Tourism Frames in Heritage Sites: A Case Study of Tourism in the Mogao Caves, China

Ming-chun Ku, Institute of Sociology, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan
(mcku@mx.nthu.edu.tw)

Abstract:
This article discusses the multiple meaning of ‘heritage’ in the context of an archaeological and World Heritage Site which experiences mass tourism. The article analyses the dimension of interaction between tourists and site interpreters. Following Erving Goffman’s frame analyses, this article proposes the notion of “tourism frames” to analyze the meaning maintained or transformed during encounters between tourists and on-site actors. My field research to the Mogao Caves in China provides an empirical case study. It discusses the tourism frames of the Mogao Caves regarding the consents, disavowal, or contestations in the interactive dynamics between different types of tourists and guides. The article concludes that the meanings of this grotto site are not statically decided by site interpreters, but rather are constantly framed and reframed through tourism interactions.
I. Preface

Public access and interpretation of archaeological sites in the era of mass tourism not only present challenges to the principles and practices of site management, but also highlight the importance of research on multiple meanings of place. Given tourists’ increasing access to archaeological sites, the possibility of their engagement in interpretation and definition is still questionable, especially in locations where definitions of the sites have predominantly been maintained by archaeologists, heritage professionals, or any other non-tourist actors with relevant expertise or with legitimacy.

To address the multiple meanings of archaeological sites in the context of heritage tourism, this article analyses how the meaning of place is maintained, contested, negotiated, or transformed during encounters between tourists and other actors on the sites. The case study in this article is based on my field research to the Mogao Caves, a significant archaeological and national heritage site transformed into a tourist destination in the late 1970s, when China launched its program of economic reforms. One major change concerning public access to the Mogao Caves, which is addressed in this article, is the emergence of tourism interaction, namely the interactive dynamics between tourists and other on-site actors. Extended from Erving Goffman’s frame analysis (1974), which concerns the interaction order in symbolic interactions, a conceptual framework of “tourism frames” is proposed in this article, and is used as an analytical tool with which to analyze the meaning of place in tourism encounters.

II. The Mogao Caves as a Tourist Site: Background and Context

The Mogao Caves are situated near the town of Dunhuang, located on the edge of the Gobi desert in Northwest China. The grottos were built during the fourth to the fourteenth centuries and today there are 735 caves in the protected area left on the site, recorded for preservation under the supervision of the Dunhuang Academy.

The archaeological excavation of ruins along the ancient Silk Road was started in the early twentieth century by international explorers and archaeologists. In these exploration and archaeological projects of this area the historical value of the Mogao Caves was discovered. One of the major archaeological sites was the Library Cave 1, also known in China as Cangjing Dong. This cave had been sealed and hidden for centuries before it was re-discovered in 1900 with tens of thousands of manuscripts. While some of the archaeological finds from the early twentieth century have been dispersed to institutions across the world, the Mogao Caves still contain large amounts of preserved Buddhist artwork.

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1 The Library Cave is Cave 17 in the Dunhuang Academy’s record system.
manuscripts and historic artifacts with artistic, academic and historic value.  

The official cultural institute, the Dunhuang Art Institute, was established in 1943 for on-site protection and research of the Mogao Caves. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) assumed power in 1949 ideological concerns constituted major principles with regards to heritage affairs and were institutionalized during the process of socialist state formation. Consequently, historic artifacts and heritage sites were taken over by the CCP as they were considered to be under state ownership (Ku 2008). The CCP took over the management of the Mogao Caves in 1950, and ever since, the on-site institute, first-known as the Dunhuang Relics Institute in 1950 and later the Dunhuang Academy in 1984, has been responsible for the management and research of the Mogao Caves (Ku 2011). Compared with its counterparts in the United State or western European countries, the authority of the state in socialist China played a dominant role in the definition and management of heritage sites considered under state ownership. Archaeological findings are considered by the CCP to be state-owned property. Research fellows and staff of the on-site institute are state employees in charge of cultural protection and propaganda, which are two major assignments from the state and the CCP. Discursively, nationalism and Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong-Thought provided the framework for authorized discourse of heritage in Mao’s China. State ownership guaranteed the dominance of the authorized discourses in the definition and interpretation of heritage and history (Ku 2008). In such regimes of cultural governance the on-site institute in the Mogao Caves plays multiple roles: an academic institute conducting research projects, a professional cultural institute focusing on grotto preservation and a government agency in charge of the daily management and supervision of on-site activities.

