Research article

Tourists and 'philosophers': Nature as a medium to consciousness and transcendence in spiritual tourism

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ABSTRACT

Nature is a vital context for transcendent experiences fostering the spiritual dimensions of humankind. Analysing data from protected areas in China, this paper investigates the ways in which spirituality permeates nature-based tourism. A thematic analysis was undertaken to interpret 27 semi-structured in-depth interviews with professionals and tourists. Findings enable the construction of a hierarchical framework of spiritual tourism achievement and highlight the need to create links between protected areas, tourists, and 'mediums'. Nature is acknowledged as a means of overcoming spiritual emptiness in a secular nation where religions function in a limited way and traditional wisdom is undervalued. This study proposes a nature-based, philosophy-oriented tourism development model, which sheds light on theoretical and industrial domains alike.
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Introduction

Modern conceptions of tourism as an '*out of [the] ordinary*' experience, beyond the usual hedonism and entertainment, are gaining significance (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018, p. 108), and unique areas of tourism such as spirituality and self-fulfilment are drawing increasing academic interest (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Buzinde, 2020; Cheer, Belhassen, & Kujawa, 2017; Norman, 2012). Nevertheless, scholars have failed to achieve a consensus on the definition of spirituality, and there are continual attempts to clarify its connotation. For instance, "*rather than the material aspects of life, spirituality involves the mental aspects of life such as the purity of motives, affections, intentions, inner dispositions, the psychology of the inner life and the analysis of feelings*" (Verschuuren et al., 2021, p. 83). Tourism scholars have also attempted to explain and attest to this phenomenon in relation to tourist behaviours, i.e., searching for personal meaning, connectedness, and transcendence (e.g. Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Willson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013), and formulating the theoretical pillars for subsequent investigations.

Following on from these early studies, broad debates have been held on the spiritual dimension of tourism pervading multiple manifestations. These range from tourism in religious sites such as cathedrals, Zen temples (Wang, Luo, Huang, & Yang, 2020), and

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pilgrimage destinations (Amaro, Antunes, & Henriques, 2018; Wang, Chen, Shi, & Shi, 2021), as well as wilderness (Williams & Harvey, 2001), well-being (Bhalla, Chowdhary, & Ranjan, 2021), yoga retreats (Buzinde, 2020), meditation (Norman & Pokorny, 2017), and forest bathing (Farkic, Isailovic, & Taylor, 2021). These studies have paved the way for spiritual tourism to become an independent term, and accepted by many researchers as a means to facilitate spiritual experience (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018). However, despite extensive work, this research field still lacks sustained literature and theory (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019). What is spiritual tourism? How spiritual is spiritual tourism? These queries remain unsolved so far, hampering the practicability of this concept in the actual industry.

Furthermore, the association between nature, spirituality and tourism lends a unique lens to investigate spiritual tourism, as nature is acknowledged as a crucial context for achieving spirituality (Bhalla et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). The dominant Western worldview regards nature as "*a mechanistic entity separated from culture and non-material dimensions*" (Mallarach et al., 2019, p. 23). This dichotomy of nature and other dimensions has raised many critiques, and a broader conception of nature combining cultural and spiritual aspects is recommended (Verschuuren & Brown, 2019). Researchers in environmental psychology have discussed spiritual values of the natural environment, while, to date, socio-cultural aspects of nature in diverse worldviews remain under-researched (De Pater, Elands, & Verschuuren, 2021). For instance, the view that humans and nature are in a harmonious relationship, and this ancient wisdom is reflected in traditional philosophies, beliefs, and taboos across East Asian protected areas (Hamzah, 2016; Verschuuren et al., 2021). These cultural and spiritual legacies have exceptional value for tourism, but little attention has been paid to them in the current literature. Given the research gaps, the present study sees spiritual tourism as an independent form of tourism. It scrutinises the role and potential of spiritual tourism, and formulates strategies for development. We aim to link nature, spirituality, and tourism by revisiting nature's socio-cultural and spiritual values, from past to present.

In the research context of protected areas in China, this study explores how spirituality permeates nature-based tourism and how it is applied in the development of spiritual tourism by answering the following questions: *1) What socio-cultural spiritual values are attributed to protected areas, and how do these socio-cultural and spiritual values interact with tourism?* and *2) How can these values be used to develop spiritual tourism?* This enquiry was addressed using qualitative methods, i.e. a literature review and in-depth interviews. We undertook a thematic analysis to interpret 27 interviews with tourism professionals and tourists. Findings reveal a hierarchical framework of spiritual tourism achievement and specific elements of tourism in protected areas that make it spiritual. Suggestions for conceptualising spiritual tourism are proposed, particularly by building an association between protected areas and tourists and emphasising the 'mediums' needed to shift spiritual tourism from the subconscious to the conscious. A philosophy-oriented means for the Chinese context is also given; thus, this research contributes to both theoretical and industrial domains.

Literature review

Pending issue: the conceptual confusion in spiritual tourism

Although definitions of spirituality vary, common themes repeat among the many conceptualisations. Self-reflection, connectedness, and transcendence are confirmed spirituality constructs in tourist behaviours (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Willson et al., 2013). Self-reflection, also known as searching for personal meaning, may be sufficient for spirituality when an individual knows that he or she is aware of the awareness (Ho & Ho, 2007, p. 69). Likewise, connectedness and transcendence require a high-level capacity for cognition. In this way, individuals may "*step out of the immediate perception of time and space*" (Piedmont, 1999, cited in Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014, p. 454), review the relationship between the self and otherness (e.g. other humanity, nature, cosmos, and sacred beings), acquire enlightenment, and gain access to understanding the essence of life (Ho & Ho, 2007; De Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012).

At the same time, differences and overlaps between religiousness and spirituality are debated in antecedent studies. "*The paths to spirituality are many and are grounded in different values and beliefs across philosophical-religious traditions*" (Ho & Ho, 2007, p. 72); evidence shows that religious and non-religious people may experience spirituality differently (Preston & Shin, 2017). However, spirituality "*is not defined by any specific belief*" (Preston & Shin, 2017, p. 220); both theism and atheism are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for spirituality (Ho & Ho, 2007). Spiritual people may not recognise themselves as religious believers, and the faithful may define themselves as spiritual and vice versa (De Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2020). Hence, we embrace the suggestions of these authors, and investigate spirituality with an open mindset rather than restricting it to one particular religion or secularisation, in order to obtain perspectives from multifaceted worldviews and minimise potential biases (Norman, 2012).

