

Wudangzhao at Baotou, Inner Mongolia: Production of space and meaning change in the context of modern China tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study is basic research that uses qualitative methods, focusing on the production of space and the change of meaning, with Wudangzhao in Baotou, Inner Mongolia, as a case study. The research finds that Wudangzhao originated under the Qing Dynasty's "governing frontiers through religion" policy, becoming a key religious and political hub that connected the Qing court with Inner Mongolia. Over time, it transformed from a political-religious center into a modern cultural heritage site. During the Qing period, its architecture, rituals, and organization reflected imperial authority, serving as an important node in frontier governance. Later, Wudangzhao underwent depoliticization, political reintegration, and culturalization, evolving into a symbol of national heritage. In contemporary tourism, Wudangzhao has been re-produced as a complex cultural space that integrates religious, cultural, economic, and political functions, illustrating the ongoing transformation and creative continuation of traditional religious heritage in modern China. The study highlights that religious spaces are not only places of belief but also serve political and administrative purposes, with their meanings continuously reshaped by changing state power and policies. Wudangzhao exemplifies this process, evolving from a political-religious hub into a composite space of religion, culture, and tourism, ultimately becoming a representative AAAA-level cultural tourism site.

Keywords: Wudangzhao, production of space, meaning change, cultural tourism, modern Chinese tourism.

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INTRODUCTION

Wudangzhao, located in Baotou City, Inner Mongolia, China, is a historically and culturally significant Tibetan Buddhist temple. Built in 1749 during the Qianlong era, it is the largest and most intact Tibetan Gelug Buddhist temple in Inner Mongolia, often called the "Small Potala Palace" (Yang, 2008). Designated as a national key cultural relic protection unit in 1996, Wudangzhao preserves numerous valuable Thangka, murals, and other cultural relics, making it a material carrier of Tibetan Buddhist culture and a symbol of multi-ethnic integration in northern China (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

In China, a AAAA-level tourist attraction is a classification within the national tourism grading system, indicating that the site possesses high tourist appeal, well-

developed facilities, and quality services. Wudangzhao was rated a AAAA-level tourist attraction in 2002, became a National Forest Park in 2005, and has been recognized as a key tourism brand in Inner Mongolia (Inner Mongolia Culture and Tourism Department, 2024). Located in the Yinshan Mountains, it spans approximately 31 km² and comprises a religious culture area, a forest park ecological zone, a folk culture experience area, and a sports and leisure area. The temple's architecture, rituals, and cultural landscape reflect both Tibetan Buddhist traditions and the historical interactions among Han, Mongolian, and Tibetan peoples.

Baotou, historically a crossroads between the northern grasslands and the Central Plains, has a long history of multi-ethnic integration. The region's Mongolian and Han

cultures have interacted for centuries, with Wudangzhao serving as the most prominent remaining Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the area. The temple's spatial production not only fulfills religious functions but also integrates art, architecture, and cultural heritage, attracting tourists and scholars alike.

Despite its historical, cultural, and tourism significance, little research has examined Wudangzhao through the lens of space production and meaning change. Therefore, this study, using qualitative methods, explores "Wudangzhao Temple in Baotou, Inner Mongolia: Production of Space and Meaning Change in the Context of Modern China Tourism," focusing on how the temple's space and meanings have evolved alongside tourism, cultural policy, and multi-ethnic interactions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative research methodology, which aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the historical and cultural evolution of Wudangzhao in Baotou. The research is designed to explore the dynamics of spatial production and its transformations over time. The study is guided by four main objectives:

Historical, social, and cultural development of Wudangzhao at Baotou: To investigate the development of Wudangzhao from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) to the present day (2024), focusing on its historical, social, and cultural transformations.

Production of space during the Qing Dynasty (1749-1912): To examine Wudangzhao within the framework of 'The Production of Space,' analyzing how spatial dynamics in the Qing period shaped the monastery's function and significance.

Wudangzhao during the Republic of China to Pre-National AAAA tourist attraction (1912-2002): To study the role of Wudangzhao during the Republic of China era and the transition towards becoming a nationally recognized tourist attraction.

Re-production of space and meaning change in Modern China tourism (2002-2024): To explore how the space of Wudangzhao has been 're-produced' in the context of contemporary tourism and how the meanings associated with it have evolved.

Research design

The study adopts a combination of fieldwork and literature research as primary data collection methods. The fieldwork consists of ethnographic observations, site visits,

and interviews with local inhabitants, religious practitioners, and tourism stakeholders. This allows for an immersive understanding of the local context and its socio-cultural dimensions. Literature research involves a comprehensive review of both primary and secondary sources, including historical documents, academic articles, and previous studies related to Wudangzhao and its significance. These data are analyzed using anthropological and sociological concepts, focusing on spatial dynamics, historical context, and tourism impact.

The research employs descriptive analysis to present the findings, detailing the evolution of Wudangzhao's cultural and spatial transformations over the centuries. The findings will also provide insights into the ways in which tourism has influenced the re-interpretation and re-production of space, leading to changes in meaning and function within the context of modern China.