In Mao’s China, the Mogao Caves were preserved by the limited public access to the site. In addition, the rigid restrictions imposed on ordinary people’s ability to be mobile limited the number of people who were able to visit the Mogao Caves in person. Most Chinese people were aware of the dispersion of the Dunhuang relics to overseas institutions through state propaganda developed for specific political purposes. In the dawn of China’s economic reforms during the late 1970s the government decided to develop inbound tourism in order to pursue tourism revenue. The Mogao Caves and several other world famous sites were officially assigned to open to foreign tourists. Since this time, the Mogao Caves have become one of the most famous tourist destinations in China. When the restrictions on geographical mobility were lifted in post-Mao China many Chinese people traveled to the

2 According to the Dunhuang Academy, in the Mogao Caves there are around 2400 statues and 45,000 square meters of murals. Resources: http://enweb.dha.ac.cn/timeline/.
Mogao Caves to visit the place spoken widely about in classrooms, the media, or at public exhibitions. Since 1980 when domestic tourism flourished due to China’s economic growth domestic visitors to the Mogao Caves have outnumbered foreign tourists. The identification of the Mogao Caves as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987 further augmented the site’s fame, both nationally and internationally. Since opening to the public in the late 1970s, over six million visitors have travelled to the Mogao Caves (Ku 2011). In 2011 alone, the Mogao Caves received six hundred and eighty thousands visitors. The large number of visitors presents challenges to the management of the Mogao Caves. Issues regarding regulations and the control of tourists in order to reduce the impact of tourism on the site have become a concern for the Dunhuang Academy. In addition, the Dunhuang Academy aims to maintain its authority on the interpretation and definition of the Mogao Caves in its interactions with the tourists.

III. Conceptual Framework: Tourism Frames

This article aims to conceptually develop an analytical tool for the multiple meanings of place from the perspective of interaction. The article first attempts to conceptualize the multiplicity of meaning in terms of schemata of interpretation. Based upon schemata of interpretation, according to Erving Goffman, people perceive meaning, organize experiences, define the situations and manage social interactions (Goffman 1974: 21). Goffman conceptualizes the schemata of interpretation in social interactions as the “frames” through which we are able to define situations in a complex social world (Goffman 1974: 21). Since the meanings of the reality, according to Goffman, are neither static nor entirely objective but instead have to be explored through subjective engagement in relational dynamics, frames are constantly multiple and can be transformed in social interactions (Goffman 1974: 40-123).

In this article, I extend Goffman’s concept and propose the term “tourism frames” in order to explore the multiple meanings of the Mogao Caves from the perspective of interaction between relevant actors. The term “tourism frames” refers to schemata of interpretation that organize experiences, define situations, and provide the cognitive framework through which tourists and other actors are able to make sense of what to do and how they interact while encountering diversified objects, people, or practices in social spaces full of complexity.

IV. Framing the Mogao Caves in the Guided Tours

Since the late 1970s, the rapid increase in visitors has become a significant issue for Dunhuang Academy regarding the daily management of the Mogao Caves. The Dunhuang Academy has gradually improved the daily management of the site in order to manage the
flow of tourists as well as to minimize any negative impact on the relics. One of the major improvements has been the introduction of guided tours in the mid 1980s by which the institute can manage the speed of tourist flows as well as the number of visitors to the caves. According to information obtained through interviewing staff, the Dunhuang Academy selects around forty out of the 492 caves for public access based on the following criteria: type of Buddhist art located in the caves, the historic period of its construction, its state of preservation, and whether it has space for visitors. The Reception Office of the Dunhuang Academy arranges different groups of guided tours led by its staff for visiting eight to ten of the forty caves in total. Groupings of caves and the order of visits can be adjusted by the Reception Office and is based on the circumstances on that day, with a view to minimizing the impact of tourism to certain caves at peak times.

Visitors to the Mogao Caves do not wander alone during their stay in the protected area. Special guests such as political leaders are accompanied by the director or researchers of the Dunhuang Academy while general visitors are required to join the guided tours. During my research visits in the years of 2001, 2009 and 2010 I joined the guided tours along with other tourists. When arriving, tourists must buy a ticket, hand their bag over at the counter, and be separated into smaller groups after they have entered the protected area. From there a guide leads them and their activities on the site are organized by a guided tour. My field notes below show the interaction order in the guided tour I joined3.