Furthermore, the functional association between spirituality and tourism has been broadly estimated. Increasing empirical data has demonstrated spirituality's significant role in tourism, shedding light on this vibrant research field. However, a well-recognised definition or theory for the concept of spiritual tourism has not yet been provided. Rather than being seen as an independent research field, spiritual tourism is usually studied under the realm of tourism in religious sites, pilgrimage, new pilgrimage, wilderness, well-being, yoga, and meditation retreats (Gill, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2019; Norman, 2012; Willson et al., 2013), with the two primary lenses of investigation being spiritual motivations and experiences.

Spirituality motivates tourists to travel (Kato & Progano, 2017), as evidenced (e.g. Bhalla et al., 2021; Lopez, Lois González, & Fernández, 2017). In a study on the Way of Saint James, a pilgrimage site in Spain, Amaro et al. (2018) pointed out that the most prevalent motives for visitors are new and spiritual experiences rather than religious ones. In a similar vein, Moufakkir and Selmi

(2018) demonstrated that motivation for tourists to visit the Sahara Desert stems from consciously seeking spiritual fulfilment, which makes them '*purposive spiritual tourists*'. However, scholars have voiced that a single spiritual motivation is not enough to push individuals to begin a particular journey (e.g. Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). "*There is a continuum of spirituality inherent in tourism, though this is related to tourists' experience rather than initial motivation*" (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005, cited in Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019, p. 7). This viewpoint can, to some extent, be elucidated by Lopez et al. (2017), who found that those starting a journey for other motivations might unexpectedly find themselves experiencing a spiritual journey.

This has led to increasing attempts to approach the topic from a spiritual experience perspective. To date, '(self) conscious', 'self-discovery', 'transformative', 'transcendence', 'connectedness', 'harmony', 'restorative', 'introspective', 'reflexive', 'enlightenment', 'spiritual well-being', and 'spiritual growth', to name a few, have been utilised as keywords of experiences and outcomes in tourism with spiritual meanings (Buzinde, 2020; Cheer et al., 2017; Lopez et al., 2017; Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014; Wang et al., 2020). These terms help explain the spirituality phenomenon in tourism, but this inevitably appears to cause conceptual confusion.

As a recent research trend, the field of spiritual tourism still has tremendous gaps. For instance, explanations of findings on complex issues such as spirituality, spiritual growth, and spiritual benefits are usually avoided by authors or are only covered superficially with a paucity of exceptions (e.g. Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Willson et al., 2013). On the other hand, current work mainly focuses on exploring tourist behaviours from the demand side. Issues relating to the supply side, such as spiritual values and developing and managing spiritual tourism destinations, remain under-researched, with a few exceptions (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Gill et al., 2019).

Paucity of theory on the relationship between nature, spirituality, and tourism

Nature not only nurtures all species on this planet biologically, but it is also a powerful resource for fostering a spiritual world in humankind (Ferguson & Tamburello, 2015). Research conducted in the US indicated that natural surroundings could affect rates of religious adherence as it provides an alternative way to fulfil spiritual demands (Ferguson & Tamburello, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the association between spirituality and nature has drawn tremendous interest from various areas, including tourism and recreation (Cosgriff, Little, & Wilson, 2009; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2009). However, nature and spirituality are based on intangible values that are difficult to define and understand, further complicating research on this issue. Furthermore, existing methodologies rarely address profound insights into spiritual dimensions in nature-based tourism (Curtin, 2009). Similarly, Heintzman (2009) pointed out a lack of theoretical models that could reflect the complexity of this relation. Existing literature only reveals the tip of the iceberg of spirituality in nature-based tourism and needs to be complemented with further studies.

Recognising the complex connection between spirituality and nature-based tourism is a good starting point (Heintzman, 2009). Achieving spirituality in nature-based tourism integrates four aspects: 1) nature, 2) visitors, 3) activities and interactions, and 4) tourist experiences and spiritual outcomes (Heintzman, 2009; Schmidt & Little, 2007; Williams & Harvey, 2001). Specifically, it is argued that nature is a crucial context for seeking inner peace and self-fulfilment (Curtin, 2009; Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014; Snell & Simmonds, 2015). Beauty, purity, solitude, tranquillity, mystery, newness, and expansiveness, to name a few, are regarded as significant attributes that allow individuals to escape from the daily hustle and bustle, and therefore obtain a sense of self and connectedness with others, nature, and even the cosmos (Andriotis, 2009; De Pater et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Schwarz, 2013). It is noteworthy that the definition of nature has gradually altered from a dichotomy to a broader pluralist concept, highlighting the significance of cultural and non-material facets. In this regard, socio-cultural aspects are inseparable in certain natural sites (e.g. temples, Feng Shui forests, philosophies, etc.) that often possess spiritual values and stimulate spiritual experience (Hamzah, 2016; Mu, Nepal, & Lai, 2019).

Tourists who experience spirituality in nature have been widely studied (Curtin, 2009; Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Singleton, 2017). Interpretations of spirituality vary depending on tourists' cultural contexts and personal backgrounds (Schmidt & Little, 2007). Different cultures define the concept of nature in diverse ways, permeating views and values that may impact individual attitudes and cognitions toward (in) natural surroundings (Verschuuren et al., 2021). Wang and Blasco (2022) found that the traditional view of nature, called "the unity of heaven and mankind", can impact Chinese perceptions and, in turn, lead to spiritual enlightenment when visiting natural landscapes. Demographic characteristics, personal characters and experiences also play essential roles; for example, Schwarz (2013) proved that high-status and well-educated individuals more commonly act as nature '*absorbers*' in pursuit of special powers (e.g. treatment, aesthetic, spirituality) from nature. Furthermore, it is worth noting that as spirituality 'recipients', evidence affirms that tourists are also 'influences' that affect the spiritual values of a destination (Mu et al., 2019).

Activities and interactions are important to the spiritual experience (Schmidt & Little, 2007). For instance, hiking reinforces spirituality because of its slow nature, which helps participants consciously engage with the natural environment, culture, and people (Kato & Progano, 2017; Lopez et al., 2017; Park & Kyle, 2021). Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) pointed out that positive social interactions with other individuals are conducive to obtaining meaningful wilderness experiences, which might become a source of spiritual inspiration. Other authors have found that observing local cultural activities (e.g. rituals, worship, festivals, etc.) and undertaking challenging or dangerous journeys also have spiritual meaning (Mu et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020).