RESULTS

Wudangzhao at Baotou: Sociocultural development from the Qing Dynasty to the present (2024)

Wudangzhao, whose Tibetan name is Badagar Monastery, meaning "White Lotus Temple," is known in Chinese as Guangjue Temple. Emperor Qianlong personally bestowed the name Guangjue Temple in the 21st year of his reign (1756). Since the valley in front of the monastery is called Wudang Valley (with Wudang meaning "willow" in Mongolian), the temple is commonly referred to as Wudangzhao. (Figure 1)

During the Qing and Republican periods, Wudangzhao's political affiliation remained relatively simple. Its monastic affairs were not directly supervised by local banners or by the Lama Affairs Bureau. Instead, it had an internal Lama Administrative Council, functioning similarly to a local Lama Affairs Bureau but without the official Zasad seal and without jurisdiction over other monasteries. It exercised self-governance within the temple, uniting religious and administrative functions. This form of "religious administrative autonomy" reflected the Qing government's particular attention and support for Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia. As Emperor Kangxi once remarked, "In the Mongolian lands, building one monastery is better than maintaining an army of one hundred thousand" (Delege, 1998), a testament to the central government's strategic policy of using religion to maintain stability along the frontiers.

The founding and growth of Wudangzhao are closely linked to its first Living Buddha, Awang Churimo (1696–1763; Tibetan name: Lobsang Tenbega Leksan Sambu), a Mongolian of the Tümed tribe. His grandfather had traveled to Tibet to pay homage to the Panchen Lama, providing a spiritual foundation for Awang Churimo's Buddhist studies. (Figure 2)



Figure 1. The Incribed Plaque of Guangjue Monastery. The plaque, an imperial gift from Emperor Qianlong in 1756, is inscribed in Manchu, Chinese, Mongolian, and Tibetan, reflecting Wudangzhao's multicultural heritage. It hangs above the entrance to Dongkuo'er Hall, the oldest recorded building in the monastery. Serving as the Kalachakra Department, the hall teaches mathematics, astronomy, geography, divination, and calendrical studies, highlighting Wudangzhao's dual focus on religious practice and scholarship. (Source: Display cabinet inside the Jinke Hall of Wudang Zhao (left); central lintel of the Dongkuo'er Hall at Wudang Zhao (full-scale replica), Researcher (right), 2024).



Figure 2. Statue of the First Dongkuo'er Living Buddha. The First Dongkuo'er Living Buddha was a pioneer of the Gelugpa school in Inner Mongolia and founded one of its key reincarnation lineages. In 1749, with the approval of the Beijing authorities, he established Dongkuo'er Hall at Wudang Monastery, the earliest large-scale recorded building. The Dongkuo'er Living Buddha lineage continues today, holding great religious significance in Inner Mongolia. (Source: Investigation and Research on Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries: Meidai Monastery and Wudang Monastery II, 2009).

Wudangzhao experienced major construction and institutional development from the mid-18th to the late-19th century. Foundational halls and colleges, including the Dongkuo'er Hall (1749), Dangxide Hall (1750), the exoteric studies college (1752), and the summer retreat Gengbi Temple (1758), were built successively. The Seventh Dalai Lama named the monastery Badagar Chalin, and in 1756, Emperor Qianlong bestowed the imperial title Guangjue Temple. After Awang Churimo's passing in 1763, the monastery entered a period of stable growth.

Recognized in 1774, the Second Living Buddha Reshinima studied in Tibet for a decade and later received the distinguished title Erdeni Morigen Doyingkur Bandida. Under his era and subsequent leadership, Wudangzhao expanded with new residences, halls, and specialized colleges, including the Ahui Hall (1800), Queyila Hall (1835), Zhangjia Living Buddha Residence (1842), and the Lami Ren Hall (1892). Successive Living Buddhas were confirmed via Golden Urn lots in 1844 and 1860, and in 1894, the Fifth Living Buddha was ceremoniously welcomed. In 1914, he was honored in Beijing by Yuan Shikai.

The Sixth and Seventh Living Buddhas died young, and religious restrictions halted the search for their reincarnation; during this period, several major structures were damaged or lost. From the 1980s onward, restoration resumed under the Baotou Municipal Government, gradually reviving Wudangzhao's historical prominence. On October 24, 2006, with government approval, Alamus was enthroned as the Eighth Living Buddha, continuing

the Dongkuo'er Bandida lineage.

The Qing rulers strengthened their control over Mongolia through the promotion of the Gelug school, believing that "promoting the Yellow Church is thus a way to pacify the Mongols" (The Veritable Records of Emperor Shengzu, vol. 151). Under this policy, Gelug monasteries flourished in Inner Mongolia, and Wudang Zhao was founded in 1749 (Uyunbillige, 2003). During the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns, its territory, approximately 3,000 square kilometers, was officially demarcated twice (Territory Map of Guangjue Monastery, 1799). At its peak, it possessed numerous halls and residences (Dalizhabu, 2006). However, the "true vs. false reincarnated lama case" of 1863, financial burdens in the Guangxu era, and the loss of monastery lands (Suiyuan Provincial Gazetteer, 1934), along with rising new ideas and ethnic crises (Ganjuurva, 1962), led to decline. During the Republic of China, although deprived of Qing-era privileges, the monastery still engaged in local economic cooperation, such as with the Mornan Mining Company (Baotou Gazetteer Committee, 1994). Nonetheless, labor movements, cultural influences, and Japanese exploitation of coal resources (Fu, 1940) disrupted local society, and the monastery maintained only limited religious activity (Yunheng, 1957).

