perspective, Pu-Tuo is the most significant pilgrimage site for many Chinese Buddhists because it is dedicated to Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, who is the most popular divinity in China (Bao & Bai, 2008; Too, 2003). Many alleged miracles and apparitions of the divinity gave Pu-Tuo credence as an important efficacious pilgrimage destination for many Buddhist believers. Today there are 28 Buddhist monasteries, nunneries and shrines that have been restored and opened to the public after 1979. Approximately 1,100 monks and nuns live in the sacred land and they constitute therefore a relatively large monastic community (Fang, 1995; L. X. Wang, 1999). It is on the basis of these considerations that Pu-Tuo was selected as the research site for this investigation. All the monasteries and nunneries of Pu-Tuo are managed by the Pu-Tuo Buddhist Association, which formulates the general visitor management strategies for the whole site, as well as the allocation of functions and roles to each monastery and nunnery. For instance, the three largest and most popular monasteries at Pu-Tuo, the Pu-Ji Monastery, the Fa-Yu Monastery and the Wei-Ji Monastery, offer overnight stays, Buddhist pujas and lectures to lay visitors while other monasteries and nunneries do not.

### **PU-TUO-SHAN’S VISITORS**

At any religious site that attracts tourists as well as genuine pilgrims, there can be difficulties arising from the behavior of some of the visitors. The problem is particularly serious when, as in Pu-Tuo, the site is not simply a religious one but also the home of monks and nuns whose monastic lifestyle can easily be disturbed by crowds of visitors. At a Buddhist site, the problem is compounded because there are not simply differences of motivation and demeanor between ‘tourists’ and religiously motivated ‘pilgrims’, but also such differences between different groups of religiously motivated visitors. The simple distinction tourist-pilgrim does

not really apply in Pu-Tuo. As reported by Wong, McIntosh and Ryan (2013), the monks distinguish among three types of religious visitors. There is first the Xiankes, whose belief the monks view as essentially folkloric. The main purpose of their visit is to Hsu Yuan 許願 (expressing wishes to the divinities) and Huan Yuan 還願 (fulfilling the vow that was made in connection with previous wishes). To the monks, the Xiankes are actually not Buddhists but worshippers. The second type of religious visitors is the one of the Shinshis who they describe as people who believe in Buddhism to a certain extent, but they are not real Buddhists. They have a veneer of Buddhism but Buddhism does not really guide their life. The third group is the one that the monks call Jushis, and they consider only the Jushis to be both Buddhists and pilgrims as they are real Buddhist practitioners who have gone for refuge to the Buddha in a formal liturgical ceremony, not simply believers or worshippers.

In the words of a monk, 'Jushis', who have gone for refuge to the Buddha, come to Pu-Tuo as pilgrims to stay overnight to do penance, to attend pujas, to learn Buddhism and to seek enlightenment from the pilgrimage journey. A puja is a Buddhist ritual in which monks recite Buddhist scriptures and chant holy mantras (Too, 2003); a puja usually lasts for two hours or more. It is equivalent to a Catholic mass. Jushis have had senior monks as their teachers on earth to teach them Buddhism. They come to a special sacred place of their religion to further learn about it and they don't pray for the satisfaction of their personal desires. They come to learn Buddhism, to seek the path to becoming free of sorrows.

Now, most of the visitors to Pu-Tuo confine themselves to spending time in its sites (courtyards and halls of the main monasteries) during daytime, as their doors are locked at night. A minority of visitors, though, spends a night or two in the monasteries and is allowed, if they wish, to participate in the monastery's morning puja, together with the monks where they are dwelling. This puja takes place at 3:30am in the middle of the night. The monks also attend a second puja in the early evening at 4:30pm. The visitors who lodge in the monasteries and participate to all monastic activities that are available to them actually live for a day or two, to some degree, the life of a Buddhist monk. The only way to attend this morning puja is to spend the night in the monastery, as, by that time, the entrances of the monasteries' grounds are locked. In order to be allowed to dwell in the monasteries, the visitor must have registered in advance and they are charged 300 Yuans by the Buddhist association. The fee includes the right



to attend the puja and the subsequent breakfast. According to the author's experience of staying in monasteries of Pu-Tuo, while the accommodation provided is rather spartan, it is certainly comfortable, with basic, small but tidy rooms. There is no indication of how much of the fee is for accommodation, breakfast or the puja.