As discussed in the previous subsection, confusion surrounds the concept of spiritual experience. Current literature includes various natural experiences and proposes different concepts within the spiritual domain. For instance, '*sense of place*', '*place attachment*', '*sacredness*', and '*sense of divine*' emerged to articulate the interaction between humanity and nature (Fredrickson &

Anderson, 1999, p. 23), as well as spiritual humility, sense of small self, a feeling of awe (Preston & Shin, 2017). Some scholars also emphasise spiritual benefits (e.g. psychological well-being, spiritual restoration, etc.) (Bhalla et al., 2021; Gill et al., 2019; Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014; Snell & Simmonds, 2015). Controversially, restorative experience is thought to hold less typical spirituality (Williams & Harvey, 2001). Despite numerous attempts to narrate the phenomenon of spiritual experiences in tourism, a breakthrough in establishing a theory is urgently needed. Constructs such as self-reflection, connectedness and transcendence are approaches to entering solid theory, and important pillars to disclose the essence of spirituality (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Willson et al., 2013), and therefore underpin the theoretical framework of our research.

To conclude, 'spirituality and tourism', 'spirituality and nature', and 'tourism and nature' are widely explored, but the complex relationship between spirituality, nature, and tourism, regarded as one of the most important aspects of spiritual tourism, is rarely scrutinised (Bhalla et al., 2021; Heintzman, 2009). The present study reinforces this association by observing how some dimensions in the supply side (e.g. natural-cultural resources and activities) interact with tourists. In the current literature, the spiritual content of nature is usually dominated by physical environmental settings such as 'beauty', 'purity', and 'solitude', while socio-cultural aspects are often ignored (De Pater et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). Hence, this article particularly focuses on socio-cultural and spiritual values of nature, and how these function in spiritual tourism. The conceptual confusion surrounding spiritual tourism limits a solid theory; therefore, this study contributes to the literature by reframing spiritual tourism so as to provide reflections for both academia and industry.

Methodology

Research context

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines a protected area as "*a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values*" (Verschuuren et al., 2021, p. 82). China has established around 11,800–12,000 protected areas categorised into three types: national parks, nature reserves, and natural parks, covering around 18 % of the country's land area and 4.6 % of the sea area (Nature Reserve Research Centre of State Forestry Administration, 2019). Although guidelines on rebuilding a protected area system noted the significance of tourism for sustainable management (Tang, 2019), the role of tourism in protected areas has yet to receive proper attention, especially in sites such as national parks and nature reserves where mass tourism is restricted for environmental conservation (Wang & Blasco, 2022). Awareness has been raised that tourist experiences are no longer limited to entertainment. New forms of tourism, such as spiritual tourism, which pays attention to people's inner worlds and experiences, may contribute to sustainable management in protected areas (Kato & Progano, 2017). Our research contends that more of this type of tourism is needed to make the sector more sustainable within protected area boundaries. Therefore, this research focuses specifically on tourism in national parks and nature reserves.

Research procedure

This research seeks an in-depth understanding of the association between spirituality, nature, and tourism; qualitative methods (i.e. literature review and interviews) can assist in elucidating this complex issue (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). In-depth interviews exploring issues in depth and detail were arranged online (Ritchie et al., 2014). Due to the complexity of the research topic, participant selection was criterion-based: having adequate knowledge of protected areas, tourism, and spirituality (if possible), as well as good verbal skills. A sample frame was achieved from published lists of regional protected area management bureaus, author lists from relevant publications, blogs, and snowball sampling. Invitation letters, including explanations of research objectives, participating criteria, topics, and ethical declaration, were delivered via email and text message to encourage participation. On receiving responses from the selected sample of individuals, a brief conversation was organised with the interviewees beforehand, so potential respondents had an opportunity to understand the research objectives and assure that they could contribute to the study. In addition, potential interviewees were checked for appropriateness, wherein nine candidates were excluded due to their ineligibility or low willingness to cooperate.

Following this, data was collected in line with interview guidelines developed from existing literature and research objectives. Questions included topics such as self-introduction, participant's view of nature, memorable experiences and feelings in protected areas, perceptions of protected area tourism, understanding of spiritual tourism (精神旅行), and visions of spiritual tourism. Although the same interview topics were used, specific questions differed depending on each group's profile and expertise. Informants were advised that there was no right or wrong answer for each question, and they had the right to not respond to any question before and during the interview (Ritchie et al., 2014). Three pilot interviews were organised, and after each conversation, repeated or complex questions were removed, and other questions were made more coherent. Some direct questions were replaced by indirect ones. For instance, questions such as "does any special feeling come to you when travelling in protected areas" and "have you ever thought about why you could achieve that special experience" were used rather than "would you please share your understanding of the term nature with us" and "what do you think about the value of nature". Hence, the more interviews undertaken, the higher the efficiency, relevance and productivity achieved.

Data collection ended when very little new information could be generated from interviews (Saldaña, 2016). In total, 27 interviews were conducted, and audio recorded between 19 December 2021 and 9 March 2022. The diversity of interviewees was ensured by recruiting professionals (coded from P01 to P15, Table 1) such as two protected area managers, eight staff from tourism enterprises operating in protected areas (e.g. nature education, hiking, cycling, traditional eco-tourism, etc.), one expert in an

Table 1
Profile of sample 1: professionals.

Code	Affiliation	Expertise
P01	Protected area	Protected area and tourism management
P02	Tourism Enterprise	Outdoor activities & nature education
P03	Tourism Enterprise	Nature education
P04	Tourism Enterprise	Cycling
P05	Organisation	Outdoor activities & guide training
P06	Tourism Enterprise	Traditional eco-tourism
P07	Tourism Enterprise	Outdoor activities & photography
P08	Protected area	Protected area and tourism management
P09	Tourism Enterprise	Hiking
P10	Tourism Enterprise	Boutique & tailor-made tour
P11	Tourism Enterprise	Outdoor activities
P12	University	Functional areas and national parks
P13	University	Tourism, ecology, and nature reserves
P14	University	Spatial planning, sustainable tourism, and national parks
P15	University	Heritage tourism and ancient tourism

organisation for outdoor activity training, four researchers who participated in tourism projects in protected areas, and 12 tourists who had plentiful experience in visiting Chinese protected areas (coded from T01 to T12, Table 2). It is noteworthy that the professionals' expertise extends beyond one particular protected area, with many possessing rich experience in various protected areas. Interviews took place in Chinese, and the duration of each interview ranged from 24 min to 130 min, with an average of 69 min. The first author, bilingual in Chinese and English, transcribed the audio into texts verbatim and sent transcripts to related informants for necessary correction.