Our guide briefly introduced himself, and then reminded everyone that they could not take pictures or touch either the wall paintings or the statues in the caves. …

After explaining the rules of the tour, he said, “Now we will go to the first cave,” and took us on our way. When we got to the door of Cave 29, we found there was another group already inside. Our guide made us wait outside. Some of the group tended to go inside the cave to take a look. The guide stopped them and said, “We will go inside in a moment. Now I am giving you a detailed introduction here.” He then started talking about the geology of the area and the history of the caves. Our group stood outside Cave 29 listening to him talk about the current condition of the Mogao Caves until the group in front of us left the cave, at which point we entered Cave 29.

The inside of the cave was quite dark and it took my eyes several seconds to adjust. I then saw that our guide had taken his place in front of us. He

3 The quoted conversations were in Mandarin. Translation is the author’s.
stood against a glass barrier about half the height of a person, which separated us from the niche with the main statues in the cave. He asked us to move further inside so that the people at the back could all get in. After everyone was pretty much settled, the guide started his introduction. First, he shone his flashlight on the ceiling of the cave, and explained the shape and structure of the cave along with the decorative pattern of the ceiling. Next he shone his flashlight downwards and began explaining the paintings on the wall. As he was talking, he used his flashlight to point out the different points of interest. He then shone the flashlight on the statues within the niche. Using these statues as examples, he explained that the statues in the Mogao Caves are not carved from the rocks, but rather are clay figures. He then explained to us that from the proportions of the statues, their colors, and other clues, it was clear that they were produced during the Qing Dynasty. He told us that in terms of artistic value, the statues are not very outstanding pieces. One visitor in our group asked which Buddha the statues represent. The guide simply replied, “The value of Qing Dynasty statues is not high, we don’t normally spend too much time talking about them. When we go into the other caves and see different statues, I will give more detailed introduction.” He then went on to talk about how the floor tiles were another important aspect of the cave. At this point, he asked everyone to lower their heads and look at the floor. He shone his flashlight onto the floor and asked everyone what they could see. Our group then used their feet to step on or kick the tiles. Some answered that they saw lotus flowers. The guide replied, “Correct! These are tiles with a lotus pattern. According to our research, they date from between the Sui Dynasty and the Western Xia Dynasty. In total, more than thirty types of pattern lotus survive. Today we are very lucky! We have stood on lotus pattern tiles dating from the Western Xia Dynasty more than 900 years ago. On our visit, we have stepped on an historical relic!”

After he had finished speaking, the visitor next to me reached out his hand to feel the tile. Then the guide made us aware that some of the tiles had already been worn down. He went on, “This was damaged by visitors before the caves became protected by us (the Dunhunag Academy). Now there is no need to worry because we apply advanced technology of international standards and put a layer of protective film to the surfaces to protect the tiles. Entering a cave is like entering a precious historical depositary. By our introduction in the tour today, we hope you understand the value of the relics of the Mogao Caves and want to cherish them and
protect them. Our introduction of this cave ends here. Please make your way outside and mind the steps.” Some of the group continued to linger, at which point the guide said, “In the next cave, we will see statues from the Tang Dynasty. Please hurry. We are going to the next cave.” The guide waited until everyone had left, then he locked the door to the cave and led us to the next cave.

The next cave was not next-door. We had to walk past many caves that were not open. However, we did pass one cave that was open. Inside there was the other group. Some of our group stopped by the door to take a look inside. Our guide said, “Keep walking ahead. We are going to see the cave ahead.” Some people said, “Let’s see this cave!” Our guide replied, “Some of the caves like this one we are not going to see. This is because we have to take into account time considerations. So, we will see the other one with similar contents of this cave. At the Mogao Caves, each guide takes a different route for his tour. But the content is basically the same because many of the caves contain similar content. You don’t have to see all the caves. But don’t worry. We will show you the most representative ones with the unique characteristics of the Mogao Caves.”