Buddhism is an inclusive religion, and there are no conditions to satisfy in order to be allowed to overnight in the monasteries, apart from the one that one must register in advance and pay the fee. Allowing lay visitors to stay in a monastery and participate in the morning pujas is meant as acts of compassion: to take care of devout Buddhist pilgrims and worshippers who want to stay in the monastery for religious and spiritual reasons. However, from the author's observations and conversations with some monks at Pu-Tuo, she learned that it is not unusual, during July-September which is the peak tourism season at Pu-Tuo that some visitors who stay inside the monasteries in fact use them as cheap accommodation and often those visitors do not attend any puja. Such a comment is very similar to the concern raised by a guest master in the Abbey of Pluscarden, Scotland as recorded in the monastic hospitality study carried out by O' Gorman and MacPhee. They reported that religious hosts were irritated by visitors who use the monastery as a one-night stop-off and treated the monk's hospitality as a convenient and economical alternative to a bed-and-breakfast (O'Gorman and Lynch, 2009; O' Gorman & MacPhee, 2006, p. 19).

As a rule, it is the case in most European Catholic convents "that the guests who usually visit the monastery are priests taking time out from their daily routine for a period of reflection, meditation and relaxation or other people with other links to the monastic community. The monastery is welcoming, but does not just open its doors to anyone" (O' Gorman & MacPhee, 2006, p. 19). This attitude does not prevail in Pu-Tuo. There is no rule set by the monastic community to select the kind of guests who are allowed to stay in the monasteries and to participate in morning pujas. Therefore the guests who stay in the monasteries of Pu-Tuo may include any of the three kinds of religious visitors (Xiankes, Shinshis and Jushis) as well as sightseeing tourists bereft of religious faith. The decision to attend or not the morning puja is their own, regardless of their type. As it is a long ceremony taking place in the middle of the night, the visitors who simply wish for a cheap accommodation will of course not attend, and there is no pressure on them to do so. Because an overnight stay has to be booked in advance, and the Pu-Tuo Buddhist Association does not itself promote stays in its monasteries, it is

mostly Buddhist associations in China and private tour operators that make arrangements for groups of tourists. It is still possible to book individually a stay *cum* puja by contacting the local Buddhist Association, as the author did.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The current study adopts a phenomenological approach based on participant observations, casual conversations and interviews. In particular, thematic interviews were conducted in December 2016 with a number of lay participants to the pujas that the author attended as well as ten monks who live in the three largest Buddhist monasteries at Pu-Tuo. Interviews were conducted specifically with monks belonging to the three monasteries that offer accommodation and pujas to visitors. The questions that framed the interviews were developed to address the core research objective: to understand how the monks perceive the presence of overnight visitors at their monastic cloisters, in particular a cultural product which allows visitors to eat, sleep and pray like a monk does.

Convenience sampling was adopted so as not to disturb the monks' monastic life. The fact that the researcher herself is a Buddhist practitioner who has a good personal network established with the monastic community at Pu-Tuo contributed to the success of the data collection. Informants included monks who are on-duty guarding the halls and offer Buddhist interpretation, if requested; monks who register the visitors and tour groups wishing to attend pujas; senior monks who lead Buddhist pujas; abbots and senior monks who oversee the monasteries. Importantly, all monastic members are required to attend the morning and sunset pujas. It is therefore a guarantee that no matter which monastic members the author talked to, they certainly had had the opportunity to observe the behavior of lay participants who attended the 3:30am morning pujas. They were thus "expert informants" on the matter. Each interview lasted for one hour on average, and was individually conducted. In addition, casual conversations with lay visitors who had joined such experiential tours and participated to such pujas were also used as a source of information. In particular, conversations with them were initiated when they were waiting for and or after their vegetarian breakfast taken in the refectory halls after the morning pujas. All names attributed here to informants are pseudonyms.

Thematic analysis was used as the evaluation method. The initial unit of analysis was the individual contribution of each informant, including quotes from the in-depth interviews (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996); the author's handwritten notes of non-verbal responses such as observations, as well as casual conversations, were also included. The analytical procedures of handling the qualitative data followed the suggestions of Marshall and Rossman (2006). All categories and themes were inductively derived from the collected evidence.

## **FINDINGS**

The first puja that the author attended assembled 89 people, of which 44 were lay participants, male and female, all adults, and the others (42) were monks. Only eight of the lay participants wore the black Buddhist practitioner robes, while the others were wearing casual attire. This is already an indication that most of the lay participants were not frequent puja participants. Black Buddhist robes are often worn by Buddhist practitioners whenever they attend pujas and pray. Quite a few of the lay participants chose to sit on the floor after a while the puja started and some leaned on pillars to rest. During the puja, many lay participants did not pray and seemed quite oblivious of the monks' chanting. Twelve of the participants actually fell asleep during the puja, resting seated against pillars by the end of the puja. None of them left before the end of the ceremony. Essentially the same thing happened during the second puja the author attended in another monastery. There were about some 70 people, of which 37 were lay participants. None wore the black Buddhist robe at that occasion which is possibly a sign that there was no Buddhist practitioner in that puja.