Given the advantages of thematic analysis (e.g. flexibility), we employed this method to analyse interview transcripts in Nvivo (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2022). Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analysis approach, and involves discovering, interpreting, and reporting patterns within data. It allows researchers to present the data set in rich detail and has the potential to obtain unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although the analysis was performed in a data-driven (inductive) form, we agree that there is no pure induction or deduction because data collection and interpretation are not based on an epistemological vacuum (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Four steps were taken to 'manage' the data. The first author went through the entire data set, identified relevant issues, and formulated a preliminary coding list (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After discussion with co-authors, an inventory composed of topics for further analysis was improved, aligning with the interview guide and research objectives. This topic list was then sorted into themes and subthemes to generate an initial thematic framework, which was used to index and sort the data (Ritchie et al., 2014). Subsequently, refinement was conducted to ensure coherence of the data extracts, wherein some themes and subthemes were merged or separated, and a thorough check of unindexed data was necessary to avoid missing important themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once data management was completed, we embarked on the next stage - abstraction and interpretation. By reviewing data extracts (sub)theme by (sub)theme, elements were detected and sorted according to underlying dimensions, which yielded categories and higher-ordered classes (Ritchie et al., 2014). Finally, we mapped linkages between sets of phenomena to seek a richer understanding of the researched subject and formulated the analysis report (Saldaña, 2016).

To ensure reliability and validity of the study, several methods were employed. First, the research was designed based on a thorough literature review and rounds of consultancies with experts. Second, the presented sample structure ensures diversity as it is guided by the optimum efficiency of qualitative sampling. Third, we checked the verbatim transcripts against the original audio and uploaded the data into Nvivo for comprehensive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis was undertaken by the first author and inspected by co-authors; further conversations were held to allow some participants to check interpretations

Table 2
Profile of sample 2: tourists.

| Code	Gender	Year of birth	Occupation	Experience in tourism
T01	Female	90s	International trade	Advanced
T02	Male	90s	Senior sales engineer	Intermediate
T03	Female	90s	PhD student in law	Advanced
T04	Male	80s	Entrepreneur	Advanced
T05	Female	70s	Novelist	Intermediate
T06	Female	70s	Housewife	Intermediate
T07	Male	90s	Co-partner	Advanced
T08	Female	80s	Entrepreneur	Advanced
T09	Female	90s	Government official	Intermediate
T10	Male	70s	Executive in 500 Fortune	Advanced
T11	Female	90s	Unemployed	Intermediate
T12	Male	70s	Bioengineer	Advanced
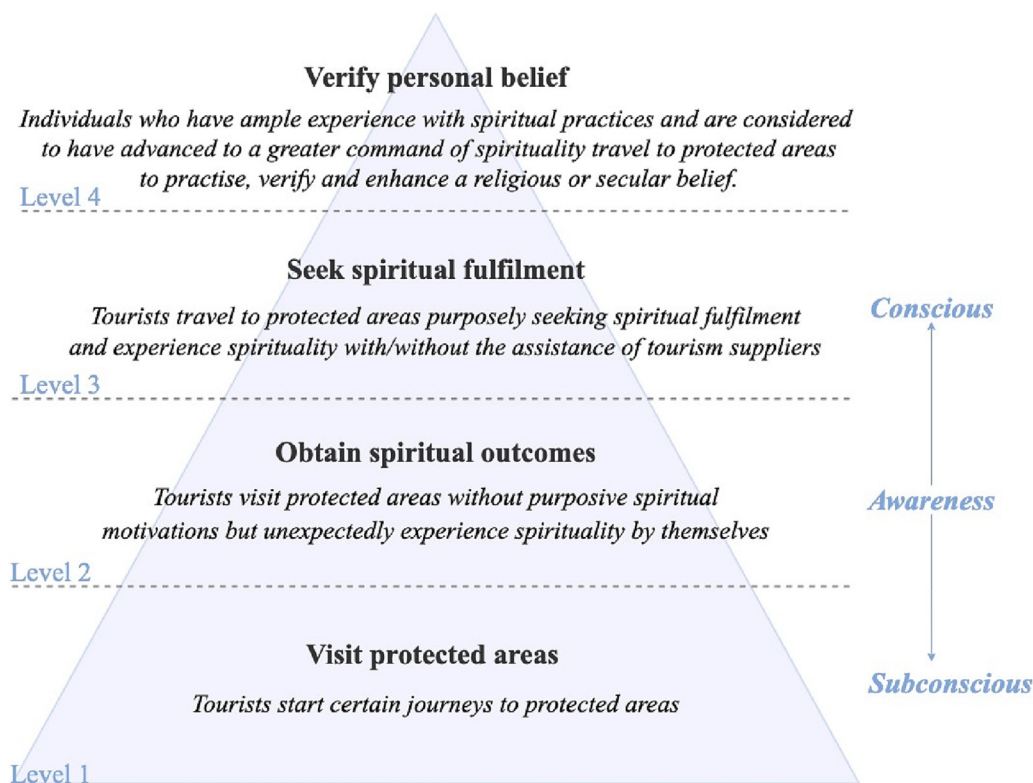
Fig. 1. Hierarchy of spiritual tourism achievement in protected areas.
Source: Own elaboration.

(Ritchie et al., 2014), and theories from existing literature were also used for validation. Finally, although minor modifications to translations were needed to cater to English speakers, the essence of the quotes was kept, and professional translators were invited to check accuracy.

Findings and discussions

Understandings and hierarchy of spiritual tourism achievement

Although spiritual tourism ('精神旅行') is barely known in China, with the examples offered, informants were able to provide various understandings of the concept, and some regarded spiritual tourism as something they were attempting to participate in. An ideal pattern of spiritual tourism can be formulated: tourists travel for spiritual motives and obtain spiritual outcomes. However, the definition of this emerging term should not be restricted to such a domain. Otherwise, this entry threshold may turn away a considerable number of potential tourists and relevant providers (T05, P06, P14 & P15). Fig. 1 presents a hierarchy of this concept, depicting four levels of spiritual tourism achievement in protected areas: 1) starting a journey, 2) unexpectedly obtaining spiritual outcomes, 3) seeking spiritual fulfilment consciously, and 4) practising, verifying, and enhancing one's religious or secular belief. Moving up the levels of spiritual tourism accompanies increased awareness of spirituality. For instance, during visits to protected areas, tourists can achieve level two as long as they experience spirituality, and likewise, if they purposely seek spiritual fulfilment, level three will be reached.

Table 3 illustrates participants' perspectives on different levels of the hierarchy. Visiting protected areas has the potential to obtain spiritual meaning (Level 1), as tourism offers an "out of the ordinary experience" (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018), and natural sites such as protected areas are recognised as a unique context for spiritual tourism (Bhalla et al., 2021; Kato & Progano, 2017; Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014; Wang & Blasco, 2022). Previous research has provided rich evidence on tourist experiences and motivations relating to spirituality in tourism, which can be verified by the present study. For instance, although the primary purpose of certain tourists (level 2) was not spiritual fulfilment, they still had a spiritual experience (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Lopez et al., 2017; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Accounts of participants who tend to be spiritual tourists (level 3) have a definite purpose of escaping and seeking and finding, which agrees with Moufakkir and Selmi's (2018) argument. Regarding level 4, to the best of our knowledge, we have not found references beyond religious tourism or pilgrimage (e.g. Wang et al., 2020) in extant literature to support this finding, which arises from our interviews. However, as mentioned in the literature review section, contributions from

Table 3
Respondents' perceptions of spiritual tourism at different levels.

