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East meets West: Spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas

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ABSTRACT

This article is a first attempt at studying the concept of spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas, and examines this western concept within an eastern context. Data from the literature review and in-depth interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. Results show that although spiritual tourism is not widely acknowledged in China, spirituality related to nature has existed for millennia, especially through the concept of the unity of heaven and mankind (in Chinese, *Tian Ren He Yi*). Opportunities for developing and managing spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas are suggested, and its challenges considered. This research adds an eastern viewpoint in order to acquire a broader understanding of spiritual tourism in different cultures and places.

1. Introduction

Protected areas are fundamental to conserving authentic landscapes, biodiversity, and ecosystems (Butzmann & Job, 2017), and play an essential role in sustainable development (Snyman & Bricker, 2019). Some protected areas also preserve a wide variety of cultural and historical sites (Slocum, 2017). Due to these particular characteristics, protected areas have become a major area of interest attracting global attention. For instance, the world's largest environmental network - 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*" (Leung, Spenceley, Hvenegaard, & Buckley, 2018). Based on this definition, IUCN developed a set of guidelines to conserve protected areas as well as a series of related policy publications aimed at sustainable tourism development (e.g. Eagles, McCool, & Haynes, 2002); thus, the significance of linking protected areas and tourism has been widely recognised. Tourism is a potential force that can support protected areas; however, although it offers ample opportunities, it also presents many challenges (Leung et al., 2018).

In recent years, tourism in protected areas has become more popular worldwide. According to Balmford et al. (2015), protected areas receive roughly eight billion visits per year globally (over 80% is in Europe and North America), generating direct tourist expenditure of approximately $600 billion. A number of simultaneous research interests in protected areas include sustainable tourism products (Butzmann & Job, 2017),

governance and benefit-sharing (Heslinga, Groote, & Vanclay, 2019; Islam, Ruhanen, & Ritchie, 2018; Snyman & Bricker, 2019), and management models (Liu et al., 2016; Slocum, 2017). However, little attention has been paid to the spiritual dimensions of tourism in protected areas despite its potential for contributing to sustainability, such as boosting sustainable management in cultural and environmental conservation and local engagement (Kato & Progano, 2017).

Protected areas contain spiritual values, particularly those embodied and reflected in indigenous worldviews, cultural activities, and environmental conservation (Verschuuren & Brown, 2019). These spiritual attractions and the existing spirituality stemming from visitors' own cultural backgrounds could influence visitors' motivations. At the same time, protected areas may represent a place that can fulfil tourists' spiritual demands (Kato & Progano, 2017; Mu, Nepal, & Lai, 2019). Similarly, Xu, Cui, Sofield, and Li (2014) argued that the value of tourism in protected areas is more than simply recreational; it has a more profound meaning, namely self-enlightenment and spiritual fulfilment, which can affect tourism experiences. However, despite a growing interest in this area, few studies address the spiritual dimension of protected areas, leaving a notable gap in the literature.

In 2013, the First UNWTO International Conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development was organised in Vietnam, illustrating the status and significance of spiritual tourism in tourism and sustainable development (World Tourism Organization, 2015). To date, an increasing number of tourism scholars have started to focus on studying spiritual tourism (e.g. Buzinde, 2020; Cheer, Belhassen, & Kujawa, 2017; Kujawa, 2017; Norman, 2012; Willson, McIntosh, &

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Zahra, 2013). However, no widely recognised definition of this concept has been formed, and perspectives from other worldviews, such as the east, are seldom investigated (Buzinde, 2020). Hence, this study analyses this issue, taking the following research question as a starting point: *How does the western conception of spiritual tourism in protected areas apply to an eastern context, and can it be related to the eastern conception of the relationship between humans and nature?* As explained in the Literature Review section, this research defines spiritual tourism as a form of tourism that focuses on an individual's spiritual fulfilment and betterment, and which has been recognised as the typical characteristics of spiritual tourism (Kujawa, 2017; Norman, 2012; Singleton, 2017).

To the best of our knowledge, no prior research has been undertaken in this field. Thus, this article contributes to the burgeoning literature on spiritual tourism by offering both theoretical and practical implications, particularly in the context of Chinese protected areas. Specifically, the western concept of spiritual tourism is challenged, and an eastern vision of nature, *"Tian Ren He Yi"* (the unity of heaven and mankind), is introduced, offering a broader theoretical background to further investigations. To address the research, a literature review was undertaken, together with in-depth interviews with protected area managers, academics and business representatives. Empirical findings show that spiritual tourism is little known and underdeveloped in China, even though protected areas have been related to spirituality for millennia. Suggestions for developing spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas, and related challenges are presented further below.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourism and protected areas

Tourism generates multiple impacts on the economy, environment, and socio-culture in protected areas, and many protected areas are facing financing shortfalls, particularly in developing countries (Snyman & Bricker, 2019). Nations are taking multiple approaches to obtaining more funds, and promoting tourism in protected areas is one of the preferred options (Islam et al., 2018). Tourism provides a market for communities to sell local goods to tourists, enhancing linkages between supply and demand, reducing local economic leakage, and diversifying traditional financial systems (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). However, some researchers indicate that tourism's contribution to residents is overestimated. For instance, Liu et al. (2016) argued that in practice, protected area tourism rarely benefits the majority or the poor in the community, and the economic leakage stemming from tourism is increasingly significant, which might, in turn, damage the local economy.

As tourism offers communities employment opportunities, residents' dependency on nature is reduced, and environmental protection increases (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). Additionally, because tourism generates tremendous economic benefits, it can provide new sources for funds, enhance financial ability, and improve planning and management capacity to better operate and conserve protected areas (Snyman & Bricker, 2019). However, the economic objectives of tourism often conflict with nature protection (Heslinga et al., 2019; Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). Studies show that tourism visitation causes several adverse environmental effects such as a decrease in water and air quality, destruction of vegetation, and wildlife disturbance (Birendra, 2021; Islam et al., 2018; Slocum, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020).

Apart from economic and environmental impacts, tourism in protected areas also influences socio-cultural dimensions. For instance, tourism can benefit local communities by investing in public infrastructure (such as transport, water supplies, electricity, and hospitals) and increase social capital (Snyman & Bricker, 2019). Tourism helps raise awareness of environmental conservation and directs domestic and international attention to protected areas (Liu et al., 2016). The proliferation of tourism development has caused socio-cultural conflicts to emerge in some communities. Adopting tourism in protected areas may threaten or even destroy traditional livelihoods, which in turn reduces community capital (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). Researchers also expressed their concerns about the loss of authentic culture due to its commodification (Mu et al., 2019).