V. Maintaining the Tourism Frames as Public Education

The guided tour, as an organized activity, constitutes the order of tourism interactions with specific schemata of interpretation. In a guided tour the face-to-face interactions take place between the visitors and their guide. Although the visitors may be diversified with different expectations and imaginations about the Mogao Caves they are treated as “tourists” and are organized into groups during their visit. The guide is a member of staff of the Dunhuang Academy and takes the lead on the pacing and direction of the tour. Unless the guide unlocks the door the visitors are unable to enter the cave. The guide can be flexible to adjust the order in which the caves are visited, to speed up or slow down the group’s movement, in order to control the number of tourists in a specific cave. If a visitor raises any doubts or challenges during interaction the guide will either encourage or curb the visitor’s behavior. A large proportion of guide’s narration also frames out the interaction. For example, after entering the caves the guide will begin the educational spiel, taking up most of the time. If time allows there may be a simple question-and-answer session or the guide may allow the group to look round some more. When time is up the group leaves the cave, and overall, tourists have spent most of their time in the cave listening and following the instructions of the guide. When a tourist speaks, unless the topic reflects the theme of the introductory remarks, he or she may not get a reply. A sustained dialogue among tourists is
extremely rare.

Guided tours have a strong sense of regulation in three dimensions: flow controls, discursive controls, and control over tourists’ behavior. In terms of flow controls, tourists are led by the guides along specific routes and at a certain pace to visit the caves that are open to them. These “open-for-visiting” caves are actually always locked and only the guides have keys. The guides are responsible for controlling the length of time the tourists spend in each cave.

In terms of discursive controls, the guide gives information and commentary in each cave the tourists visit. The inside of the caves are dark and only the guide has a flashlight, so when the guide mentions a specific point of interest he points his flashlight to highlight it for the tourists. Therefore the gaze of the tourists typically follows this weak light. When I joined tours in 2009 and 2010, wireless headsets were in use and the guide’s narration was received clearly in my headset throughout the visits. With headsets, even if I walked some distance away from the guide, or two or more groups entered the cave at the same time, I still received the narration from my assigned guide, which told me what to look at and why throughout the tour.

The guided tours at Mogao Caves are available in several languages and in order to make comparisons I joined tours in Mandarin and in English. I noted that in both the Mandarin and English tours the remarks were standardized and some wording was identical. These remarks focused on specific subjects such as the artistic attributes of particular grotto relics, the religious and scientific dimension of the wall paintings, and other historic findings in the caves. The guides constantly use jargon in their remarks to highlight the artistic or scientific value of the grotto relics and all guides mention that the Mogao Caves are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. During subsequent interviews with staff I was informed that during the off-season the guides are required to attend training classes taught by the resident researchers at the Dunhaung Academy so they may memorize standardized remarks related to individual caves. At the end of the training guides are assessed. The assessment requires them to give oral introductions to randomly selected caves to make sure that they have been able to memorize what they have been taught. The scores received are taken into consideration with regards to determining the guide’s ranking, salaries, and other benefits. Through staff training and evaluation the Academy is able to maintain the discursive controls via well-trained professional guides capable of delivering officially approved remarks, using preferred referential frameworks of meaning or even identical scripts in the tours.

In terms of control over tourists’ behavior, the duties of the guide include enforcing bans on certain types of behavior during the course of the tour. These include bans on photography, touching the relics, and eating or drinking. In the tours I attended anonymously I often heard guides admonish tourists in a very loud voice for touching relics or taking photographs. Sometimes, the guide would use a moralistic tone, such as, “This is destroying
cultural relics.” At other times, guides would invoke their authority such as when one guide noticed one of the visitors using a camera during the tour he issued the following warning, “Switch your camera off. If I see you using it one more time, I CAN have you removed immediately.” During the tours, the guides kept a watch on visitors’ behavior to prevent anything “improper” taking place such as spitting or touching the relics, even though such behavior is common elsewhere in China according to my observations.

In these tours, guides maintain the interaction order in a tourism frame defined by the Dunhuang Academy, and that is the frame of “public education.” I observed that in most of the tours tourists consented to this frame and behaved in the same way as a “flock of sheep.” They followed the lead of the guide, listened to guides’ narration, and refrained from doing anything “improper.” When the guide had completed the narration, they either took another look at the wall painting or statue, or asked a question or two about what the guide had just told them and then followed the guide out of the caves. When the guide announced the tour was over they lingered no more and left the protected area of the Mogao Caves.