Level of spiritual tourism	Quotations
1. Visit protected areas	"*All tours have the potential to be spiritual*" (T05) as "*tourism itself is a process that can* [more or less] *exert influences on individuals*" (T02). Protected area tourism contains special meaning beyond leisure stemming from its characteristics (P02, P03, P05, & P11). "*Many trips in protected areas are toilsome because comfortable facilities are usually absent. For instance, tourists often need to walk or drive for hours and stay at yurts or camps for the night*" (P10).
2. Obtain spiritual outcomes	"*I seldom purposely seek spiritual meaning in travelling. However, I must admit I still received some spiritual reflections, for instance, when I heard stories of ancient people*" (T08). "*I don't travel for spiritual fulfilment, but* [as a Christian] *I could feel a kind of connection between God and me in some moments during my trips, especially when I was facing challenges from nature*" (P04). "*People can feel a sense of humility and reverence in nature*" (T03). "*Outdoor activities in the wilderness allow individuals to know their limits as human beings*" (P05).
3. Seek spiritual fulfilment	"*I think I tend to be a spiritual tourist. I usually seek a peaceful state of mind on my journeys. It's a sense of emptiness. […] I travelled to Xinjiang Province four times and visited Sayram Lake three times because it helped me to achieve that unique feeling. It seems that visiting such places can clean our souls*" (T07). "*I live a fast-paced life. So, when I have spare time, I like to find some quiet places with excellent views, such as protected areas, to calm down and think about who I am and what I want in my life*" (T11).
4. Verify personal belief	"*For individuals who have achieved the advanced "spiritual" level, the purpose of travelling is to practise and verify their spiritual world*" (P14). "*The pilgrimage to Tibet is dangerous and strenuous, deaths happen every year, but it never stops pilgrims*" (P06). "*In my opinion, the most important thing for a person is their spiritual world. If your inner world and belief are stable, then no matter what happens, they will not be changed. Hence, I want to strengthen my spiritual world through travel*" (T01).

the field of religious tourism should be taken with caution, since religious and non-religious people may experience spirituality differently (Ho & Ho, 2007; Preston & Shin, 2017).

The significant distinction between different layers of spiritual tourism relates to tourist consciousness, in other words, 'whether the tourist is aware of the spiritual outcome' and 'whether the tourist consciously seeks a spiritual journey', as this sort of awareness effectively impacts achieving spirituality (Farkic et al., 2021; Ho & Ho, 2007). Respondents highlighted that the help of tourism suppliers is needed to establish awareness. However, findings reveal a stagnation of industrial development regarding spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas, where services and products remain at the initial stage, lagging behind actual tourist demand, especially those with higher expectations of activities focusing on individuals' inner worlds, such as spiritual experience (Zheng, Liang, Ma, Liu, & Wu, 2022). Consequently, tourist performances regarding spirituality remain spontaneous, and depend on an individual's capacity for cognition, which limits the depth and scope of spiritual tourism.

This undeveloped status can, to some extent, be explained through professionals' attitudes toward spiritual tourism. The first group regards this type of tourism as utopian and unsuited to the business of tourism, so they are unwilling to consider the demand of the niche market. Although the second cluster agrees on the need to develop spiritual tourism, they foresee various challenges considering the lack of successful cases in China, which leads to a relatively negative attitude. Others are optimistic, but have concerns and doubts about facing new and uncharted territory. One respondent highlighted that "*without the support of understandable theories, it is quite difficult to design products that can help raise spiritual experiences from the subconscious to the conscious*" (P10). This discovery reflects the dearth of theoretical background and the limited practicability of existing research, while aligning with the debate that there is a noticeable lack of research focusing on the supply side of spiritual tourism (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Gill et al., 2019).

Developing spiritual tourism: from unconsciousness to consciousness

Interviewees foresee two ways to implement spiritual tourism in China. The first is to enhance spirituality in existing tourism products, and the second is to develop spiritual tourism as a specialised tourism type. On one hand, "*the concept of spiritual tourism is too vague to be understood or accepted by the public*" (P06), so "*enhancing the spirituality in existing tourism products seems realistic and feasible*" (P12). On the other hand, some informants raise the need to distinguish spiritual tourism from traditional tourism patterns. "*Spiritual tourism focuses on individuals' inner world, which makes it distinct, so it should be designed and developed as specialised; otherwise, spiritual outcomes will be limited*" (P04). This opinion is further supported by Buzinde's (2020) autoethnographic narratives, based on spiritual tourism experiences, and Farkic et al.'s (2021) discussion on forest bathing.

In general, achieving an ideal level of spiritual tourism in protected areas - seeking spiritual fulfilment and acquiring spiritual experiences, requires an efficient association between nature, tourists, and 'mediums' (T02, T07, P03, P05, & P11). First, consistent with assertions by previous authors, we indicate that nature has significant meaning for the spiritual experiences of individuals due to its characteristics, e.g. tranquillity, expansiveness, mystery, newness, etc. (Curtin, 2009; Ferguson & Tamburello, 2015; Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014; Snell & Simmonds, 2015). For instance, "*observing nature leads to a distillation of my spirit; I can feel a sense of smallness and a sense of fragility as a human being. I am so minute compared with the grandeur of nature that I have to prostrate myself before it and worship*" (T03). Further debates on spirituality of nature in the Chinese context are illustrated in the next subsection.