2.2. Spirituality and spiritual tourism

In recent decades, spirituality has gradually gained interest as a research topic. The IUCN defines it thus: "*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). Haq and Yin Wong (2010) argued that focusing on this concept may solve personal and social exhaustion, therefore this area has been recognised as an important field of research, especially in sociology and business. Spirituality can affect an array of economic activities and markets, including the tourism industry, and the interactive relationship between spirituality and tourism is evident, and spirituality may impact tourist experiences (Willson et al., 2013) and motivate tourists to visit certain places (Kato & Progano, 2017). On the other hand, as Cheer et al. (2017) noted, travel plays an essential role in "seeking spirituality", which is an emerging trend in which the visitor seeks transcendence. Although a definition of spiritual tourism has not yet been widely recognised, several articles identify the common characteristic of spiritual tourism as a self-conscious spiritual betterment (Norman, 2012).

To date, most studies focus spiritual tourism on a religious mindset or base it on tourism experiences such as yoga, wellness, or wilderness (Willson et al., 2013), and relationships between religion (religious tourism) and spirituality (spiritual tourism) have been vehemently debated (Cheer et al., 2017). Some researchers see seeking spirituality as a sort of secularisation performance which is both personal and subjective (Kujawa, 2017). They disconnected spirituality from beliefs, seeing tourism as a road towards spiritual experience, and a secular substitute for traditional religion (Sharpley and Jepson, 2011). Conversely, Norman (2012) argued that tourism could not be the secular replacement of religious pilgrimage if religion were not disappearing. Religions have not declined in the contemporary era; rather, they have become marginalised due to increasing secularisation stemming from science and rationality (Kato & Progano, 2017).

As Kujawa (2017) commented, in existing literature, definitions of "religious" and "spiritual" often overlap, adding confusion rather than clarifying the concepts. Therefore, the present study attempts to avoid this circle of definition overlaps between "religious", "pilgrimage", and "spiritual". The essential role of pilgrimages and religions in developing spiritual tourism is recognised, but as Norman (2012) suggested, research should not be limited to such beliefs. To simplify the theoretical basis of this research and obtain diverse perspectives, herein spiritual tourism is defined as a form of tourism focusing on secular spiritual fulfilment and betterment rather than under particular religions.

Researchers also strive to define the relationships between spirituality and tourist motivation and tourist experiences. For instance, Choe, Blazey, and Mitas (2015) found that temples provide a convenient opportunity for people in urban areas with a busy lifestyle to escape from the daily hustle and bustle. These tourists might prefer the experience of "escaping" to the temple itself. Similarly, Sharpley and Jepson (2011) demonstrated that although tourists do not appear to visit these nature-based landscapes purposefully for spiritual fulfilment, their reasons for participating have, to some extent, a subconscious spiritual dimension. In a subsequent study, Jepson and Sharpley (2015) argued that tourists embrace a strong attachment to the destination, namely a sense of place, and visiting rural areas contributes to a more in-depth, emotional experience. However, whether this experience could be termed "spiritual" depends on the individual's "beliefs". This research therefore, tests the possible existence of spiritual dimensions of tourist experiences, and seeks further empirical research to support this viewpoint.

Previous research provides valuable theoretical ground for further

investigation of spiritual tourism; several limitations have been identified. First, topics such as religion, well-being, and yoga are explicitly discussed by scholars (Haq & Yin Wong, 2010; Kato & Progano, 2017; Kujawa, 2017; Singleton, 2017); but eastern philosophies, which are regarded as essential aspects of spiritual tourism, are rarely discussed (Buzinde, 2020), or often limited to yoga tourism in countries such as India. Spiritual tourism in China is significantly less studied, and only a few scholars have attempted to explore spiritual experiences in religious tourism destinations (Huang, Pearce, Guo, & Shen, 2020; Jiang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2018). However, the embedded spirituality has not been articulated explicitly, and spiritual tourism in China has not been investigated as a specific concept. Finally, most empirical research stops at demonstrating spirituality in tourism activities or tourist experiences, and practical issues such as converting spiritual dimensions into tourist attractions or developing spiritual tourism are neglected. Given these significant gaps, this research aims to reveal insights into spiritual tourism in China, thus complementing the existing literature on this topic.

2.3. An oriental approach: "Tian Ren He Yi"

In the Chinese context, travelling in natural landscapes is relevant to spiritual enlightenment (Xu, Cui, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2013). Chinese people have a unique, traditional view of nature that can impact tourist motivations and experiences (Xu, Ding, & Packer, 2008), called *"Tian Ren He Yi"* (the unity of heaven and mankind). The origins of *"Tian Ren He Yi"* are deeply ideological and can be traced back thousands of years to an agricultural period which depended highly on the environment (Ye & Xue, 2008). Today, *"Tian Ren He Yi"* is still recognised as one of the essential pillars of the fundamental spirit of Chinese culture, and contributes to its continuation and development (Zhang, 2003).

In the modern era, *"Tian Ren He Yi"* represents harmonious relationship and deep link between people and nature, and how the Chinese know about the world and cosmos (Xu et al., 2014; Zhang, 2003). As presented in Fig. 1, *"Tian Ren He Yi"* is reflected in conventional philosophies: (1) kindness ("仁" - *Ren*) and loyalty ("义" - *Yi*) in Confucian philosophy; (2) Tao ("道" - *Tao*) and Moral ("德" - *De*) in Taoist philosophy (Jiang, 2007). For instance, "kindness (*Ren*)", the core concept of Confucian philosophy, promotes loving everything, including other people and nature (Xu et al., 2013). In Taoist philosophy, "*Tao*" is the essence and origin of the world and the ultimate reason for the existence of all things. Following *Tao*, the fundamental law and principle, humans and nature can achieve harmony and unity (Ye & Xue, 2008). On the other hand, *"Tian Ren He Yi"* is an essential precondition of kindness (*Ren*), loyalty (*Yi*), *Tao*, and moral (*De*) (Jiang, 2007). Feng (2017) stated that ancient philosophies claim that a person's ultimate achievement is to be a sage, and the highest success of a sage is to be at one with the universe.