After 1949, the new government implemented religious freedom and cultural preservation policies (Delege, 1998), and land reform and the commune system transformed the monastery's economic base (Baotou Gazetteer Committee, 1994). The Cultural Revolution caused severe destruction (Delege, 1998). Following the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, wrongful cases were corrected, and religious activities were gradually restored (CPC Inner Mongolia Committee Party History Research Office, 2001). Beginning in 1972, the monastery was placed under government administration, with cultural and monastery management institutions established, and it was designated as an autonomous-region-level protected site, marking a new phase of restoration and preservation (Wang, Yao and Guo, 2009).

The formation of Wudangzhao was deeply rooted in the political structure and religious policies of the Qing dynasty. It emerged from the interaction among state power, the religious system, and local society. Through institutions such as the Lifan Yuan, the reincarnation system of Living Buddhas, and the conferment of official titles, the Qing court incorporated Wudangzhao into its imperial governance framework, making it not only a religious center but also a medium for frontier administration and ethnic integration.

Wudangzhao at Baotou in the dimension of 'The Production of Space' in the context of the Qing Dynasty (1749-1912)

The French scholar Henri Lefebvre systematically proposed the concept of "the production of space" in The

Production of Space (1991). He challenged the traditional view of space as a passive container, arguing instead that space is a social product shaped by power, economy, and culture. Spatial production both reflects and transforms social structures (Lefebvre, 1991).

The Wudangzhao architectural complex extends along the mountain slopes, exhibiting some irregularity due to differing construction periods and terrain. Despite this, its overall layout follows the religious and ethnic principles of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, forming a pattern of "unity with variation." Centered on the earliest structure, the Dongkuo'er Hall, the monastery evolved into a cohesive system that emphasized the central complex and embodied the Tibetan Buddhist ideal of spiritual congregation. Pathways, walls, gateways, and color schemes interconnect the buildings, integrating them with the landscape to create a grand, harmonious ensemble that amplifies its religious symbolism through both spatial composition and monumental presence.

The Wudangzhao complex is organized into two main sections: the Hall Area and the Living Buddha's Residence. The Hall Area ascends the mountain along a clear central axis, forming a distinct hierarchical order. From front to back, the sequence progresses from the Suguqin Hall to the Dongkuo'er Hall and finally to the Lamrin Hall, each emphasizing the prominence of its principal structure.

At the mountain's base, a broad plaza establishes a grand setting, with the creamy-white Suguqin Hall and the adjacent Queyila Hall creating a solemn visual impression. Higher up, the Dongkuo'er and Dangexide Halls, marked by their massing and vivid colors, form the architectural and visual core. The Lamrin Hall crowns the axis, drawing the eye toward the summit and deepening the spatial perspective. Through its axial composition and ascending rhythm, Wudangzhao achieves a sense of order, dynamism, and sacred majesty.

Wudangzhao is located in the core area of the Daqing Mountain National Nature Reserve, Inner Mongolia, within an ecologically sensitive zone of the midsection of the Yinshan Mountains. The landscape comprises forests, shrubs, and meadows typical of arid and semi-arid ecosystems (Inner Mongolia Forestry and Grassland Bureau, 2023).

Forest coverage in Wudang Valley reaches 55%, with distinct altitudinal vegetation zones: 1100–1400 m foothills, *Festuca lenensis*, *Artemisia frigida* grasslands; 1300–1700 m slopes, *Pinus tabuliformis*, *Quercus liaotungensis*, and *Betula platyphylla* forests; above 1700 m, mixed line-leaf daisy meadows. Pure pine and mixed conifer-broadleaf forests are characteristic of the Yinshan Mountains. The area forms a transitional zone between the North China and Mongolian Plateau floras, supporting approximately 1,200 vascular plant species, including rare species such as the Mongolian almond (*Prunus mongolica*, Level II protected) and *Cypripedium macranthos*. Juniper, Chinese arborvitae, and over twenty

shrub species, including wild cherry and *Rosa xanthina*, enhance plant diversity.

Wudangzhao's surroundings provide habitat and migration corridors for 218 recorded wild vertebrate species, including Level I protected species such as golden eagle, black stork, and griffon vulture, and Level II species such as Chinese goral, leopard cat, and Blakiston's fish owl, indicating high ecological value.

The regional ecosystem plays a crucial role in environmental regulation. As part of a key Yellow River watershed, forests intercept ~300 mm of precipitation annually, reducing surface runoff erosion by over 40%, while mountain soils store ~12.5 kg/m² of organic carbon, serving as an important carbon sink.