It is argued that culture and nature are inseparable. Participants and previous authors highlight the significance of historical and cultural values in protected areas (Hamzah, 2016; Verschuuren et al., 2021); however, the empirical data shows that
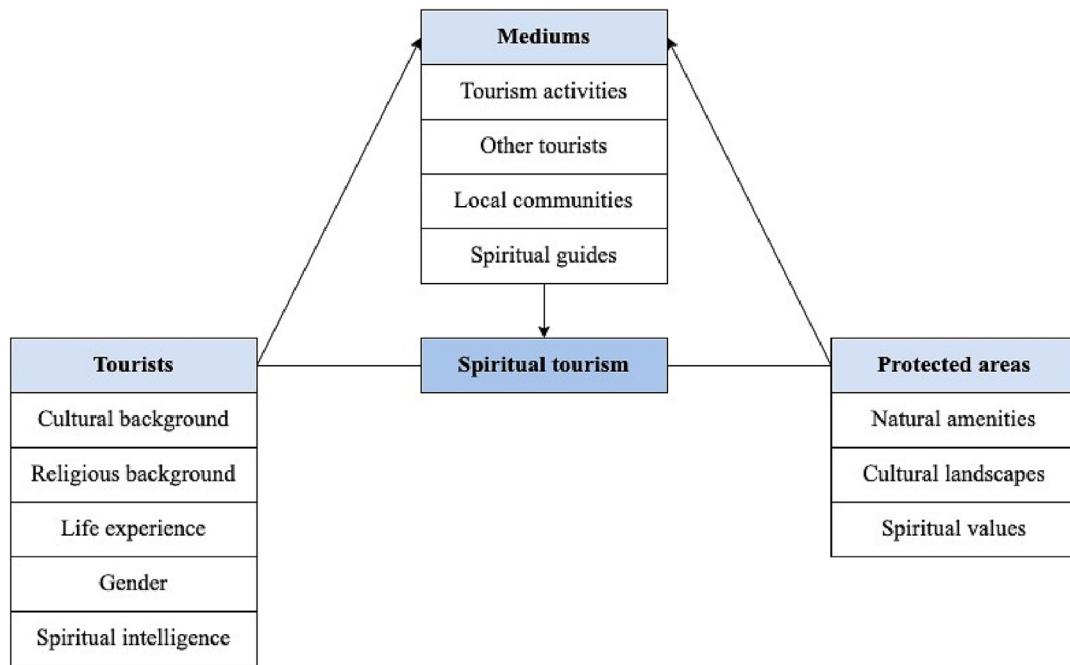
Fig. 2. Conceptualisation of spiritual tourism as an association between protected areas, tourists, and mediums.
Source: Own elaboration after Curtin, 2009; Ferguson & Tamburello, 2015; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Hamzah, 2016; Heintzman, 2009; Ho & Ho, 2007; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Preston & Shin, 2017; Schmidt & Little, 2007; Verschuuren et al., 2021; Williams & Harvey, 2001.

traditional, local culture has a finite influence on tourist experiences. "*Our protected area has a dense historical and cultural accumulation, but its impact on tourism is quite delimited*" (P03). Respondents attribute this phenomenon to two main reasons. Firstly, learning about and elucidating such a profound culture requires considerable capacity and skill, and few tour guides fit the bill (P10 & P11). Secondly, this situation is unavoidable due to the gap between tradition and modernity; "*Chinese culture tends to be unified and in decline since the Great Cultural Revolution*" (P04). As another interviewee commented, "*the only solution I could imagine is popularising local cultures for tour guides and tourists after further excavation and research of local history and culture, which means it is not a problem that can be solved in a short period*" (P15), which agrees with De Pater et al.'s (2021) proposal that the conservation surrounding cultural and spiritual values should be included in protected area management.

Second, information from the interviews suggests that tourists play an essential role in spiritual tourism as they are recipients of spiritual benefits stemming from their cultural and religious background, life experience, spiritual intelligence, and gender. When participants were asked to explain why nature evokes certain complex feelings in them, they frequently mentioned 'cultural deposits', recognised as something deep in their bones (Verschuuren et al., 2021; Xu, Cui, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2013). Furthermore, being religious does not appear to be necessary to achieve spirituality (De Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012; Ho & Ho, 2007; Wang et al., 2020), but may affect how individuals interpret and express spiritual feelings. For instance, non-religious participants prefer to see their transcendent experiences as connected with nature and the cosmos, while some religious informants feel more comfortable describing the feeling as a link to God, parallel to Preston and Shin's (2017) work.

A considerable number of published studies have demonstrated that tourists' life experiences, which motivate them to seek and escape, can impact their perceived spirituality (e.g. Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Singleton, 2017; Wang et al., 2020). Rather than educational level, as suggested by Schwarz (2013), informants remark that tourists' 'spiritual intelligence' (in Chinese, '悟性'), introspection and examination of personal meaning, cognition of nature, and even awareness of 'existence', significantly affect the quality of spiritual tourism they are involved in (Ho & Ho, 2007). This finding supports research by Wei, Yang, and Liu (2021), who discuss the importance of intelligence in promoting positive emotions. Therefore, it is necessary to educate tourists to improve their critical thinking skills, and awareness of self-meaning and traditional culture, which may increase their spiritual intelligence (T02, P11, & P15).

Third, attaining higher levels of spiritual tourism supposes a shift from the subconscious to the conscious, which is indispensable for tourist guides and product suppliers alike. The data reveals four aspects of 'mediums': tourism activities, other tourists, local communities, and spiritual guides. Regarding activities, two divergent and conflicting discourses emerge. Some respondents argue that spiritual tourists are supposed to suffer on journeys in order to obtain enlightenment, while others express unwillingness to take a challenging trip, which they feel hinders them from experiencing spirituality. As Jepson and Sharpley (2015) note, individuals' spiritual feelings are determined by their personal circumstances.

Most informants agree on the benefits of a quiet and solitary atmosphere, so proper interaction between tourists is important (Heintzman, 2009). For instance, "*I could experience spirituality when I travelled alone, because friends may disturb my thinking if I go out with them*" (T02), and "*acquaintances on journeys sometimes give me the illusion that I am still stuck in my old life*" (T11). Hence,

screening tourists is proposed so as to keep participants from possible disturbance from other tourists. Also, integration with residents, such as experiencing their poverty, witnessing their devotion to faith, and learning about their attitudes toward life, provides an opportunity for self-reflection (T01, T04, T07, & T09). However, community participation is regarded as a controversial issue due to conflicts between tourists and locals as well as hidden side effects of tourism on local culture and spiritual values (Mu et al., 2019); therefore, further investigation is also needed in this line.

Moreover, interviewed tourists and professionals have shown a demand for spiritual tour guides. Researchers have confirmed the importance of excellent guides in formulating tourist experiences (Xu et al., 2013) and further brokering spiritual tourists to facilitate self-development (Parsons, Houge Mackenzie, & Filep, 2019). This research found extensive demand from tourists and enterprises for high-quality spiritual tour guides due to the current chaos in tour guide management. "*Outdoor guides largely determine the success of a spiritual journey; especially in protected areas, guides are almost the only group to operate the trip. However, they are uncontrollable factors so far*" (P11). In China, an official "Tour Guide Certificate" is required in order to give a tour of traditional tourist attractions. However, there is no regulated requirement for outdoor activity guides, so the abilities of this cluster are uneven (P05). Given this problematic status, a mechanism for training, assessing, and monitoring spiritual tour guides in protected areas is urgently needed.

