Tourism: a good servant, but a bad master. Strategies for visitor management at Chengde and Mogao, China

Neville Agnew, Kirsty Altenburg, Martha Demas, and Sharon Sullivan

An earlier paper for this journal (Agnew et al. 2004) described the development of the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China, the ‘China Principles’, a set of guidelines for heritage site conservation and management (Agnew and Demas 2004). The Principles, developed under the auspices of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China (SACH), together with the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) and the Australian Department of the Environment and Heritage, were issued by China ICOMOS and disseminated for national adoption in 2000.

Since their approval in 2000, the partners in China have applied the Principles at two World Heritage sites – the Chengde Mountain Resort and Outlying Temples of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), located some 250 km north of Beijing in Hebei Province and the formerly inaccessible Mogao Grottoes near Dunhuang in Gansu Province. At Chengde the responsible authority is the Chengde Cultural Relics Bureau which reports to the city municipality and Hebei Cultural Relics Bureau; at Mogao the Dunhuang Academy reports directly to the provincial bureau. As nationally important sites with World Heritage status, both are ultimately under the authority of SACH in the Ministry of Culture. Application of the China Principles has involved the development of master plans at both sites, and detailed planning and implementation of specific aspects of these plans, including visitor management. This paper presents an overview of the work currently in progress relating to tourism at the sites.

Chengde, founded in 1703, was the summer capital of the Qing emperors. It consists of the Summer Resort itself, comprising a palace complex with extensive landscaped gardens, many pavilions and water features, set in a larger natural park of some 600 hectares enclosed by a 10 km wall. Associated with the Resort are eight large Buddhist temple complexes (originally 12), located outside the wall surrounding the Summer Resort and known as the ‘Outlying Temples’. The cultural values of Chengde include its historic significance as the summer capital of the dynasty and to serve also the political agenda of the Qing empire vis-à-vis Mongolia and Tibet; a splendid example of a Chinese imperial garden; architectural exemplars which epitomize the splendour of the Qing dynasty; and social values for local residents. Today Chengde is a rapidly expanding provincial city that engulfs the Resort and Outlying Temples.

The Mogao Grottoes were an important Buddhist site on the ancient Silk Road. Today there remain some 480 painted and decorated cave temples, in a spectacular setting near the oasis town of Dunhuang in the Gobi desert. There are a further several hundred undecorated ‘habitation’ caves in the northern section of the site. Dunhuang was a staging, trading and military outpost on the Silk Road between the fourth and the fourteenth centuries, and the development of Mogao over six Chinese dynasties (Northern Wei to Yuan, fourth to fourteenth centuries CE) has always been linked to Dunhuang. The cultural values of Mogao include the artistic brilliance of the wall-paintings and sculpture; the historic, aesthetic and natural values of its setting; the unparalleled historic information which the paintings reveal about life in China for over a thousand years; its role as a key site for the dissemination of Buddhism into China; and its social and economic value for the local Dunhuang community and Gansu Province (Whitfield et al. 2000). It also attracts Buddhists, notably from Japan, and many other countries.

Master plan for Chengde and Mogao

Over a period of several years the planning process developed master plans that outline future conservation and management objectives and strategies for the sites. Assessment is the key to this planning process. Future decisions about conservation, management, and use of a site follow from the assessments of significance, condition, and management context. These decisions are formulated in the plan as Goals, Policies, and Objectives. Implementation of the plan requires the development of strategy or action sub-plans. Strategy plans are the most detailed level of planning, specifying how the objective will be achieved and establishing resources required, and time frames and responsibilities to get the work done.

At each site, the sub-plans developed varied to some extent depending on the particular issues of significance, condition and management context identified during the assessment process. At both sites however, it became apparent through the assessments that visitor management and interpretation are vital areas of need requiring detailed research for the development of strategies and sub-plans, and that planning...
and implementation in these areas are essential for sustainable tourism and the overall conservation of the site. This paper explains why this is so, and describes some of the objectives and strategies developed to meet those needs.