Furthermore, *"Tian Ren He Yi"* is anchored in literary compositions, painting, Fengshui, customs, worship and religions, which make up "Chineseness" and Chinese common knowledge (Li, 2008), generating spiritual criteria for Chinese tourists and destinations (Ye & Xue, 2008). Hence, *"Tian Ren He Yi"* is an unavoidable concept when researching spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas. However, only a handful of scholars endeavour to define this concept in tourism studies (e.g. Huang et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2013), and there is a lack of research linking *"Tian Ren He Yi"* with tourism.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research context

In 1956, China built its first national nature reserve in Guangdong Province, named Dinghushan Nature Reserve. This was the first system
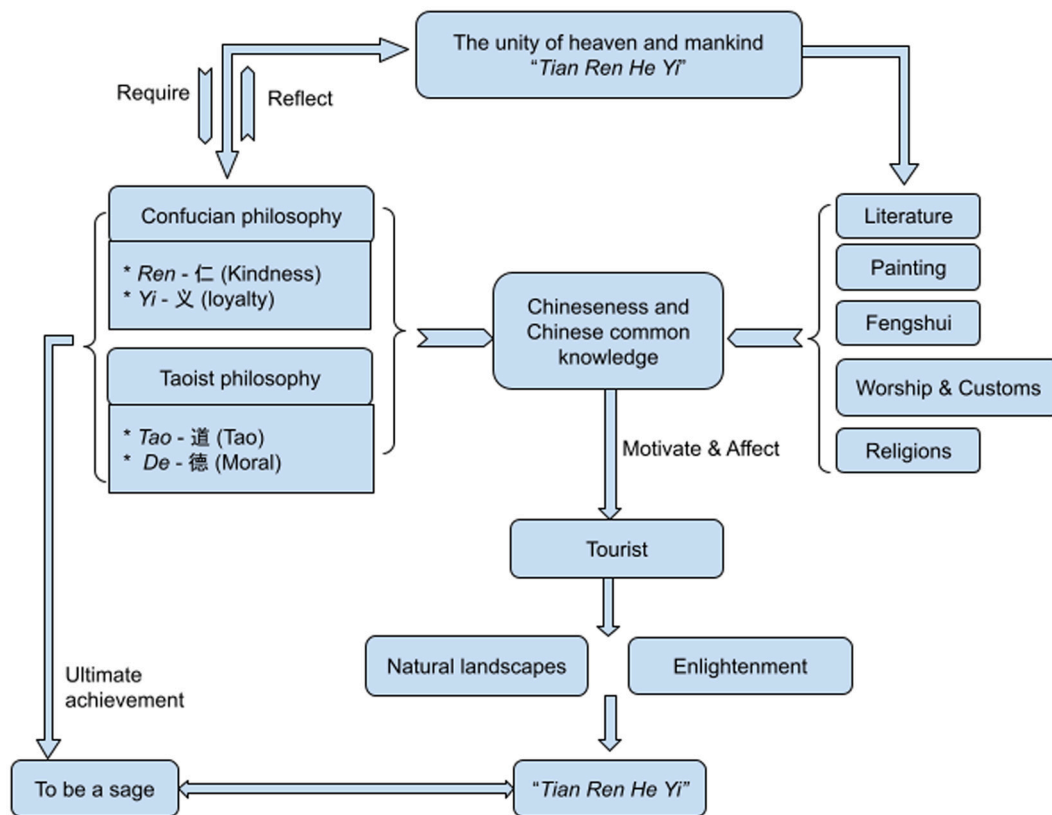

Fig. 1. The connection between *"Tian Ren He Yi"* and tourism.
Source: Own elaboration after Feng (2017), Jiang (2007), Li (2008), Xu et al. (2008, 2013, 2014), Ye and Xue (2008), and Zhang (2003).

established in the county to protect a specific area (Wang, Liu, & Innes, 2019). Today, China has a wide variety of around 12,000 protected areas. These include national parks, nature reserves, scenic parks, forest parks, geo-parks, and wetland reserves (Wang, Liu, Kozak, Jin, & Innes, 2018), which cover 18% of mainland China (Tang & Luan, 2017). Among these, the largest area is given over to nature reserves, which protect 14.84% of the country's land (Tang & Luan, 2017). These protected areas are established (sometimes overlapping), managed and monitored by different governmental sectors at various levels. However, responsibilities are unclear, management goals differ, and regulations are generally inconsistent. This cross-jurisdiction has subsequently led to chaos and inefficiency in terms of management, and has directly affected the conservation and development of protected areas (Wang et al., 2019).

To improve this situation and achieve a certain level of sustainable management, in mid-2019, the State Council of China released guidelines aimed at rebuilding the protected area system (Yang, 2019). The corresponding document decreed that protected areas should be divided into three groups: national parks, nature reserves, and natural parks, depending on management objectives, ecological value, and protection intensity. National parks and nature reserves make up two areas: core protection areas and general control areas, while natural parks are defined as general control areas. In core protection areas, human activities are strictly prohibited. Strict conservation rules apply to common control areas; but eco-friendly human activities are allowed to some extent.

As in other countries, China also faces contradictions regarding protected areas, particularly nature reserves (Wang et al., 2018, 2019). In 2018, China established 2750 nature reserves. This included 474 national nature reserves aimed at protecting biodiversity, ecosystems, and representative geological conditions (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019a, 2019b). These nature reserves are perceived as outstanding resources for developing tourism. However, few researchers have explored this type of tourism in China, let alone spiritual tourism.

Currently, most of the tourism in protected areas is niche tourism, which is divided into publicly led and privately led tourism. This is shown in more detail in Fig. 2. Publicly led tourism is funded and supported by government departments such as forestry administration. For instance, museums are built to popularise science. Privately led tourism operates by tourism enterprises, including parent-child tourism, wildlife tourism and other types of tourism. Overlaps exist between these two categories: natural education tourism, scientific groups, traditional ecotourism, and demonstration parks can be either publicly or privately led. The primary difference is that publicly led tourism is free for the whole populace, while privately led tourism runs for profit. In addition, natural education tourism offers an opportunity to develop tourism in protected areas in the future.

3.2. Participants and procedures

Qualitative methodology was employed to conduct this exploratory research. The first step was a literature review to identify the main concepts contributing to the theoretical framework. Then, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather empirical data. A purposive sample of participants well-acquainted with tourism and protected areas in China was collected to obtain high-quality information. Published lists of protected areas and snowball sampling were employed to generate the sample frame; emails and messages were sent to encourage participation. On receiving confirmation from potential respondents, individual conversations were conducted to introduce the research topic and objectives, and to evaluate the participant's eligibility.