The morning puja is as a rule followed by a traditional monastic vegetarian breakfast for the participants to the puja. The author observed that while the monks performed the puja according to the rules, without any special consideration of the presence of lay participants, they bended the rules for the breakfast. The post-puja breakfast is supposed to be part of the religious experience; it is to be eaten in silence and is meant to give one the opportunity to train the mind, to be focused. Some visitors to the contrary chatted with each other during the breakfast on all kind of subjects. Monk Ng Fan, Tak Yi and Guang Fa are the monks who are in charge of guarding the different halls of their monasteries. They mildly criticized that "they (visitors) were quite noisy", "it is difficult to tame your mind in silence when the refectory hall is not silent at all". Monk Wei Shan and Feng Tan explained to the author that originally, while

the monks and lay participants sat at different tables, they used to have breakfast in the same refectory hall. The monks and lay people now eat in separate rooms. Monk Pu-Ming who is a senior monk who leads the chanting in pujas commented: “It would be nice if they could follow our monastic rules, yet it is always unrealistic to expect people to change for you. Now, we have our own breakfast room and the lay people eat in a separate one”.

Monk Fa Yuen commented that the visitors tended to break other rules of a monastic meal, even though they should have been informed about those rules by their tour leaders. Monk Fa Yuen explained that visitors tended to help themselves to large serving of food in the buffet-like setting of the meal, something that is frowned upon by the monks. Visitors also did not, as done in the monastic life, wash their dishes when finished. In fact, many participants behaved as if they were in an ordinary restaurant. Nevertheless, both Monk Wei Shan and Fa Yuen adopted a forgiving attitude toward such behavior by acknowledging that “monastic life is not easy for a lay person” and “they just come to experience how our life is, for a day or two, and they are not real monks so we can’t expect too much from them”. The Buddhist principles of being compassionate and forgiving are the key notions that one can easily detect from monks’ conversations. Even at the cost of suffering from visitors’ incongruous behavior and bending some monastic rules, monks in Pu-Tuo are still willing to help lay people to “make acquaintance with Buddhism” by letting them experience a monastic life in the real monastic cloisters.

Regarding visitors’ behavior during pujas, apparently monks were well aware of the fact that some participants slept during the religious rituals; occasionally some even snored. Abbot Zhi Zhong shared his Buddhist worldview about this issue.

“it is very hard for ordinary people to attend a long puja in the middle of the night and remain focused ... many of the participants did not know much about Buddhism or Buddhist scriptures, but as long as they come to attend, they still make a good knot with Buddhism and one day, who knows, their Buddhist seeds may germinate because of this. They may want to learn more about Buddhism. This is the reason why we open our door for them to participate”.

Monk Yuan Tong who is responsible for registering the lay guests to his monastery, which is the largest one of Pu-Tuo, concurred, “Buddhism always provides convenience and we let lay people stay in our monasteries. It is also a way to help people. If we do not let them stay in the

monastery, they basically cannot attend the morning puja, which is equivalent to blocking someone's Buddhist seed from being planted or from germinating".

Turning now to the interviews with the lay participants to the puja, the author interviewed first two sisters in their 50s. They were clearly Jushis (Buddhist practitioners) as they wore the black Buddhist robes during the morning puja. They came from ToiShan to Pu-Tuo and admitted that they could recharge spiritually and became "refreshed" only when they were at Pu-Tuo. They admitted that they came to Pu-Tuo annually. They said "attending a puja is the best way to be 'reborn' and to 'purify one's minds' ". The older sister Ka-Yi said,

"I think I am more focused here when I pray together with monks; you know the arena is different from when you pray alone at home. I had goose pimples from head to toes every time the monks hit the Mu-yu (a Buddhist musical instrument) and chanted the Guan Yin holy scriptures. This is the power of Pu-Tuo which gives you energy and I felt so contented and now my mind is clearer".

Ka-Yi's comment is perhaps difficult to comprehend for someone who is not a Buddhist. The author as a Buddhist since her childhood understood well the feeling of Ka-Yi. Her expression indeed is the plainest description of achieving a peak experience and, as evidenced in her quote, she intentionally sought such an extramundane experience when she decided to come to Pu-Tuo.