Visitor management, presentation and interpretation in both the assessment and implementation phases of the plans are undeveloped aspects of master planning in China where, traditionally, interventive physical conservation and curation have been the norm. Visitor management and interpretation have been accorded a lower status, with little detailed research or needs assessment, few trained personnel, and a lack of coordination between visitor management and other aspects of site conservation. The Mogao and Chengde Master Plans, developed by systematic use of the China Principles methodology and working closely with site staff, break new ground in this respect.

Visitor management
Visitor management is of vital concern because of the increasing numbers of visitors, their rising expectations, and the threat through overuse they pose to sites' heritage values (Chu 2000; Liu Li 2000). Site control and interpretation are often inadequate to manage and satisfy the demands of mass tourism, and there are also the needs of particular user groups such as local people, those visiting for religious observance, specialists, and foreign visitors who require dedicated translation and interpretation services.

Tourism
The economic benefits of tourism are seen as an important driver in China's development, especially at a regional level and in economically underdeveloped provinces. Tourism has become a major industry which is creating mounting pressures at cultural and natural heritage sites. The government in 1999 established three national holiday weeks, known as 'Golden Weeks', in May and October and Spring Festival, which have strained transportation services and greatly increased site visitation (Zhu Zhe 2005). Heritage sites are expected to contribute to the economic development of their region. Mogao is located within the northwestern province of Gansu, one of the poorest provinces in the country. The aim of the central government's Western Regions Plan, in which tourism plays a key role, is to stimulate the development of this disadvantaged rural hinterland (World Bank 2005). At Mogao domestic and international tourists are visiting the site in increasingly large numbers and beginning to threaten its values. Chengde also has overseen issues which for the moment arise from heavy regular local use of the site rather than an excess of tourists. A new freeway is due to open in 2006, which will make the site readily accessible to Beijing residents and visitors, including the anticipated increase in visitors to the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Visitors to both Mogao and Chengde are distributed unevenly throughout the year, as most come in package tours in summer, and especially during the Golden Weeks.

![Early morning activities in the Summer Resort.](image-url)

Visitor management and interpretation at Chengde
Visitor management issues identified during the assessment stage of the master plan relate to the extensive size of the site, with different access routes, lack of supervision, lack of overall interpretation and infrastructure for visitors, and overuse of areas within the site, particularly the lake areas, by local residents in the early morning. Moreover, there is continuing pressure to restore and reconstruct buildings and landscape features to reflect the site's history during its eighteenth-century heyday. There was clearly a need for surveys to identify visitor profiles, understand visitor expectations and behavior, and to explore ways to enhance the visitor's experience.

Visitors to Chengde have increased rapidly over the past decade. In 2004 there were 540,000 non-resident visitors to the Summer Resort and 400,000 to the Little Potala Temple (the largest of the Outlying Temples in the architectural style of the Potala in Lhasa). The site's projected target is for 1 million visitors to the Summer Resort alone by 2008; the Chengde Municipality (i.e. Chengde municipal region) predicts 5.7 million visitors by 2010.

Surveys of Chinese and overseas visitors were undertaken in 2002 and 2004 to determine visitor use of the Summer Resort and Outlying Temples and perceptions on the conservation being undertaken at the site. The results show that 69% of visitors were using the site for family outings, 25% for cultural
excursions, 4% for exercises (which does not accurately reflect the early morning use), and 2% for religious purposes. One of the Outlying Temples, Puning, has been returned to the Buddhist community and is an active religious site.

When asked whether the visit had lived up to expectations, in 2002 76% of visitors were positive and 9% negative (15% did not answer). In 2004 80% of visitors were positive while 20% answered in the negative. There were interesting differences between Chinese and international visitors concerning what they liked best about their visit. Chinese visitors preferred the museum displays (located mainly in the Resort and which have been increased in number and quality in recent years), the lake area, the palace complex and the Little Potala Temple. A clear majority of international visitors preferred the Outlying Temples, the natural beauty of the mountainous landscape, and the palace area in the Resort.