Recruiting professionals rather than tourists as interview participants may raise some concerns. However, as Gearing, Swart and Var, (1974, p. 2) and Azzopardi and Nash (2016, p. 257) argued, "*each expert opinion is representative of a large group of tourists*", so experts can have a clear view of tourists' preferences and are able to articulate this fairly. In this exploratory research, the complexity of spirituality and spiritual tourism may harbour difficulties for tourists to reveal themselves, and accurately identifying "spiritual tourists" as a group can also be problematic. After taking these aspects into consideration, we identified the target population as being industry experts. Furthermore, with the development and prevalence of spiritual tourism, future research should attempt to collect voices and opinions from the tourist side.

Two different sets of interview protocols were designed for two types of interviewees. For protected area managers and business representatives, the first section of the interview topics included: 1) necessary
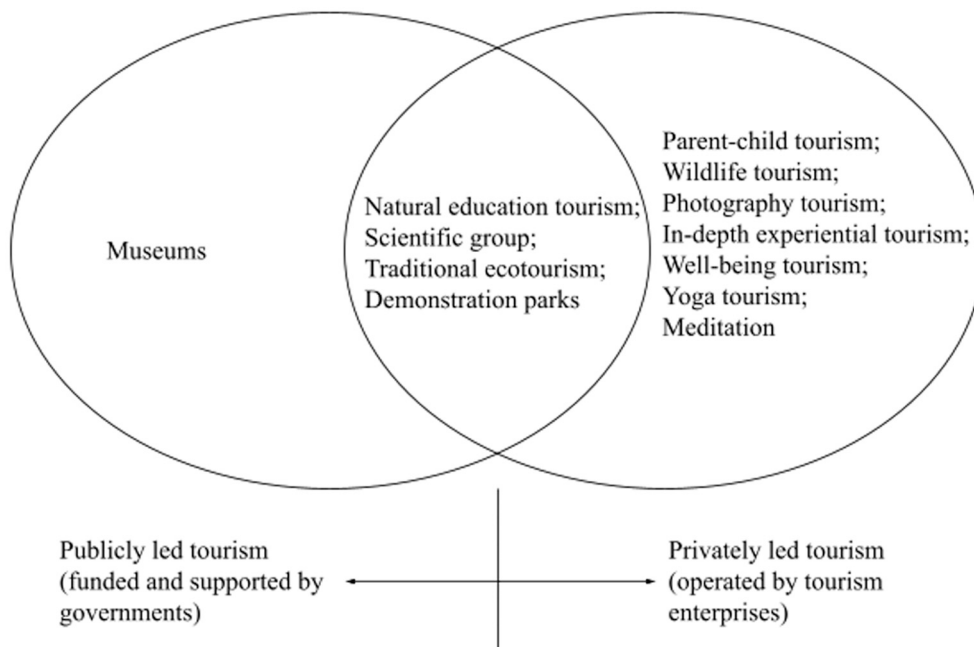

Fig. 2. Tourism in Chinese protected areas.
Source: Own elaboration.

background information such as a brief description of the protected area and tourism situation; 2) the issue of tourism management such as the tourism management team and visions of development; 3) protected area tourist profiles; and 4) social-cultural aspects such as the role of local culture and communities in tourism, measures for cultural conservation and ensuring resident participation. The second section was related to spiritual tourism: 5) participants' knowledge of spiritual tourism; 6) whether the protected area has spiritual tourism or not; 7) existing spiritual tourism; 8) the potential for developing spiritual tourism in the protected area; for example, spiritual values that could be utilised to exploit this type of tourism, willingness to develop spiritual tourism, feasibility, forecasting challenges in developing spiritual tourism, and further comments.

The topic guide for researchers participating in interviews also comprised two parts. First, questions relating to the current development status of tourism in protected areas were posed: 1) participants' knowledge about protected areas as tourism destinations; 2) comments on tourism management in Chinese protected areas, the competence of protected area management teams, and measures of cultural conservation and community participation. Other issues related to spiritual tourism based on topics presented in the previous paragraph were also covered. These included overexploitation and insufficient exploitation of cultural and spiritual assets within protected area tourism development, implementing the concept of spiritual tourism in the Chinese context, and "*Tian Ren He Yi*", a concept that emerged in the first round of interviews. At the end of each interview, the participant's demographic information was collected.

The research ended when samples reached saturation, which means little or no new information could be generated to address the research question (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020; Saldaña, 2016). Consequently, from 29th May 2020 to 30th June 2020, a total of twelve respondents participated in the online interviews. Participants' names are kept confidential and coded as P (e.g. P01) in the results section to protect their privacy. The sample profiles are provided in Table 1. The sample comprised four university academics, one Institute of Geography researcher, five protected area managers, and two CEOs from private tourism enterprises. Most interviews lasted between 45 min and 75 min, and the audios were digitally recorded and transcribed into texts. The documents were uploaded to ATLAS.Ti, which systematically analysed the qualitative data.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data, following a reflexive, "inductive" approach. However, Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, and Snape (2014) discussed that it is impossible to be purely inductive because researchers are influenced by assumptions deductively derived. Following the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006), the first step of data interpretation was transcribing audios into texts and getting familiarised with the data set. Second, the fundamental data was coded with the assistance of ATLAS.Ti by the same researcher who transcribed the data. The authors then undertook a series of discussions to review the codes one by one, and to sort and synthesise these codes together. Third, once the initial themes were formed, revisions were organised to allow all

themes to form a coherent pattern and be refined. The fourth step involved defining and naming themes, in which coherence and consistency was achieved after rounds of improvement. After this, the themes were organised and analysed. With all the above phases completed, the researchers were then able to produce the analysis report. The researchers also consulted some participants to check any statements from the interviews that were unclear (Saldaña, 2016).

This research achieved good credibility and dependability. The interviewees are professional experts, so the collected data is symbolically representative and accurate, and contributes to rich narratives and in-depth descriptions. Interviews, transcripts and analysis were conducted in Chinese; and these were modified to ensure readability for English speakers, making sure the essence of the interviews was faithfully presented.

4. Results: The development of spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas

This section presents the empirical findings, incorporating five emerging themes and the most important codes for each theme. These are summarised in Table 2 and discussed in detail below.

4.1. Key issues in the development of tourism

Results from the interviews indicate that even with outstanding resources, the current development status of tourism in Chinese protected areas is not encouraging. In many protected areas, tourism has not been well-developed as the primary task for Chinese protected areas is environmental conservation rather than economic development, so current policies and regulations strictly limit human activities such as tourism (Zhang et al., 2020). For instance, one interviewee (P07) noted that *"tourism in our protected area has been forced to shut down for rectification following policies. Under the requirements of the government, we need to solve the existing environmental problems caused by previous tourism development and then reopen tourism gradually"*. Thus, compared with environmental protection or other tasks, tourism development seems to be less of a priority.