However, I also observed that occasionally some tourists would break the rules. The most common form of rule breaking was leaving the group to walk around as they pleased or, either wittingly or unwittingly, to enter forbidden areas. When a guide noticed such a situation, he or she may do something to maintain the interaction order. For example, I observed that when a tourist was clearly falling behind and looked like he may become separated from the group, the guide said to him, “You have bought the entrance ticket. You have paid for our introduction. The wall paintings and statues in each of the Mogao Caves are genuine art. You may not be able to understand them yourself. So stay close to the group and let me introduce them to you.” Sometimes, while noticing “the potential trouble makers,” the guides would redefine the situation and reframe it to something other than public education. The following field note, from one of the Mandarin tours I joined, provides an example of this. The guide introduced himself to the group then started handing out headsets and explained the visiting rules to us, and in doing so, somehow reframed the professional-oriented public education tour into a theme of “supervision from Big Brother”, a theme that most Chinese people are familiar with.

First, I would like to welcome you to the Mogao Caves. I am a professional guide of the Dunhuang Academy. If you have any questions during the trip please ask me. I will do my very best to give you an answer. I want to talk a bit about the visiting rules. They are very simple. Only a few points. First, after you have entered the caves it is important that you do not touch any of the wall paintings or statues. This is because the paintings and statues are all made from clay. They are many hundreds of years old and very fragile. If you are not careful and cause a piece to break off, then you have damaged a
cultural relic. The consequences will be serious. The second point is about photography. Regardless of whether you are inside or outside the caves, until you have exited through this ticket gate do not use either your mobile phone or camera to take pictures. Our entire tour will be photographed by digital cameras. If you take pictures or touch relics, even out of my notice, when you leave here someone will track you down and give you a hard time. The third point is that the electronic tour guide systems (the headset) you are carrying are the same as the machines used by museums across the country. If you want to use one of the machines elsewhere there is a separate charge. But here at the Mogao Caves we let you use the machines for free. If for any sudden reason you need to leave during the tour please return the machine to me first. Do not take the machine out with you as it has a tracking system inside. I hope everyone pays attention to these points. Now, we will move on to the main topic…

VI. Disavowing or Transforming Tourism Frames

Not all tourists act as part of the “flock of sheep” during the guided tours. During a visit in 2001, I witnessed tourists expressing their disapproval and transforming the frame in a Mandarin tour. When the group came to Cave 17 (the Library Cave), well-known across China as Cangjing Dong, our guide gave a brief introduction which focused mainly on the intellectual contributions contained in the historical scripts found in this cave. She did not touch on the topic of the dispersion of these relics overseas. Cave 17 is a very small cave, too small for visitors to enter, and it is situated along the passageway to Cave 16, a much larger cave with wall paintings of Buddhist stories. After her brief remarks the guide intended to lead us directly on to Cave 16. However, one of the Chinese tourists stopped and began an enthusiastic speech about Western imperialists’ theft of China’s national treasures from the Cangjing Dong. This topic immediately evoked responses from the rest of the group, who started interjecting stories about how many “good things” were “stolen” by the “foreign devils on the Silk Road.” Everyone seemed to have something to say on this topic and the opinions espoused were identical to popular nationalist discourses concerning the Mogao Caves, and particularly Cangjing Dong, as a symbol of “national shame.” At that moment, the tour was transformed into nothing less than a spontaneous mass forum for patriotism and nationalism. Our guide silently stood aside, unable or unwilling to intervene in the interactions among these domestic tourists until she finally said to the group that we were running behind schedule and needed to move on to the next cave. When we left Cave 17 I asked the tourist who had made the initial speech why he had done so. He responded, “Of
course, we need to talk about it. How can someone talk about Dunhuang without referring to the history of imperialism in China? There is so much to say on this topic. You must be from Hong Kong or an overseas Chinese, otherwise you would no doubt know how important this topic is. The guide did not mention it at all. The guide’s introduction totally misses the key point. I was doing her job for her.”