![Visitor survey at the main entrance to the Summer Resort.](image)

Visitor attitudes to conservation at Chengde also revealed an interesting difference between local people and Chinese visitors on the one hand and overseas visitors on the other, with the former wanting most restoration, while overseas visitors favoured least. Although a majority of respondents were in favour of more restoration and reconstruction, a significant number preferred a variety of treatments to wholesale restoration. Conclusions from the visitor surveys provide opportunity for a range of treatments and dialogue with visitors through interpretation, and suggest that the attitudes of at least some Chinese visitors toward restoration may be changing.

**The case of Shuxiang Temple**

This potential shift in attitudes was also revealed in the results relating to interpretation and visitor use that emerged in the work on Shuxiang Temple. Here at the last unrestored Outlying Temple, the Getty Conservation Institute and the Chengde staff are preparing a conservation plan in accordance with the China Principles. One issue which emerges is the possibility of presenting and interpreting Shuxiang in its relatively unrestored state. Given the survey results, it is realized that this would currently serve only the needs of a minority of Chinese visitors.

Shuxiang Temple is not a well-known temple and is currently closed to the public. Previous attempts to open it were not successful. A large number of staff, and the provision of new facilities would be necessary to open the temple fully to the public and this is not warranted at present. On the other hand, visitor numbers to the Summer Resort and Outlying Temples are increasing overall, though further research is needed to validate the numbers that can be expected. This work is important in our considerations about the future of Shuxiang Temple. It may be that the time will come when pressure on the Summer Resort from increased visitors will make the use of the Outlying Temples important in relieving visitor pressure elsewhere. One other Outlying Temple, Puren, is also presently closed to visitors. This temple was restored in the 1990s and for a time was open, but there were not enough visitors to warrant it being kept open.

Furthermore, while research to date shows that the majority of Chinese visitors prefer fully restored structures and sites, a specialized minority audience with an interest in history and heritage and overseas visitors will value what a conserved rather than restored Shuxiang has to offer. These visitors prefer minimal restoration and have a deeper and broader interest in learning about all the aspects of the site as a whole than the average tourist. Currently, the methods of restoration and some building and landscape reconstruction are in themselves an interpretive tool which allows visitors to see aspects of the full splendour of the site as it would have been at the height of the dynasty. What is not really available in the Resort and Outlying Temples is an experience of the effects of time and history on the fabric of the great Qing complex. We therefore have an opportunity to interpret these aspects at Shuxiang Temple. The original Qing fabric (including furnishings and sculpture) at Shuxiang is becoming rare in China and should be a focus of the interpretation. Also, it seems likely that there may be increasing interest for using Shuxiang Temple as a site for filming because of the atmosphere of the antique and authenticity of the original.

![Shuxiang Temple: the centrepiece of the complex is Huicheng Hall (left) which contains statues of Manjusri and original furnishings (right).](image)

Taking all these factors together, it appears that there may be an opportunity to open Shuxiang Temple to relevant selected visitors, initially on a limited basis, perhaps using a guided tour method. This is dependent on several factors: the proposed conservation approach being undertaken, the resolution of issues relating to the treatment and setting generally (the temple is hemmed in by a military complex on one side and the haphazard growth of the village historically associated with the temple on the other), and also the quality and type of interpretation that can be provided.
Future needs at Chengde

Results from the management assessment and surveys to date have identified requirements such as a clear need for further research into visitor management, visitor carrying-capacity studies, marketing, use patterns, visitor number predictions, their needs and satisfaction, and education and interpretation planning.

The master plan's goals include provision of good quality visitor services, control of visitors to prevent damage, encouragement of more visitors during the low season by a number of strategies, removal of commercial stalls and discouragement of their establishment. In the area of curation and interpretation, the plan calls for an integrated interpretive plan for the Summer Resort and Outlying Temples using modern and innovative techniques, and research and experimentation into interpretation and exhibition methods.

The plan also places emphasis on the solution to the problem of intensive early morning use of the Resort by local inhabitants. Chengde city residents taking morning exercise in a wide variety of forms (dancing, marching, tai chi) inadvertently damage the vegetation and fragile fabric, especially of the lake area of the Resort. The plan acknowledges the social value of the site for local people, and proposes mitigation of the damage caused through improved management, security, certain landscaping interventions, and by education programs; it also suggests the development of other recreation areas within the city as alternative venues. A strategy to map the original existing paths and to develop a use plan for the heavily impacted lake area is proposed to remedy the current practice of hardscaping surfaces to accommodate the overuse by locals and visitors.