Natural features such as Jihuluntu and Aobao Mountain are deeply integrated with Tibetan Buddhist culture, forming a unique ecological-cultural composite system that provides a model for eco-tourism and biodiversity education (Inner Mongolia Forestry and Grassland Bureau, 2023).

During the Qing Dynasty, Wudangzhao, a major Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Mongolia, exemplified the integration of politics and religion. Supported by the Qing court, the monastery functioned not only as a religious center but also as a local power node connecting Mongolian princes and communities. Monks participated in rituals as well as dispute mediation, tax collection, and other administrative matters (Ming, 2018). These dual functions were legitimized through Qing institutional recognition.

The court's support took three forms: Political Recognition Emperor Qianlong granted the Wudangzhao Living Buddha the title "Dongkuo'er," incorporating him into the official reincarnated lama system; Economic Privileges, the monastery was exempted from land taxes and received gifts of livestock and silver for expansion, ensuring economic independence (Wang Yan, 2020); Authority Confirmation—the monastery exercised religious jurisdiction over surrounding communities and participated in administrative affairs, reflecting the Qing policy of "promoting the Yellow Hat sect to pacify Mongolia."

Monks propagated the "unity of politics and religion," portraying Qing rule as righteous and protective of the Dharma, while leveraging imperial endorsement to consolidate spiritual and secular authority (Zhao Qiang, 2015).

Thus, Wudangzhao served as both a religious center and an instrument of Qing governance, forming a unique social structure in which politics and religion mutually reinforced each other.

Since its founding, Wudangzhao has inherited the Gelugpa's comprehensive organizational system and rigorous educational framework while adapting to local Mongolian conditions, forming a distinctive educational model. The monastery established four major zhacangs:

Dongkuo'er Zhacang (Tsongkhapa Studies Division) – Founded in 1750 (Qianlong 15th year), affiliated with the

Esoteric Studies Division, and was the earliest zhacang at Wudangzhao. Its establishment was associated with the first Living Buddha, Agwang Churimo, who specialized in esoteric studies related to Tsongkhapa. The Dongkuo'er Hall served as both classroom and chapel.

Queyila Zhacang (Exoteric Studies Division), founded in 1752 (Qianlong 17th year), was the largest zhacang in the monastery, with over 70% of the monks enrolled (Qinggele Zabu, 2010). After the completion of the Suguchin Hall in 1757, it became the main venue for scripture study, while debate activities took place on the debate platform in front of Dongkuo'er Hall.

Ahui Zhacang (Esoteric Studies Division) was constructed around 1800 under the supervision of the second Dongkuo'er Living Buddha, with Ahui Hall as the main structure (Bayar, 1988). This zhacang primarily focused on the practices of Vajra Heruka and Bhasrajyaguru, emphasizing esoteric teachings while integrating exoteric doctrines, reflecting the dual emphasis in Wudangzhao's educational system.

Larmiren Zhacang (Bodhisattva Path Division) was established in 1892 (Guangxu 18th year) with Larmiren Hall as the principal building. It specialized in Tsongkhapa's Lamrim Chenmo and was the only zhacang in Inner Mongolia dedicated to this curriculum, demonstrating Wudangzhao's advanced academic system and teaching standards (Wang Leiya, Yao Guixuan, Guo Jianzhong, 2009).

Wudangzhao Monastery houses an extensive collection of gilt-bronze Buddhist statues, with 327 preserved over more than two centuries. Their heights range from just over 10 cm to 10 meters, including the 10-meter bronze Maitreya Buddha in Queyila Hall and the 9-meter bronze Je Tsongkhapa in Lamiren Hall, alongside over twenty statues around two meters tall. Most date from the Qing Dynasty, with some originating from Duolun, Beijing, Qinghai-Tibet, and inland China, showcasing a wide variety of artistic styles and exceptional historical value.

Wudangzhao, as a major Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) monastery in Inner Mongolia, showcases wall painting art that serves not only religious rituals and the sanctification of space but also reflects multiethnic cultural exchange and integration. Since the monastery's establishment, mural painting has continued for over two centuries, with a surviving total area of approximately 800 square meters. The themes encompass the life stories of the Buddha, various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, arhats, protective deities, eminent monks, the six realms of existence, and auspicious patterns, combining both religious and artistic value (Su, 1996).

Wudangzhao preserves the richest collection of Thangka in Inner Mongolia, with 466 extant pieces, mostly kept in secret chambers or Buddha halls and rarely exhibited publicly. For centuries, the Thangka were hung in dimly lit halls, and monks, out of reverence, seldom moved them, which objectively contributed to their preservation.