The other interviews (conducted after the breakfast) with lay participants, selected by the author as those whose behavior during the puja has indicated a lack of immersion, confirmed that a majority of them see their experience with monastic life as a matter of satisfying their curiosity, that they were unprepared for their participation to the puja and that they did not expect it to be so taxing. None of those informants mentioned anything about a quest for peak experience or that they achieved such an experience during the puja. Their reasons for joining such an experiential tour are multiple and secular. They were essentially tourist or at best Xiankes or Shinshis. One of the interviewees, Ms. Suen, a middle-aged professional woman, explained that she was a real estate agent in Hong Kong and she had often visited Pu-Tuo with friends.

She explained: "The power of Kuan-Yin (Bodhisattva Avalokitesava) is real and powerful in Pu-Tuo. I come to Pu-Tuo every year to pay back for my vows and so I do not need to join a tour. But this year my mother came from Canada to stay with me and therefore I thought why not bring her with me this year".

Apparently the reason for Ms. Suen to join such an experiential tour is due to convenience. When she was asked why she comes to Pu-Tuo every year, she said:

“You know, this year the economy of Hong Kong was not that good and many of my colleagues had difficulties closing a single sale in a month ... I am blessed, I believe, and my sales record is not bad at all this year, so I must return to thank Bodhisattva”.

It is apparent to see that Ms. Suen is a Buddhist worshipper whose aim to visit Pu-Tuo is not a quest for a peak experience, but for auspiciousness. When Ms. Suen was asked about her feelings about joining the morning puja, she said she felt “okay” with it, though she added that her mother was old and could not stand for too long so they sat down together and leaned by the door side of the hall after the monks started to pray for a while. She said,

“It is always a bit difficult to wake up at 3 am in order to go to the puja; nevertheless, it is worth doing, you get more blessing. Although honestly I don’t know much on how to pray, I think that as long as one is sincere one will get the blessings from Bodhisattva. My mum is happy to attend; this is the first time for her to come to Pu-Tuo and join the puja”.

When Ms. Suen was further asked if she had contemplated any attempt at experiencing any extramundane or peak experience by either attending the puja or joining the tour, she giggled and waved her hand and said, “I think it is too deep for me ... I don’t really know what it is or how it feels, but I think I am blessed already as long as I have the heart to come to Pu-Tuo, blessed already”. As evidenced in Ms. Suen’s quotes, the core reason for her to be in Pu-Tuo as well as the expression that she mentioned the most is to look for “blessing”, “to be blessed”. While in Buddhism, it is not wrong to ask for external blessings and it is still good to make a knot with Buddhism and wait for one’s Buddhist seed to germinate, the ultimate goal is to achieve enlightenment by oneself and be free from external desires.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Prima facie, participating to monastic life in the sacred land of one’s religion, reached through a long journey, is a possible situation for undergoing an extraordinary or peak experience. Such concepts have been used in the tourism literature and seem particularly appropriate as a phenomenon in religious tourism. This paper considered the case of Chinese lay visitors who choose to live “like a Buddhist monk or nun” for a day or two at Pu-Tuo, one of the sacred mountains of Chinese Buddhism. The research method used relied to a large extent on observation of the participants by the researcher and interviews of participants; monastic

members provided additional insights. The findings suggest that deep immersion and detachment from one's daily life are prerequisites for being the beneficiary of an extraordinary experience.

The phenomenon has also been studied in the literature on art appreciation. Caru and Cova (2005) consider the case of musical experiences and give as an example of total failure at immersion the one of a person falling asleep during a concert. A strikingly similar phenomenon was observed in Pu-Tuo by the researcher. In fact, failing totally to be moved by music is somewhat analogous to being untouched by sacred rites. The observation of the participants indicated indeed a lack of immersion and this was confirmed by the interviews. The first thing Ms Suen tells the researcher is that she is a real estate agent and that she came to the puja to ingratiate herself with the divinities, for the benefit of her business activities. Surely, this indicates that she had not really left the realm of her ordinary life and never intended to do so. In another interview, the participant essentially describes himself as a tourist curious about monastic life, viewed as an object of cultural interest.

The interview with the monks suggests that it is the inclusive nature of Buddhism which is the reason why tourists end up attending sacred rites and to an extent disturb them. As O'Gorman and MacPhee (2006) document, catholic monastic orders exercise a certain degree of filtering as regards who is allowed in their house. Mormons do not allow non-believers in their churches and the Hajj is exclusively for Moslems, for whom it is a milestone in their life. Buddhist monasteries do not have a filtering system. In the spirit of Buddhism, if some degree of intrusion in monastic life is permitted for some lay visitors, then it permitted for all.

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