The site must implement strategies to ensure that it is able to manage the increased visitor pressure that will result from the opening of the freeway and expectations for a satisfying experience. Consultation with stakeholders is also needed, especially with the local residents and tourist authorities.

Visitor management and interpretation at Mogao

More than 3 million tourists have visited the site of Mogao since it was opened to the public in 1979. From 2001 to 2003 there were more than 300,000 visitors annually, while in 2004 there were over 430,000 and visitor numbers for 2005 are anticipated to be at least 450,000. For the past two decades overseas visitors have grown steadily, peaking in 2000 at 65,000. Visitors are concentrated from July to September (and in May and October Golden Weeks). In 2002 61% (187,934 out of 308,715) of visitors were at the site during this three-month period. Visitor numbers are low in winter.

Though unquestionably the art and historic significance of the site is what draws visitors, the site is also a recreational venue for people from Dunhuang and the surrounding area. The pleasant green and shaded environment in front of the grottoes affords an opportunity for relaxing with family and friends. No park exists in the town, thus during holiday periods the site is visited by local people who may have come often on previous occasions but whose primary intention is not necessarily to see the caves.

Assessment of physical condition and management issues at Mogao revealed a significant and growing problem in managing visitors to the extremely significant and fragile painted and decorated cave temples. The paintings were executed on a clay-fibre plaster applied to the surface of the rock and are fragile. Salts have accumulated in the painted plaster over the centuries, which renders the paintings susceptible to humidity and to physical damage. The Dunhuang Academy, the authority responsible for the site, provides an excellent multilingual guiding program to caves, with limited numbers per tour. Access without a guide is not permitted. During Golden Weeks this program has to be relaxed to some extent to cope with the influx of visitors. There is active deterioration in many of the caves which may be exacerbated indirectly or directly by opening the caves; those caves that are open to the public suffer from overcrowding and consequently there is a decline in visitor satisfaction at peak periods. In this situation the need to work closely with stakeholders, especially the local tourist agencies, was also identified.

Not all caves are open to the public; many are not suitable for reasons that include small size, soot deposits from the 1920s when some caves were inhabited, extensive loss of wall paintings, extreme susceptibility to damage or further deterioration, or lack of artistic or religious appeal to the visitor. Visitor surveys and observations were conducted as part of the assessment. Outside of Golden Weeks, 80% of visitors were satisfied with their visit experience and the level of interpretation offered. There was some dissatisfaction with visitor facilities and services on the part of a minority of visitors. Satisfaction levels during Golden Weeks however dropped to 55% in May 2002 and 36% in October 2002. Lack of satisfaction was mainly related to crowding, noise and poorer oral interpretation during tours. Many people were concerned with conservation issues and more than 50% of visitors considered more conservation work should be done by Dunhuang Academy staff (though it is not clear exactly what they meant by conservation work).

The use objectives in the Mogao Master Plan focus on enhancing the quality and diversity of the visitor experience at the site, while managing the negative impacts of too many visitors, and working closely with tourist authorities to achieve this. In brief, it is planned to significantly and measurably reduce visitor impact on physical fabric and the setting by more effective visitor management measures to fully exhibit the site's
cultural significance, historic information and conservation needs for the public, by developing and implementing an interpretation plan, and to improve the overall quality of visitor management and services and the level of visitor satisfaction.

Visitor carrying-capacity study at Mogao

The development of a carrying-capacity study at Mogao emerged as a key strategy to achieve these objectives. Increasing visitor pressure at Mogao, as outlined above is of particular concern because of the fragility of the cave temples, which contain priceless artwork in confined spaces on an often actively deteriorating base of clay plaster. There is a grave risk of damage by inappropriate use and overuse. But the actual effect of visitors and their relationship to the rate and extent of deterioration is unquantified. On the other hand, there is pressure from local and provincial governments to increase tourism and even to allow tourism authorities to take over tourism management of sites, including Mogao. Some years ago commercial tourism interests were successful in securing control of Qufu (the birthplace of Confucius, and a World Heritage Site) with disastrous results. This situation has now been reversed. Management at Mogao needs hard data both to develop effective strategies to prevent damage and to convince the local authorities to work with them to mitigate visitor impact.