Apart from the general tourism situation outlined above, three specific controversial issues were identified through interviews. The first issue is the lack of high-quality, experiential tourism activities. Tourism in most protected areas is still confined to sightseeing in nature, while more in-depth, interactive experiences are required. As one interviewee (P03) stated, *"although some protected areas have built museums aimed at popularising science, tourists are unlikely to have a deep experience or gain environmental knowledge by visiting these museums"*. A few participants

Table 1
Summary profile of the sample.

Code	Affiliation	Position	Education
P01	Academia	Researcher	Master's Degree
P02	Academia	Researcher	PhD
P03	Academia	Researcher	PhD
P04	Public Body for Protected Areas	Manager	Bachelor's Degree
P05	Academia	Researcher	PhD
P06	Tourism Private Business	CEO	Bachelor's Degree
P07	Public Body for Protected Areas	Manager	Bachelor's Degree
P08	Tourism Private Business	CEO	Bachelor's Degree
P09	Public Body for Protected Areas	Manager	Bachelor's Degree
P10	Public Body for Protected Areas	Manager	Bachelor's Degree
P11	Academia	Researcher	PhD
P12	Public Body for Protected Areas	Manager	Bachelor's Degree

Table 2
Themes and key codes of tourism in Chinese protected areas.

Theme	Main Code
Key issues in the development of tourism	tourism has been developed in a limited way
	lacks in-depth experiential activities
	ignorance of culture and tradition
	community participation
The spiritual tourism situation	not widely developed
The potential for developing spiritual tourism	significance of developing spiritual tourism
	market foundation
	traditional philosophies
	ethnic and minority cultures
The challenges of developing spiritual tourism	fuzzy definition
	religion
	spiritual tutor
Suggestions for launching spiritual tourism	define the concept
	design the product
	natural science versus social science
	recruit professionals
	resident engagement

pointed out that the entrance fee for most protected areas will probably be eliminated throughout the country in the future. Without additional products or services, companies operating tourism businesses may not be able to receive an income. Therefore, protected areas need to develop other tourism products with more added value urgently.

Most interviewees agree that another problem for tourism development and management in Chinese protected areas is ignorance of local cultures and traditions. This verifies the standpoint of Gao, Lin, and Zhang (2020), who assert that a common issue with tourism development in China is that the focus is on natural scenery rather than culture, even in cultural sites. In addition, at the level of administration, awareness of cultural conservation, especially intangible culture, is much weaker than that of environmental protection. With few proper actions undertaken at the level of protected areas, negative cultural impacts such as modification of traditional livelihoods, culture loss, and commodification of culture (Mu et al., 2019; Stone & Nyaupane, 2018) are still plaguing protected areas. As stated by one interviewee:

"Tourism has changed the traditional livelihoods of residents and affected the local culture. Because the bearer of culture is human, with this change, the original culture, beliefs and habits gradually disappear. It can be said that tourism has cut off the foundation of local cultural tradition" (P01).

The last issue is the complex relationships between protected areas, communities, and tourism. Some protected areas in China are inhabited, so ecological relocation is used to move residents out of protected areas. However, this work is hindered due to lack of funds (Snyman & Bricker, 2019) and the resistance shown by some residents. Conflicts in protected areas are common. For instance, traditional livelihoods such as farming, hunting, and fishing in most protected areas have been remarkably restrained (Slocum, 2017), but some residents might illegally exploit this resource for benefit. Moreover, historically, protected areas in China have been managed under top-down policies, which rely heavily on the expertise of agency staff, thus limiting the participation of stakeholders such as local communities (Islam et al., 2018); hence, on an administrative level, community participation is relatively low. Several participants pointed out that although some nature reserves have paid attention to community participation, the shift is not evident because backward local economies limit perceptions of residents and administrators.

"We consult residents when planning tourism because they have been living here for a long time and have more experience than us about some aspects. After completing the project plan, we usually invite them to participate in reviews and discuss whether it is feasible. However, the initiative to participate is up to individuals. People who value community interests are more willing to participate, while those who do not obtain personal benefits from the project might be less active" (P04).

4.2. The situation of spiritual tourism

The concept of spiritual tourism has not been popularised in China's tourism industry, nor in academia, and most participants had never heard of it before attending the interview. However, after explaining the term and giving some samples, a few interviewees acknowledged that spiritual tourism is long-standing in China. Some famous poets travelled to mountains and rivers in ancient China and expressed their feelings in their landscape poetry. From these landscape poems, it is evident that their travel experience was not merely limited to sightseeing, but had reached a spiritual level.

"Ancient Chinese travel had a spiritual meaning rather than entertainment. People's view of the universe was a kind of spiritual experience. As Tao Te Ching noted: man follows the earth; earth follows heaven; heaven follows the Tao. Tao follows what is natural. This traditional natural ontology is embodied in the works of Zhuangzi, Tao Yuanming, and Su Dongpo, which highlights that the highest level of communication between humans and nature is spiritual communication"(P01).

Although spiritual tourism is lesser-known and underdeveloped in China, evidence shows that some tourism products in protected areas

have features of spiritual tourism, which can be discussed through the three following aspects. First, most participants demonstrate that tourism related to religious and cultural dimensions can be considered spiritual tourism. This kind of tourism is commonly seen in areas of southwestern China such as the Tibet Autonomous Region (e.g. Mt. Everest), and northwestern China, for example Qinghai Province. As one participant (P05) stated, "*there are many tourists without a religion or from different religious backgrounds visiting these places to observe local people's spiritual, religious, and cultural practice for reflection, purification or self-transcendence*". Moreover, another interviewee (P01) commented that "*this type of tourism carries strong spirituality; some routines are even dangerous, but, with exceptional natural landscapes and cultural and spiritual values, these destinations attract tremendous [numbers of] tourists*". Respondents also stated that protected areas located in eastern China have similar tourism products, which are generally based on Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian philosophies, and other traditional cultures.

Tourism also provides tourists with opportunities to get close to nature, connect with natural landscapes, and reflect on the journey, and its spiritual meanings (Huang et al., 2020). Participants frequently mention traditional ecotourism and natural education tourism in protected areas. Some tourists often revisit protected areas for their primitive and wild environment, seeking the inner world in this environment. Furthermore, natural education tourists have a particular tutor, an expert in botany, zoology, or ecology, who can offer professional explanations to help visitors gain fundamental knowledge. By learning and communicating with nature, tourists can more easily attain harmony with nature and thereby treat or prevent physical illnesses and mental health issues stemming from nature-deficit disorder.