Religious assemblies, known as “jinghui”, are the main form of religious activities in Tibetan Buddhist temples across Inner Mongolia. While the content of these assemblies is broadly similar across temples, their dates are not uniform. A jinghui mainly includes monks chanting scriptures, deity worship, and ritual ceremonies, and is also referred to as a “fahui”. Large assemblies attract significant crowds, and temple fairs, trading markets, and entertainment activities are often held in front of the temples. Donations from devotees who attend the temples constitute an essential source of income. According to

Mongolian-language archives from the 9th year of the Qianlong Emperor (1744) to the 14th year of the Republic of China (1925), monks from various leagues and banners came to Guangjue Temple to participate in jinghui. The participating regions extended north to present-day Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, northeast to the Balhu area of Hulunbuir, east to the banners of Horqin, south to Ordos, and west to the Alashan League. Despite limited transportation, more than 7,000 monks from other regions attended these assemblies. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. The Mani Assembly and Mongolian-Style Wrestling at Wudangzhao. The Mani Assembly is Wudangzhao’s most important annual religious event. Monks chant the Six-Syllable Mantra to pray for all beings, good weather, and national peace. The assembly also features Mongolian wrestling, horse racing, and archery, blending religious ritual with folk celebration. The solemn ceremonies and lively competitions highlight both devout faith and the vibrant spirit of the Mongolian people (Source: Investigation and Research on Tibetan Buddhist Temples: Meidai Zhao and Wudang Zhao II, 2009).

In Inner Mongolia, after Tibetan Buddhism gradually supplanted shamanism, it skillfully absorbed certain ritual forms long valued by the Mongols, such as offerings at Aobao (stone mounds), fire rituals, and Shangshi ceremonies. Aobao and Shangshi symbolized mountains and forests, reflecting the cultural memory of early Mongol life along the forested Erguna River region. Originally, Aobao, constructed from stones, soil, or grass, served as landmarks and boundary markers, but later evolved into sites for deity worship; Shangshi were decorated trees, with rituals led by elders.

As a critical Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist temple in Inner Mongolia, Wudangzhao’s architectural layout and spatial imagery not only embody religious spirit but also play a central role in shaping local cultural identity, preserving historical memory, and reinforcing a sense of regional belonging. Through its unique spatial structures, symbolic systems, and cultural practices, Wudangzhao has profoundly influenced the construction of identity within Mongolian communities and the development of local consciousness.

During the Qing Dynasty, Wudangzhao was shaped by the influence of imperial power, religious systems, and

local society. Its architectural form reflected sacred religious orders, while its social space reflected the integration of political and religious power. Its artwork and rituals reinforced the dynasty’s legitimacy and symbolized the cosmic order. Wudangzhao was thus an important religious center and instrument of governance, using religious culture to shape the beliefs of the people of that era and foster social unity in the Mongol region.

Following the collapse of the imperial system and the rise of the modern state, the republican era, which led to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, brought about significant changes in governance and religious policies, gradually altering the role and spatial structure of Wudangzhao. Wudangzhao transformed from an imperial religious center into a place of local faith and a symbol of cultural identity linked to Tibet.

Wudangzhao at Baotou from the Republic of China to before the National AAAA tourist attraction (1912-2002)

During the Republican period, local governance of temples

in Inner Mongolia and the Baotou region exhibited notable contradictions. On one hand, local authorities inherited the Qing Dynasty's dual governance system of "Jasak princes + lamas," relying on temples to maintain social order (Wuyun Gerile, 2003). On the other hand, influenced by the Nanjing National Government's reformist agenda of "eliminating superstition and promoting new policies," the government sought to modernize and reform religious institutions (Shiqiang, 1989). This contradiction reflected multiple considerations, including the harmonization of ethnic relations, the control of religious power, and the needs of social governance (Bailadugeqi, 2009).

In the early Republican period, local governments did not completely dismantle the Qing Dynasty's framework for religious governance. Instead, they controlled the economic resources and religious activities of temples through a system of registration and record-keeping for temples, living Buddhas, and lamas, stipulating that rituals such as ordination and religious ceremonies required official approval (Huang, 1936). This model continued to maintain the central role of temples in Mongolian society, for example, in the Baotou area alone, dozens of temples such as Nanlongwang Temple and Longquan Temple served not only as religious centers but also as social hubs for both Mongolian and Han communities.

Local governments relied on temple assets, including land, pastures, and ritual donations, to maintain social stability, particularly in Baotou, a commercial hub at the Han-Mongol border. Economic resources were allocated through measures such as temple taxation and lending. Connections between merchant guilds, such as the Qiao family's Fushengyuan, and donations to Nanlongwang Temple further underscore the temple's pivotal role within the local economic network.

During the period of warlord conflicts, many local authorities confiscated temple assets under the pretexts of "promoting education" or "expropriation." Small temples in Baotou were often merged or had their resources diverted, whereas large lama temples were preserved due to their significance in ethnic relations (Bai Ladugeqi, 2009). In Suiyuan, instances occurred in which the military occupied temples and forcibly requisitioned grain and donations (Suiyuan Gazetteer Office, 2007).

Temples held strong social cohesion within Mongolian society, and local governments leveraged them to appease the Mongolian population, particularly in Baotou, where Tibetan Buddhism exerted significant influence. Nanlongwang Temple, as a shared place of worship for "Zou Xikou" migrants and indigenous Mongolians, became an important instrument for local authorities in mediating ethnic tensions (Yan, 2004).