It is noteworthy that most tourism enterprise representatives state a higher proportion of female than male tourists in their customer population (from 6:4 to 7:3). "*It appears that well-educated females are more willing to cultivate their spiritual world through tourism*" (P11), verifying the discussion by Amaro et al. (2018) that female pilgrims on the Way of Saint James are more motivated by spiritual dimensions and nature than male pilgrims. In the case of China, respondents remark that "*men in China suffer more financial pressure than women, making them reduce the frequency of travelling for recreation*" (P05). At the same time, females tend to show more awe of nature than males, so women are more likely to visit protected areas with agencies than males, who may prefer travelling by themselves (T07 & P10). A female's unique ability to build connectedness with nature and realise spiritual fulfilment is also authenticated (Cosgriff et al., 2009; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). However, Zheng et al. (2022) claim that there is no significant difference between the impact of tourism on the subjective well-being of women and men in China. We found no evident 'spiritual intelligence' divergence between females and males. Future research that accounts for gender issues is recommended to demonstrate the impact of gender on tourist behaviour in spiritual tourism.

Overall, the findings above indicate a complex system (shown in Fig. 2) for investigating and developing spiritual tourism, which requires an association between protected areas, tourists, and 'mediums'. Spirituality in nature permeates natural amenities, spiritual values and cultural landscapes, and the latter two have limited impacts on tourist experiences due to the capacity of tour guides and the cultural fault line between tradition and modernity, so these two dimensions necessitate excavation, conservation and promotion at both government and park levels. Tourists' cultural and religious background, life experience, gender, and especially spiritual intelligence may impact their cognition of spirituality; spiritual intelligence can be improved through education, while gender issues require further evidence. Finally, protected areas and tourism enterprises need efficient collaboration to strengthen 'mediums' which help shift spirituality from the subconscious to the conscious.

Nature: a medium to transcendence

Circumstances alter cases. Spirituality and spiritual tourism should be investigated in specific backgrounds (Norman, 2012; Verschuuren et al., 2021). Participants' opinions suggest that western patterns of spiritual tourism, especially those dependent on religions, cannot be directly transplanted to China. This is because as a secular country, China officially endorses atheism, even though a portion of the population is religious (Kirillova, Wang, Fu, & Lehto, 2020). One interviewee emphasises that "*I wish I could deliver unique spiritual journeys to my customers. [...] Given the reality, I'd rather avoid topics that refer to religions*" (P04). This sort of cautious attitude not only originates from government policies, but also from awe of religion, which is relatively unfamiliar territory for this populace, especially the Han group (P01, P12, & P13). Nevertheless, not believing in religion does not mean that Chinese people have no pursuit of transcendence ('超越'). On the contrary, the Chinese population has this quest, and their oriental worldview means transcendental pursuit can be accomplished from the secular world (T03, P05, & P15). Despite the limited information gathered from interviews and previous literature, this exploratory study attempts to illustrate the relationship between nature, spirituality, and humans in this subsection to explain how transcendence (the highest level of spirituality) can be achieved through spiritual tourism in the Chinese context.

Foremost, the secular worldview's prevalence in China goes back to ancient times. As Feng noted, albeit Chinese people seek transcendence, they are less concerned with religions because they have cared too much about philosophies (2019, p. 16–17). Philosophy happens to be regarded as the other means to overcome nothingness aside from religion (Wang, 2014, p. 91). Herein transcendence can be obtained, expressed, and experienced. According to Feng (2019), children's education in ancient times started with philosophical works (e.g. Confucianism); this sort of education somewhat remains in modern China, influencing people's mindsets and behaviours (Wang & Blasco, 2022; Xu, Cui, Sofield, & Li, 2014; Ye & Xue, 2008). Most respondents can more or less enumerate speeches in ancient philosophies covering transcendental descriptions when asked about the Chinese view of nature. As one interviewee ascribed, "*I was required to recite these classics when I was three or four years old; I did not understand the meanings in my childhood, but I started to know them when I became an adult*" (T07).

Paradoxically, no obvious evidence from the tourist side can prove that the aforementioned philosophical background works as expected in their experience, and descriptions of spiritual and transcendental experience remain superficial and disorderly. Moreover, there is confusion among non-religious participants when facing a higher spiritual force. For instance, "*I was helpless with tears when seeing the incredible natural view in Tibet. [...] It occurred to me that I suddenly felt highly devout to an unknown force.*

It may be Buddha for Buddhists or God for Christians. However, I am secular, so I have no idea what I was devout to. Perhaps it is the higher power of nature and the universe" (T01). Hence, a concern is raised: how can Chinese people console their spirits and fill spiritual emptiness when the support of religion is somehow absent, and the philosophical background does not act as expected in reality?

An expert in ancient Chinese tourism stated that "*spiritual tourism in nature was quite well-developed during ancient times. […] We can find many travel notes from Tang and Song dynasties (i.e. 618–1279 AD). Why were they so immersed in Shanshui (nature)? Their works show that they could discover Tao in nature, and Tao embedded their demand for transcendence*" (P15). Hence, "*western people may seek transcendence from their religions, God, churches, and sacred sites, while Chinese can look for it in nature. One flower, one world, one leaf, one bodhi* [a tree regarded as sacred in Buddhist philosophy and representing the final enlightenment]*, everything I see is free and transcendent, so I am also transcendent, and therefore, mountains, rivers, waterfalls, and fallen leaves are all sacred in my eyes. […] We live in this world, Tao is also in this world, and Tao is everywhere; so we are living in 'heaven'*" (P15). This finding reflects Kujawa's (2017) argument that literary travel-focused memoirs can provide rich evidence and materials for researching spiritual tourism. This also aligns with Ferguson and Tamburello's (2015) discussion that nature contains the power to fulfil the spiritual needs of humans, and attachment to nature can even affect rates of religious adherence.

In other words, nature is considered a medium for transcendence. This stems from Chinese people's attachment to nature, which has entered the realm of philosophical thinking, and can potentially contribute to developing spiritual tourism (T02, P01, P05, P08, P14, & P15). Nature represents a symbol in Chinese perceptions, and debates on nature are common and crucial in philosophical thought, literature, and artworks (Ye & Xue, 2008). Discussions on Buddhist philosophy, Confucianism and Taoist philosophy underpin the Chinese view of nature (Feng, 2019; Xu et al., 2014; Ye & Xue, 2008), which was frequently mentioned by respondents. In these philosophies, the transcendental sphere represents the highest pursuit of humankind - to become a 'sage' ('圣人'). The ultimate achievement of a sage is to achieve the state of '*Tian Ren He Yi*' (the unity of heaven and humankind), which means the oneness of humans, nature, and the cosmos (Wang & Blasco, 2022). This can be achieved in a secular world, while people must dedicate themselves to spiritual improvement to obtain a sage's quality (Feng, 2019). Nature provides a vital context in this process (Bhalla et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999) as it is viewed as the highest aspiration of Taoist philosophy and allows people to reflect on '*Tao*' (the way to become a sage). Also, Confucius said, "*the wise man enjoys water; the good man delights in mountains. The wise are active; the good are tranquil. The wise are happy, and the good are long-lived*". Among these, 'water' and 'mountains' are metaphors utilised to symbolise the moral characteristics of 'the wise' and 'the good', reflecting an internal connection between humans and nature (Xu et al., 2014).