When they visited Cave 17 in this tour, the Chinese tourists’ interaction with the guide did not fall into the pattern of “You narrate, I listen. Then we have questions and answers.” Instead, they spontaneously and enthusiastically narrated stories they knew and expressed their opinions surrounding Cangjing Dong. They took the lead in the process of tourism interaction and transformed the tour into a kind of public forum. In addition, these tourists did not bring up the artistic or scientific value of the relics. Instead, their narratives focused on those items either damaged or dispersed overseas by foreign explorers. Their narratives followed a nationalist discourse that was widely spread through public exhibitions and mass education programs in Maoist China. In such discourse, the stories about the Mogao Caves revolve around Cangjing Dong, which symbolize the “national humiliation” when “our national treasures were lost overseas by rapacious Western imperialists.” Such discursive inscription of nationalism on this archaeological site has symbolically constructed the Mogao Caves as a national space, projecting collective feelings and images regarding the imagined community of “nation.” For some domestic tourists, if not for all of them, Cangjing Dong was the must-see in the Mogao Caves and their visit constituted a journey to express their sentiments towards “our nation.” The tourists I met in front of Cave 17 that day showed me the possibility of transforming the frames by redefining the situation into a public forum of patriotism and nationalism.

I also observed that not all tourists are capable of expressing their disagreement and transforming the frames in the same way as I witnessed in Cave 17. In my visits during 2001 a Chinese backpacker named Zhang started chatting with me on the tourist minibus when he learned that I was from Taiwan. He sat next to me and asked me how I “felt” about the flying angels (feitian) on the cave walls. I told him that I had read about them in art books in Taiwan but I did not realize how splendid they were until I saw them firsthand in the caves. Suddenly, he told me that he had seen the flying angels in his practice of Falun Gong and the purpose of this trip was “to feel and to experience the power of flying angels and that of this place.” Unsure of how to respond, I then asked him, “What did you feel and experience in the caves?” He then told me mysteriously how those flying angels were flying off the

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4 *Falun Gong* is a new religious movement that emerged in China in the 1990s. The estimated number of its practitioners was in the tens of millions in the late 1990s. After the crackdown of practitioners’ protest in Beijing in 1999, the Chinese government officially declared *Falun Gong* a heretical organization and forbid its activities and practices. For details on this subject see Palmer (2007).
walls and, as though alive, gesturing to him. He said that he directly captured the profound meaning of these gestures and the sacred power in the spaces of the Mogao Caves. I admitted to him that I had not “felt” as he had, and he replied that, “Most people could not feel that either. See how those guides introduce the cave? They emphasize the color of the painting and the gestures of the sculpture. Very superficial. Unless you learn and practice Falun Gong, you may neither feel nor experience either the holy power or the law of the Universe.”

I joined the same tour as Zhang that day because what he had said to me on the bus made me pay particular attention to his behavior in the caves. Zhang did nothing at the grotto site that would have singled him out as a Falun Gong practitioner. He simply followed the guide, moving from one cave to another and listening to the narration. I would have had no idea that Zhang was a Falun Gong practitioner if he had not told me. After the tour I could not help asking Zhang why he had not practiced Falun Gong in the caves. Zhang replied, “Well, our tour was led by the guide and with a routine schedule. In each cave we only stayed a few minutes and then immediately moved on to the next cave. How can I practice with such a schedule?”

This grotto and the relics on the site for Zhang are sacred and he wanted to “feel” these spiritual powers. However, his behavior appeared no different than that of other tourists. For me, Zhang was a closet pilgrim hidden within the arranged tour and two factors may account for Zhang’s status: the first is surely the illegal status of Falun Gong in China and the second is that the Dunhuang Academy requires all tourists to join guided tours and has the guides keeping a watch on visitors’ behavior. During the guided tours no religious activities, including meditation, praying, chanting sutras, or burning incense are allowed. The rules as drawn up by the Dunhuang Academy specifically stipulate that burning incense is forbidden. Among all of the on-site cultural units administering grotto sites in China, the Dunhuang Academy clearly has the most administrative strength and prestige. Therefore, religious activities such as praying or chanting sutras, which I occasionally came across while visiting other grotto sites, are unlikely to take place at the Mogao Caves. Even though the guided tours may introduce the Mogao Caves as the location of Buddhist art, the Dunhuang Academy does not frame this grotto site as a holy space with ritual practices for Buddhists, or for believers of other religious or spiritual movements.