During the various Mongolian autonomy movements of the Republican period, the potential mobilization power of temples and living Buddhas placed local governments in a dilemma; they needed to employ conciliatory policies to stabilize religious forces while simultaneously fearing that these institutions could become bases for political unrest.

This resulted in a flexible strategy of "alternating between appeasement and control" (Sudebilige, 2013).

After the 1920s, the "promote education, abolish temples" policy was implemented much more leniently in Inner Mongolia and Baotou than in inland regions (Dalizabu, 2001). Local authorities attempted to repurpose temple assets for schools or establish educational institutions within temples, but such efforts frequently met resistance, as they encroached on core religious and ethnic interests. This compromise reflected the deep interconnection between religion and ethnic identity. For instance, Nanlongwang Temple in Baotou not only enshrined the Dragon King but also honored the ancestral deities of Shanxi merchants, forming a multi-ethnic faith community; forced reforms risked triggering social unrest.

Since the reform and opening-up, China's tourism industry has undergone a fundamental transformation from a traditional "foreign-affairs-oriented service" to a market-oriented "economic industry." This process not only reflects the achievements of the country's broader institutional reforms but also demonstrates the tourism sector's self-evolution amid economic globalization and social modernization. The development of the industry can generally be divided into the following three stages: 1) The Initial and Transformational Stage (1978–Mid-1980s). 2) The Stage of Rapid Growth and the Emergence of Domestic Tourism (Mid-1980s–Early 1990s). 3) The Stage of Industrial Expansion and Market Diversification (1990s–2002).

The transformation of Wudangzhao's role is, in essence, a process of reconstructing its core functions and redefining its spatial attributes. Under the combined influences of modernization, urbanization, and the growth of the tourism economy, the social functions of traditional religious sites have undergone profound changes.

Entering the 1990s, with the comprehensive marketization of China's tourism industry and the rapid growth of domestic tourism, religious and cultural sites began to be systematically integrated into tourism development frameworks.

In response to the growing homogenization of tourism products nationwide, the Baotou municipal government and relevant tourism authorities deliberately strengthened Wudangzhao's tourism function, shaping it into a distinctive "cultural brand" that stood apart from conventional nature-oriented scenic attractions. (Figure 4)

As a typical case of successful transformation from a sacred religious site into a renowned tourist destination, Wudangzhao has undergone a developmental process deeply marked by the interweaving and interaction of its religious and tourism functions.

This interaction has, on one hand, facilitated a coordinated coexistence between the two spheres; yet, on the other hand, it has inevitably generated internal tensions and contradictions that continue to shape the site's evolution and management practices.

The development of tourism has generated ticket

revenue, social donations, and increased government attention to Wudangzhao, providing crucial financial support for the restoration of ancient architecture, the preservation of cultural relics, and environmental improvement. Without these external resources, such large-scale conservation efforts would be difficult to sustain, relying solely on the capabilities of religious institutions themselves.



Figure 4. Wudangzhao Tourism Scenic Area. Under the guidance of national policies and the promotion of integrated cultural and tourism development, Wudangzhao has gradually transformed from a purely religious site into a comprehensive tourism destination centered on religious heritage preservation, sightseeing, and cultural experience. Tourists Li Yong and Wang Lin respectively expressed their purposes for visiting Wudang Zhao, as well as their knowledge and understanding of Wudang Zhao prior to their visit. (Source: Researcher, 2024).

In this sense, tourism has injected new economic vitality into the preservation and continuation of religious cultural heritage.

During the Brick Period (1912–2002), Wudangzhao Temple transformed a traditional religious shrine into a modern cultural tourism destination. This involved issues of cultural politics and the re-definition of religious space, which were related to national tourism policies. This resulted in changes in social structures and adjustments in religious policies related to Wudangzhao Temple. At the same time, it also demonstrated the repositioning of religious space amidst modernity and secularization.

The Wudangzhao phenomenon thus reflects the interconnected social issues between religion, belief, and state power. Wudangzhao has thus undergone a complete transformation from a "religious and political space" to a "cultural and tourism space," exemplifying the revitalization and restoration of religious heritage in modern society. The evolution of Wudangzhao not only demonstrates the adaptation of the state-religion

relationship but also the redefinition and mobilization of traditional sacred spaces in a contemporary context.

Wudangzhao at Baotou in the dimension of 'Re-Production of Space' and Meaning Change in the context of Modern China Tourism (2002-2024)

The large-scale development of modern tourism in China is the result of the interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors. First, the transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy has fostered a market-driven operational mechanism in the tourism industry, providing institutional support for its growth. Second, rising household incomes have driven an upgrade in consumption patterns, with leisure tourism gradually emerging as a new form of consumer demand, while the rise of consumer culture has injected sustained momentum into the tourism sector. At the same time, the central government has continuously introduced policies on cultural heritage protection and the integration of culture and tourism, clarifying the development direction of the tourism industry and providing policy support for its standardized and high-quality growth (Bramwell and Lane, 1993).