Furthermore, tourism activities for rehabilitation and well-being were recognised as a form of spiritual tourism. Protected areas are regarded having spiritual energy, which contributes to physical and psychological well-being. Hence, some protected areas promote yoga and meditation to help tourists discover inner peace and heal themselves spiritually.

4.3. The potential for developing spiritual tourism

Respondents widely recognise the significance of developing spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas. Most participants have a positive attitude towards spiritual tourism and regard it as a "cure" for the problematic situation of tourism in Chinese protected areas. To date, China's tourism development has encountered a bottleneck as over the past thirty years, it has overfocused on tangible products while neglecting the demand for spirituality. As one participant (P01) stated, "*China's tourism focuses too much on physical demand such as 'food', 'accommodation', 'transportation', 'travel', 'shopping', and 'entertainment' rather than tourists' spiritual world*", "*tourism products without intangible value lack vitality and can hardly survive long*". Regarding this point, another interviewee (P11) commented that "*we [tourism in China] need [s] a revolution, spiritual tourism is a solution in a way because it focuses on the tourist's spiritual world*".

Some interviewees indicated that spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas has much potential for development. Most participants agree that the domestic market has formed a particular foundation. As society has developed, tourists' level of education has improved, thereby an increasing number of tourists wish to visit destinations with fascinating natural sceneries and abundant cultural landscapes for deep, integrated experiences. Furthermore, the pressure of living in Chinese society is exceptionally high, especially for people living in metropolises, which can even lead to physical and psychological health problems. These people want to travel to places like protected areas to discover themselves, and to experience and achieve spiritual fulfilment. Thus, spiritual tourism could be attractive to particular groups of tourists. As one interviewee said:

"Lots of visitors from Shanghai enjoy visiting our protected area because we focus on the spiritual world to some extent. They can recharge and then go

back to Shanghai with vigour. Many visitors said that they might visit places like Huangshan once in a lifetime, but they would like to come to our protected area countless times"(P06).

Protected areas possess ample resources to develop spiritual tourism. In ancient China, religious schools such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism preferred to settle in the mountains, far from important historical and cultural sites. Today, Chinese people still have a unique feeling for nature, stemming from a time-honoured tradition and sense of harmony, which is key to thinking about the relationship between humans and nature (Xu et al., 2014). In the Chinese context, the ultimate pursuit of man is unity with nature (Feng, 2017); looking at *"Shanshui"* (the natural landscape) is to see the existence of one's own life in the eternal world. Therefore, travelling to natural areas is a spiritual experience for some Chinese, even without the assistance of an infrastructure or guide. Regarding this topic, most interviewees mention keywords such as *"Tian Ren He Yi"* (Huang et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2018), traditional philosophies, poems, traditional worship of "holy mountains and divine lakes", minority cultures, and Feng Shui forests, all of which verify the Chinese view of nature described in section 2.3.

4.4. The challenges for developing spiritual tourism

Regarding developing spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas, three challenges were identified in the interviews. First, the concept of spiritual tourism, directly translated from English to Chinese as "精神旅游", is difficult to understand for stakeholders such as governments, tourism enterprises, tourists, or communities. Consequently, it will be challenging to win the support of various stakeholders if they do not know spiritual tourism or its value. Meanwhile, due to the absence of a clear, recognised definition in the Chinese context, it will be difficult for companies to develop and promote spiritual tourism, or locate the target market. For instance:

"Quoting terms directly from the West may not enable Chinese people to know how spiritual tourism is manifested in a literal sense. For example, when we mention ecotourism, people associate travelling with natural, authentic landscapes. However, when we refer to spiritual tourism, people might feel confused"(P03).

Second, in some cases, spiritual tourism may be linked to religions (Norman, 2012). Although the Chinese people are free to choose their faith or be atheists, it would be prudent for government bodies such as nature reserve administration bureaus to intervene in tourism products with some religious significance (Kirillova, Wang, Fu, & Lehto, 2020). In other words, administration bureaus may not take the initiative to develop spiritual tourism products related to religions. Few participants show concern over whether developers misunderstand the concept, and thereby turn spiritual tourism into extreme belief or an activity involving religious superstition. One interviewee explained:

"In China, it is suggested that we advocate science. Concerning religious issues, some tourism enterprises or institutions may talk about it. Still, nature reserve administration bureaus will try their best to avoid these topics because we should give priority to science"(P10).

Finally, spiritual tourism requires highly qualified tour guides; however, interviewees point out that tour guides in China are not professional enough. Some highly educated tourists with background knowledge may be capable of seeking spirituality by themselves, but some tourists require assistance from a "spiritual guide", or the quality of their tour may be affected (Mu et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2013). Some protected areas have been trying to recruit highly qualified tour guides; unfortunately, there are not enough to meet the demand. Attracting, hiring, or inviting these tour guides may increase staffing costs and the companies' budgeting pressures. In this regard, one interviewee said:

"We can find some local elders to teach folk customs, but in other aspects, we have to go to the cities to get some good mentors. For example, we may invite an abbot from a temple for guiding Zen meditation; these people are not so easy to find, and the cost is very high"(P06).

4.5. Suggestions for launching spiritual tourism

In this research, four suggestions for developing spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas are identified. First, most interviewees note that the first and most essential task is to define the concept in the Chinese context in the academic world, and then introduce it to the tourism industry. Although some protected areas have set up tourism activities related to spiritual dimensions, spiritual tourism is still brand new for researchers, governments, and tourism companies. Therefore, it is urgent for academics to develop a recognised, explicit definition in Chinese background. In addition, other issues should be considered, such as clarifying boundaries, setting indicators, and drawing up guidelines to give policymakers suggestions. Based on a more mature academic foundation, stakeholders can better understand the importance of developing spiritual tourism, and be willing to participate in these projects, as well as learning how to plan and design it appropriately. For instance:

"So far, we know nothing about spiritual tourism, so the first thing we need to do is to provide a precise definition. Then, we can try to design some products. Anyway, probably the safest way is to start from the academic field. Once your research gets well-known and influential, governments and the private sector will consult you. Moreover, if residents realise that they could benefit from it, they may also participate"(P11).