Nonetheless, during a number of tours I noticed that after the guides had completed the introductory remarks some visitors would neither return to look at the items introduced by the guides nor ask specific questions concerning the introductory themes. Instead, they walked toward the main Buddhist statue and placed money in a collection box, placed their hands together and prayed. Only then did I realize that there was a collection box inside the cave, something that the guides never mentioned, and the box was full of both coins and paper money. According to a guide I interviewed later, visitors would throw coins toward the statue if a collection box were not supplied. Not only would this make it difficult to keep the place...
tidy, but it also might damage the artifacts. It was difficult to ascertain exactly how much money was in the collection boxes but clearly there were a large number of coins that probably came from a significant number of visitors. During guided tours that did not allow the burning of incense and with limited time scheduled to remain inside the caves visitors still clasped their hands in prayer and donated money. Therefore, I infer that pilgrims were hidden among the mass of tourists. Pilgrims are more than likely not limited only to the Falun Gong members, but also include believers of Buddhism, Daoism, and various other spiritual beliefs of new religion movements. Given some visitors were praying, donating money, and even secretly touching the statues when the guides backs were turned, I believe that for these pilgrims the statues and wall paintings inside the Mogao Caves still possess a degree of sanctity. Since all visitors to the caves are required to join the guided tours and the Academy clearly forbids the burning of incense it is easy for these pilgrims to remain hidden in the frame established by the institute; appearing no different to other tourists. These hidden pilgrims may join the tours, but for them the meaning of this site is not framed as a World Heritage Site and their visit is not for the purpose of learning the artistic or scientific merits of the relics. Rather, their frame is a religious one which, if not illegal as is Falun Gong, is permitted to appear occasionally as long as it does not challenge the dominant frame in the guided tours. My research also finds that at certain times the religious frame emerges and replaces the frame of public education. For example, according to a local custom a temple fair for pilgrims and the community is held in the caves on the Buddha’s birthday, the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar year. The Dunhuang Academy pays respect to this tradition by opening several of the caves for pilgrims on Buddha’s birthday so they may pray and make circuits around the Buddha. In my 2010 field research on the Buddha’s birthday I witnessed many people from nearby towns and villages, both young and old, praying inside the caves. The Dunhuang Academy set up an incense burner outside the protected area and it also allowed believers to worship in several caves containing large Buddha statues (Ku 2011). Guides were assigned to each of these caves but they did not carry out their narration. Their main task was to keep the worshipers moving ahead and to ensure that no activities damaged the relics. During this event the dominant frame of public education gave way to a frame centered on religion and pilgrimage.

VII. Conclusion

This article approaches the issue of multiplicity of meaning regarding tourism on heritage site from the perspective of face-to-face encounters between tourists and site interpreters at heritage sites. The case study in this article is based on my field research to the Mogao Caves in China. In the context of cultural governance in socialist China, specific cultural institutes have been the legitimate actors who have occupied the dominant position
regarding interpretation and site management. Yet mass tourism in China’s economic reforms presents new challenges to their dominance because of the changing interaction order at the heritage sites. In this article the interaction order in the encounters between tourists and professional guides of the Dunhuang Academy has been explored through analyzing how meanings of this heritage site are maintained, negotiated, or changed through encounters between relevant actors.

This article has endeavored to propose a conceptual framework of “tourism frames” as a means of analyzing and exploring the interaction order between tourists and on-site actors. The use of the “tourism frames” is an extension of “frame analysis” originally proposed by Goffman (1974). By the term “tourism frames,” I refer to schemata of interpretation according to which actors define the situations regarding their tourism encounters. In this article, my field research to the Mogao Caves serves as the empirical basis to analyze the tourism frames. At the Mogao Caves tourism activities are organized through guided tours that are designed to control and regulate tourists’ behavior. I observed three dimensions of control and regulation in the guided tours: flows, discursive interpretation, and the tourist behaviors. The guided tours define the participants’ roles and their activities in order to maintain a specific tourism frame: the frame of public education. This article also points out the possibility of frame transformation in the interactions between guides and different types of tourists. It describes three kinds of interaction order and tourism frames, and their embedded referential frameworks of meaning of the Mogao Caves: the first one is guide-audience interactions in the frame of public education with reference to an academic framework of meaning; the second one is interaction among patriot citizens in the frame of mass forum with reference to a nationalist framework; and the third one is interactions among pilgrims and spirituality in a frame of religion and rituals with reference to a framework of spirituality and sacredness. The findings lead to the conclusion that the meaning of this grotto site should not be treated as something predetermined and static as it appears on official publications, but rather as frames maintained or transformed during the tourism interactions.
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