As the most representative Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Inner Mongolia, Wudangzhao is not only a spiritual sanctuary for the religious beliefs of the Mongolian people but also an essential symbol of ethnic cultural identity and intercultural integration, owing to its embodiment of Mongolian-Tibetan cultural fusion, preservation of complete Tibetan-style architectural relics, and profound religious heritage (Heberer, 2006). Its dual value in religious transmission and cultural representation highlights the diversity of ethnic cultures in Inner Mongolia and reflects the cultural influence of Tibetan Buddhism in northern ethnic regions.

Before its establishment as a national AAAA-level tourist attraction, although Wudangzhao was an important religious sanctuary and a nationally protected cultural relic site with profound cultural and religious value, its tourism infrastructure had long been inadequate, making it difficult to meet the demands of modern tourism development (Xiaobo and Shufen, 2012). The situation at the time could be summarized as "a scenic site without a district," lacking a systematic tourism function and comprehensive supporting services. To completely reverse this situation, the local government led a thorough and systematic infrastructure upgrade project, laying a solid material foundation for the scenic area's transformation and development.

The infrastructure upgrade of Wudangzhao has been a systematic and comprehensive project, reflecting the local government's coordination and execution capacity in building a tourism public service system (Jigang and Yifang, 2019). By comprehensively improving transportation accessibility, service facilities,

environmental management, and safety measures, the scenic area has undergone a fundamental transformation from a traditional religious site to a modern tourist destination, providing a solid physical foundation for its successful establishment as a national AAAA-level tourist attraction. This case also demonstrates that, in developing countries, decisive government-led infrastructure intervention during the initial stage of tourism development at cultural heritage sites is a key factor for successful scenic area construction (Timothy and Nyaupane, 2009).

Against the backdrop of China's overall shift toward cultural tourism, tourism patterns are moving from primarily natural landscape sightseeing to deeper models emphasizing "cultural experience + experiential tourism + Buddhist culture + historical exploration". Visitors increasingly value experiential aspects such as "immersive experiences," "cultural significance," and "photography and social media check-ins. As a Tibetan Buddhist monastery and historical site, Wudangzhao aligns perfectly with this trend. By hosting cultural forums, summits, and similar events, Wudangzhao effectively leverages the niche cultural tourism market to attract scholars, writers, photographers, and cultural tourism enthusiasts.

After being rated as a AAAA-level tourist attraction, Wudangzhao received the endorsement of an authoritative "official label." Leveraging this credential, it has gained higher recommendation weight and increased exposure on mainstream platforms, such as Ctrip, and in various tourism promotion activities, becoming a focal point for visitors searching for cultural tourism destinations in Inner Mongolia.

Utilizing modern communication channels, including online media, social media platforms, WeChat official accounts, Douyin, and travel review apps, Wudangzhao's cultural landmark image, known as the "Potala Palace on the Grassland," and its sports-tourism IP, the "Wudangzhao Cup" cycling race, have been widely disseminated. The "Wudangzhao Cup," accumulated over fifteen years, has become one of the top 100 national brand events, continuously expanding its influence through live race broadcasts, participant sharing, and online discussions.

Local governments and tourism institutions have consistently enhanced the brand's influence through a diversified model of "festival activities + self-media promotion + IP creation." For example, during the cycling event, the "Joyful Xiguitu" cultural tourism consumption series is held, coordinated with integrated media centers and cultural workers to create online publicity, generating a "Follow the Race to Shiguai" trend that effectively stimulates tourism consumption in the scenic area and surrounding regions (Baotou Culture and Tourism, 2025).

To meet the higher standards required for advanced-level scenic area evaluation, Wudangzhao has continuously improved its hardware conditions, including transportation, accommodation, signage, visitor centers,

and safety facilities (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2019). At the same time, staff training has been strengthened to enhance reception and service capabilities. These improvements have directly contributed to a better visitor experience, creating a positive feedback loop.

The tourism development of Wudangzhao has generated an industry spillover effect centered on Tibetan Buddhist cultural experiences, effectively driving the coordinated growth of local agricultural and sideline products (such as grassland beef and mutton, sea buckthorn products), Mongolian handicrafts (such as silver ornaments, embroidery, and thangka reproductions), as well as the catering, accommodation, and transportation sectors, forming a development chain of "scenic area attraction industry linkage, consumption upgrade" (Timothy, 2011).

Visitors' comprehensive consumption within and around the scenic area is continuously amplified through economic multiplier effects, revitalizing local small and medium enterprises while providing income-generating opportunities for individual operators. For resource-dependent regions like Shiguai District, which historically relied on coal mining, the cultural tourism industry centered on Wudangzhao has gradually become a new economic growth point. By substituting for the economic role of traditional mining, it supports the region's transition from a "black coal economy" to a "green cultural tourism economy" (People's Government of Shiguai District, 2020).