Interviewees also argue that even though spiritual tourism seems significant for protected areas and the tourism industry, persuasive data is still needed in order to prove the rationality and feasibility of developing spiritual tourism in China. Hence, when refining academic research, designing particular products in some protected areas and launching these as typical pilot projects will need to be carried out. The preliminary findings may also contribute to building indicators and guidelines.

"Suitable protected areas for developing spiritual tourism need to be selected, and then classified, several typical cases should be chosen to do this. According to the results, we can say that it is reasonable to plan spiritual tourism in China. After that, we can go deeper and research how specifically it can be developed"(P05).

Furthermore, the organisational structure of the nature reserve administration bureau needs to be improved, as there is a remarkable absence of social scientists in comparison to natural science professionals (Slocum, 2017). This advice is proposed by all academics participating in this research. When protected areas plan tourism, they may obtain professional support from external sources, such as other governmental departments, universities and institutions. However, experts working in these organisations know little about local communities, which may lead to tourism products lacking regional characteristics. Therefore, protected areas wanting to develop tourism must be equipped with excellent tourism professionals who can take charge of planning, management, and supervision. For example:

"It is suggested that managers in protected areas grasp corresponding professional knowledge, such as management and spiritual tourism, in order to avoid negative impacts on tourism development caused by poor decision-making"(P03).

Finally, as long as the communities in protected areas are aware of the benefits of tourism development, most people may choose to support and participate in tourism development, which provides a good opportunity for involving locals. Few interviewees note that spiritual tourism in some nature reserves is closely related to the local civilisation. Residents are the inheritors of traditional culture, so only with their participation can protected areas develop spiritual tourism outstandingly. Also, tourism development cannot be too much. Otherwise, it may damage the authenticity of historical civilisation. As one interviewee said:

"Protected areas should promote resident engagement. I also think we need to change our mindset, allowing tourists to participate in the production and lifestyle of residents, living with residents and experiencing the most authentic traditional culture, rather than modifying local livelihoods to meet

the needs of tourists"(P01).

5. Discussions

Results show that tourism in Chinese protected areas is underdeveloped because promoting tourism is given less importance than conserving the environment. This finding reflects a popular topic discussed by researchers such as Butzmann and Job (2017), Slocum (2017), and Zhang et al. (2020): the relationship between conservation and development, which influences achieving sustainable management. Given the natural barriers and prior mindset of environmental protection, which restrains traditional livelihoods, tourism has become one of the few approaches to developing the economy (Liu et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the role of tourism has not been widely respected in Chinese protected areas. On the other hand, scholars have utilised empirical research to prove that the contribution of tourism to sustainable management in protected areas might be overestimated. For instance, Liu et al. (2016) point out that tourism rarely benefits the poor, and Zhang et al. (2020) also demonstrate that participation in tourism may not be the best strategy for livelihood or harmonising the relationship between development and conservation. Hence, the role of tourism in Chinese protected areas requires a rethink based on further research.

We identify three common controversial issues in Chinese protected area tourism. These are the quality of tourism products, neglecting cultural aspects, and complex relationships between protected areas, communities, and tourism. Among these, the latter two issues have been widely discussed in previous research. For instance, Xu et al. (2008, 2013, 2014) and Ye and Xue (2008) have argued that tourism in Chinese natural landscapes should not be separated from cultural aspects. However, this research shows that tourism in Chinese protected areas primarily focuses on tangible natural sceneries, while intangible cultural dimensions are often ignored, consistent with Gao et el.'s (2020) argument. The findings agree with Snyman and Bricker's (2019) viewpoint that communities are less empowered and have a relatively low degree of participation in tourism. However, this differs from Slocum's (2017) investigation, which points out that residents in the USA are highly engaged, although protected areas fall under top-down policies. Hence, management models indeed impact resident participation, but this may not be the single or primary reason. In the case of Chinese protected areas, residents' capabilities, community members' preferences (Snyman & Bricker, 2019), and the long tradition of being a centralised nation (Gao et al., 2020) may be variables influencing residents' engagement.

This research indicates that the concept of spiritual tourism came from the western world and has not yet been popularised in China, where most people, including professionals, may not have heard of it. However, although spiritual tourism has not formally been advocated in China's tourism industry or academia, it is not a recent phenomenon. Spiritual tourism has a long history in China, as demonstrated by Haq and Yin Wong (2010) and Kato and Progano (2017), who concluded that spirituality related to nature has existed since ancient times.

Three categories of existing tourism in Chinese protected areas sharing similar features with spiritual tourism were identified in the literature. First, for tourists without religion or with different beliefs visiting religious and cultural sites, Norman (2012) recognises them as experimental, spiritual tourists; and Choe et al. (2015) found that these tourists may aim to "escape" and search for individual consciousness rather than any religious purpose. Second, nature tourism, such as traditional ecotourism and natural education tourism, is recognised as having spirituality because these provide tourists with opportunities to get close to nature, obtain knowledge, discover inner peace, and build a harmonious relationship with nature (Huang et al., 2020). This finding agrees with Sharpley and Jepson (2011) that travelling to a natural landscape may contain a spiritual meaning. However, in another study, Jepson and Sharpley (2015) state that the spiritual significance is more likely a "sense of place", and whether the emotion is "spiritual" or not

depends on tourists' beliefs. The Chinese view of nature and "a sense of place" is different because the view of "*Tian Ren He Yi*" emphasises the harmonious relationship between humans and nature and being at one with the universe (regarded as an ultimate achievement), which is more intense and thus goes beyond "a feeling of a place". Third, when it comes to rehabilitation-related tourism, Farkic, Isailovic, and Taylor (2021), Kato and Progano (2017), Kujawa (2017), Norman (2012) and Singleton (2017) have also mentioned the experience of "healing" and rehabilitation in spiritual tourism.

The enormous potential for developing spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas is verified as it is underpinned by a potential market. In previous research, the relationship between spiritual dimensions and tourist motivations has been demonstrated by scholars such as Cheer et al. (2017), Kujawa (2017), Sharpley and Jepson (2011), Singleton (2017), and Willson et al. (2013). Moreover, some researchers (Xu et al., 2008, 2013) argue that spiritual dimensions may be one essential motivation for Chinese tourists to visit natural landscapes. This research shows that Chinese protected areas are capable of providing resources for spiritual tourism. These could be tangible resources, such as natural landscapes, or buildings belonging to different philosophical schools (Jiang et al., 2018), or intangible elements such as the traditional view of nature (Xu et al., 2008, 2013, 2014; Ye & Xue, 2008); both can be employed to develop spiritual tourism.