Therefore, we propose a philosophy-oriented spiritual tourism development model (Fig. 3) using nature as a medium, and determined by policies and the thousand-year legacy inherited in people's minds. To achieve this aim, we recognise the need to face a severe social problem in the desolation of Chinese people's spiritual home, and to seek a revolution in cultural education (especially traditional philosophies) to enhance the populace's spiritual intelligence. There is a long way to go, but as the hierarchical framework of spiritual tourism achievement suggested, there is no need to adhere to an ideal pattern at the beginning
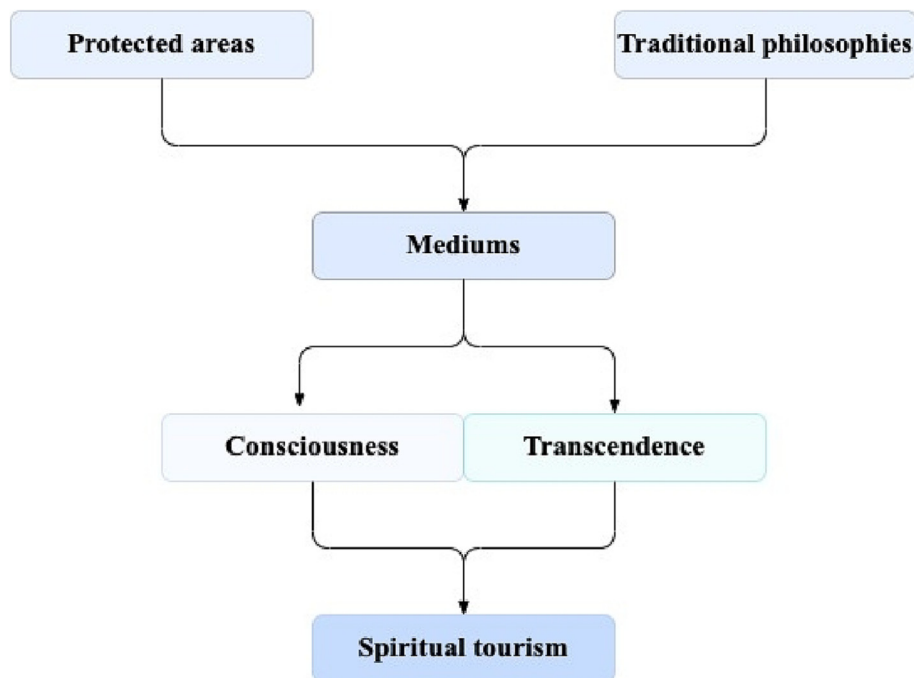

Fig. 3. Philosophy-oriented spiritual tourism development model.
Source: Own elaboration.

of this task. If tourists can see the law from nature and somehow reflect on themselves, this in itself is spiritual (T02, T03, P05, P14, & P15). Besides, although participants assume that secular Chinese follow tradition by visiting temples located in mountains to pray for blessings (e.g. fortune, succeeding in exams, pregnancy, etc.), more evidence is required in order to shed light on this behaviour and classify it into spiritual, religious, or neither.

Conclusion

As an emerging research field, spiritual tourism faces conceptual confusion and a paucity of sustained literature. So far, understanding this tourism type has been dominated by Anglo-western conceptions, while non-western worldviews, especially in countries such as China, remain undocumented. By conducting a literature review and in-depth interviews, this research attempts to conceptualise spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas to gain a broader understanding of this 'eastern' concept. In summary, although spiritual tourism shows promising potential in the market, it is undeveloped in China. This reflects the remarkable phenomenon that tourism supply can scarcely fulfil the demand of tourists with high expectations of unique experiences such as spiritual development (Zheng et al., 2022). In other words, whether tourists can experience spirituality during their journeys depends highly on their own personal abilities, for instance, spiritual intelligence. On the other hand, despite realising the significance and necessity of concentrating on this refreshing tourism type, doubts and concerns are raised among parks and tourism enterprises regarding the limited practicability of existing research (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Gill et al., 2019). Therefore, developing spiritual tourism further requires a theoretical breakthrough that is accepted by academia and industry alike.

Correspondingly, we disclose a four-level hierarchy of spiritual tourism achievement: 1) starting a journey, 2) receiving spirituality unexpectedly, 3) seeking a spiritual journey consciously, and 4) verifying personal belief. Furthermore, consciousness plays an essential role in this hierarchical framework, where spiritual tourism needs to shift from unconscious to conscious. Participants remark that this requires an effective association between protected areas, tourists and 'mediums', rather than relying on one particular group. Specific elements for building this association are identified and discussed. Finally, we find nature is a sufficient medium to transcendence (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). Hence, we suggest a philosophy-oriented tourism development model in protected areas and call for a 'renaissance' in investigating spiritual tourism and linking traditional philosophies.

The present study proposes a hierarchy and suggests an association between protected areas, humans, and 'mediums' to simplify views and extend practicability in the industry. Although protected areas are utilised as the research context, implementation of findings goes beyond these domains (e.g. destinations with outstanding natural and cultural landscapes, but have not been defined as protected areas). While we embrace both religious and non-religious mindsets, religious issues are not comprehensively covered in this study. This may be considered a limitation, given that a significant number of the populace adheres to one of the five major religions in a country which officially endorses atheism. This research can assist the industry in grasping the complex academic discourse and planning spiritual tourism for the early stage; it will be helpful if related pilot projects can be implemented and tracked. This paper contributes to a conceptual development with limited empirical data; however, more evidence is needed for validation and refinement. Besides, China has around 1.4 billion people from which we attempt to seek a general pattern that may not cover all the diverse behaviours and responses of such a diverse and significant population. Further studies are needed on spiritual tourists (e.g. demand, gender, cultural background), indigenous people, and the sustainable development and management of spiritual tourism.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Shaohua Wang: Conceptualisation, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing-Reviewing and Editing.
Dani Blasco: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Writing-Reviewing and Editing.
Amran Hamzah: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Writing-Reviewing and Editing.
Bas Verschuuren: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Writing-Reviewing and Editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103543.

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