Within the theoretical framework of spatial reproduction, layout and functional optimization constitute the key pathway for the transformation from "monastery" to "tourist site," profoundly reflecting Lefebvre's (1991) core idea that space is not a passive container but a social product constructed by multiple forces. At Wudangzhao, Suguchin Hall (the main sutra hall) serves as the core, while historical buildings, such as Buddha halls and monks' quarters, retain their traditional Tibetan-style layout, built along the mountainside in a staggered, layered arrangement, preserving the original historical texture without structural alteration. This form of spatial modification, which maintains historical authenticity while integrating new functions, aligns with international best practices in religious heritage tourism that emphasize balancing the preservation of authenticity with functional adaptation (Avramidis and Economou, 2021).

By establishing clearly defined tour routes, selectively opening specific halls during non-religious periods, and implementing railings and signage systems to guide visitor behavior, Wudangzhao minimizes interference with cultural relics and monastic activities. Additionally, measures such as visitor flow control, maintaining silence within the halls, and using soft lighting help preserve the solemn atmosphere of the religious space. This approach of coordinating sacredness with tourism through spatial design represents a typical strategy for achieving

sustainable development in religious heritage sites (Watson, 2023).

The tour routes are designed as a “single loop” or “dumbbell-shaped” path, guiding visitors to enter from the main entrance, sequentially visit the primary halls, and exit through a designated exit. This design avoids repeated or intersecting paths, improving both tour efficiency and visitor experience. This circulation organization, by standardizing visitor movement along a preset path, fundamentally illustrates how spatial representations guide and regulate spatial practice (Lefebvre, 1991).

A unified signage system rich in Tibetan cultural elements—including guide maps, directional signs, and interpretive panels—replaced the previous rudimentary or missing signs. This not only addresses visitors’ wayfinding challenges but also constructs a coherent cultural narrative, interpreting the spatial meaning and transforming the physical site into a cultural space with educational functions. This aligns with Chao and Jamal’s (2023) observation that heritage space meanings can be reconstructed through symbolic systems. (Figure 5)



Figure 5: Wudangzhao Visitor Map. The visitor map is displayed at the visitor center and entrance, with paper guides available. Major halls and routes are clearly marked, allowing visitors to follow a clockwise path without backtracking. Signage and interpretive panels align the tour flow with the monastery’s spatial layout, balancing sightseeing convenience with the site’s religious solemnity. (Source: Researcher, 2024).

The tourism development of Wudangzhao essentially reflects a history of the continual evolution of its social functions and audience groups. Its trajectory from a religious pilgrimage site to a mass tourism destination, and then to a cultural experience venue, directly mirrors the changing composition and upgraded demands of its visitors. This evolutionary logic closely aligns with Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the production of space, which emphasizes that the meaning of space is continuously reconstructed through social practice.

The tourism development of Wudangzhao did not occur overnight; it can be summarized in three key stages, each accompanied by a continuous reconstruction of spatial meaning:

- 1) From the Establishment of the Temple to the Reform and Opening-Up Period, “Sacred Space” Centered on Religious Pilgrimage.
- 2) From the Reform and Opening-Up Period to Designation as a National AAAA-Level Scenic Area from “Sacred Space” to “Scenery to Be Observed”.

- 3) From Designation as a National AAAA-Level Scenic Area to the Present, from “Scenery” to a “Cultural Experience Venue”.

In this stage, this analysis, spanning the period from 2002 to 2024, systematically examines the full process of Wudangzhao’s “spatial reproduction” and “meaning transformation” within the context of modern Chinese tourism. By analyzing historical evolution, policy initiatives, spatial layout optimization, and the construction of cultural identity, the study reveals the dynamic path through which Wudangzhao gradually transformed from a traditional religious sanctuary into a national AAAA-level tourist attraction and a regional cultural landmark. The research indicates that Wudangzhao’s development represents not only a physical reconstruction of religious space but also a process of reproduction driven by the interplay of social, cultural, and economic forces, under the guidance of national policies and local government.

Wudangzhao has achieved an organic integration of religious functions, cultural exhibition, and tourism

economy, forming a sustainable model of “development through preservation and preservation through development.” At the same time, the tourism process has fostered cultural consciousness and identity within the local community, positioning Wudangzhao as a vital cultural link that connects history and modernity, faith and the public, as well as the regional and national spheres.

CONCLUSION

The historical evolution of Wudangzhao demonstrates that religious space is not static but continuously reshaped by political power, social change, and economic development. During the Qing Dynasty, Wudangzhao functioned as a key node in the imperial system of “governing the Mongols through the clergy,” integrating political governance with religious dissemination. In the Republic of China and early PRC periods, institutional adjustments and social upheavals weakened its traditional authority, though its religious symbolism persisted. After the Reform and Opening-Up, driven by cultural heritage protection and tourism development, Wudangzhao was reproduced as a multifunctional space that integrates religious practice, cultural display, and tourism value, shifting its significance from a political–religious center to a cultural and economic resource.

Overall, the transformation of Wudangzhao’s space and function reveals how religious heritage in modern China is reconstructed within contemporary political, cultural, and economic contexts. It provides a representative case for understanding the dynamic production of religious space and the cultural transformation of frontier regions in the present era.

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