As presented in Fig. 3, this research argues that "*Tian Ren He Yi*" is another essential pillar for investigating spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas, and spiritual tourism can bring together both philosophical theory and a pragmatic industry. Specifically, as noted in Section 2.3, "*Tian Ren He Yi*" interacts with ancient philosophies (Jiang, 2007) and leaves a lasting impression on areas of Chinese culture such as literature, painting, Fengshui, worship and customs, and religions. Cultural elements such as literature are recognised as materials for promoting spiritual tourism (Li, 2008). These elements form Chineseness and Chinese common knowledge, and affect tourist behaviours and tourist destinations, including protected areas (Li, 2008). However, studies on how the concept of "*Tian Ren He Yi*" relates to tourism is lacking in the literature. The present research brings to light the role of spiritual tourism by connecting tourism to "*Tian Ren He Yi*", and tourists to nature. By practising spiritual tourism, tourists can have access to developing a spiritual relationship with nature, attaining self-enlightenment, and finally achieving the realm of "*Tian Ren He Yi*". However, further research is needed to demonstrate whether this approach works for both domestic and international markets, and to what extent this knowledge can be applicable to or comparable with similar phenomena elsewhere.

6. Conclusions

This research aims to explore the concept of spiritual tourism in protected areas in a Chinese context by examining the traditions surrounding the relationship between humans and nature, and scrutinising the "collision" between western concepts and eastern philosophies. A literature review and in-depth interviews were carried out to conduct this exploratory study. To conclude, the concept of spiritual tourism arising from Anglo-Western scholarship has not yet been popularised or systematically developed in China, even though type of tourism has a long history that can be traced back thousands of years. Even today, in modern China, several kinds of tourism show similar features to spiritual tourism. Chinese protected areas have great potential to develop spiritual tourism because of abundant resources and the formation of potential markets. However, several challenges are inevitable: 1) how to define the concept in the Chinese context; 2) the sensitivity of religion for governments; and 3) the lack of highly qualified tour guides. Reflecting on launching spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas, the following suggestions are put forward: 1) define the concept of spiritual tourism in the academic field and spread this to the tourism industry; 2) show the significance of spiritual tourism by providing persuasive data
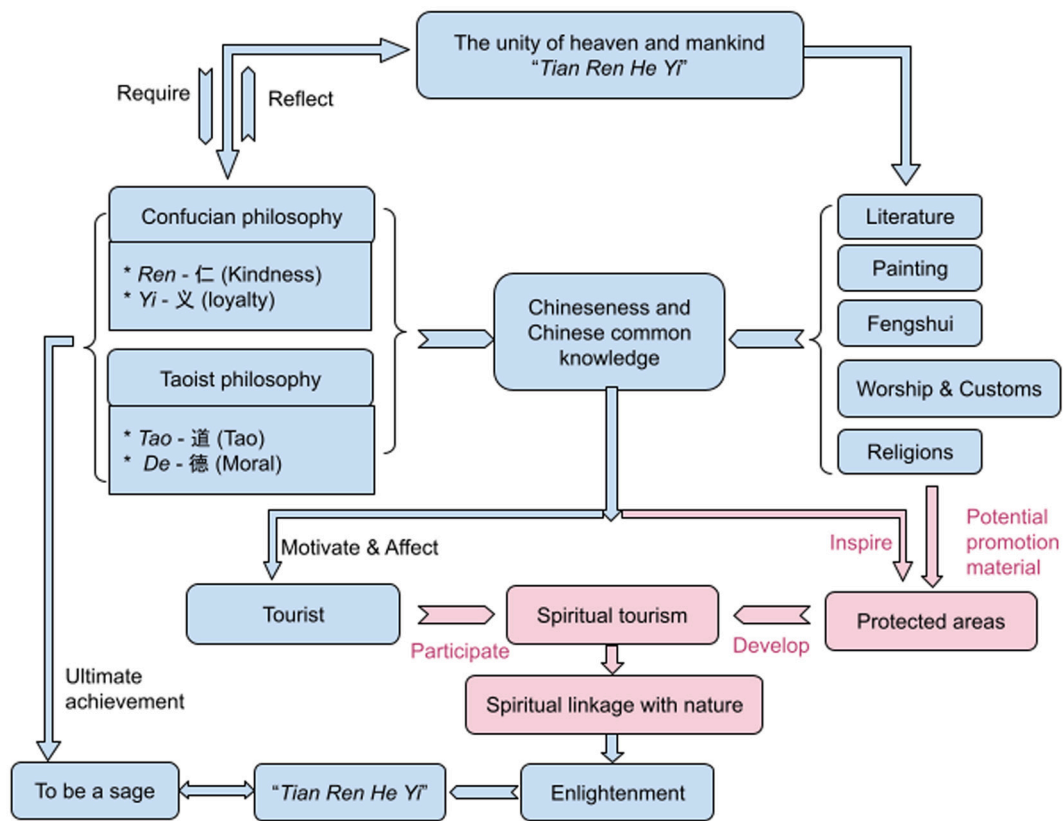
Fig. 3. Developing spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas.
Source: Own elaboration after Feng (2017), Jiang (2007), Li (2008), Xu et al. (2008, 2013, 2014), Ye and Xue (2008), and Zhang (2003).

from pilot projects; 3) optimise the organisational structure of nature reserve administration bureaus; and 4) introduce community participation.

This article is a first academic attempt to conceptualise the issue of spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas from a national viewpoint, bringing a new approach to the development of tourism in China. At the same time, it may help change the problematic situation some protected areas face when attempting to develop sustainable tourism. In this regard, the Chinese attitude to nature, namely *"Tian Ren He Yi"*, can provide a new theoretical background for studying and developing spiritual tourism. Furthermore, this research is only a first inroad into investigating spiritual tourism in protected areas. Further studies are required to establish more in-depth theory in this research field. For instance, more insights should be sought into the relationship between spirituality and protected areas, the role of *"Tian Ren He Yi"* in tourism, and the identification and analysis of empirical case studies with which to explore the value of spiritual tourism. This research was based on the views of professionals; future research, therefore, could take into account the perceptions of tourists. Finally, it is noteworthy that spiritual tourism should be investigated under specific cultural contexts rather than simply "transplanting" western ideas to the East or vice versa (Kirillova et al., 2020; Norman, 2012). In addition, the Chinese context only represents a portion of the so-called "eastern world", so future studies in diverse contexts are needed.

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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.

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