Without definitive, quantitative data on the effects of overcrowding on the cultural resource and of visitors themselves in degrading the quality of their experience, it will be impossible for site managers in the long term to resist tourism's pressure. In the case of Mogao, with many more decorated caves than are open at any one time (30 normally, some 60 during the holiday weeks), the frustrations of tour agencies are understandable. The Far Eastern Economic Review reported in 2001 (Gilley) that Mogao was the only one of China's then 24 World Heritage Sites (now 31) where visitor numbers were controlled. With no data available at that time, this was an arbitrary policy, but there was already a clear intention by Dunhuang Academy management to set limits because of the threat to the site.

The concept of a carrying capacity for cultural sites therefore is recognized by Mogao, and in China generally, but as studies to determine capacity have not previously been undertaken at any major site, Mogao would be the first to do so. Mogao is an ideal site for systematic research on carrying capacity as it is not yet overrun by visitors, other than during the two annual Golden Weeks, as are the Forbidden City, sections of the Great Wall, Mts. Tai and other sites near major population centers. Furthermore, the strong desire of the DA leadership to establish a rational carrying capacity, with preservation of the site taking precedence over economic exploitation, offers the best opportunity for a visitor policy to be put in place. SACH is also a strong supporter of this research at Mogao as it sees the potential for a methodology to counter blatant tourism exploitation of heritage sites.

A considerable literature exists on the concept of carrying capacity (see for example, Pedersen 2002) and its limitations. The approach adopted at Mogao acknowledges the limitations of the concept and that there is no hard and fast number that may not be exceeded. Bearing in mind the caveats of general carrying-capacity issues the study is focused in the first instance on the caves, their confined spaces, the fragility of the art and its susceptibility to physical and environmental impacts, and the high summer period, which together with the two holiday weeks (May and October) are the times when the site receives most visitors and is at greatest risk.

Based on these parameters, the carrying capacity for Mogao comprises three categories:

- Cultural carrying capacity: The maximum number of people who can visit the grottoes daily without any alteration or damage to the wall paintings and sculpture. The wall paintings at Mogao constitute the principal significance of the site. They are a finite resource and all damage to them is irreversible and thus cumulative; therefore, ideally no deterioration of the wall paintings as a result of visitation is acceptable.

- Landscape and setting capacity: The maximum number of people who can use the site without unacceptable change or intrusion to the landscape and setting. Some level of impact on the landscape and setting can be tolerated in order to accommodate visitors, but with good management negative impacts can be mitigated or reversed.

- Social carrying capacity: The maximum number of people who can use the site daily while maintaining the quality of the visitors' experience, their safety, and the ability of management together with infrastructure resources of the site to effectively meet their requirements. Some decline in visitor satisfaction may be tolerated, because with good management and adjustment of visitor numbers this condition is reversible; the exception of course being visitor health and safety.

The carrying capacity of the grottoes is the priority capacity to establish and to monitor over time and is the current focus of the study. The capacity needed to maintain the visitor experience, and for the landscape and setting, will rely principally on visitor survey data and observations being collected, on planning for a new orientation center and parking areas, and on establishing safe carbon dioxide levels in the caves during visitation, personal space requirements, and other factors.

Methodology

The methodology being used to establish carrying capacity is adapted from a U.S. National Park Service model, the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection Process (VERP), with changes reflecting the needs and context of Mogao. The methodology consists of a number of steps applied to each of the carrying capacity categories – the Grottoes, the Landscape and Setting, and the Visitor Experience. These are: identifying current issues impacting the site and its management; identifying key indicators to monitor change; defining desired conditions for each capacity category; designing and implementing strategies for measuring and monitoring these indicators; defining the limiting conditions. Once established, these limiting conditions will determine the long-term monitoring and management tools for sustaining visitor capacity and the management actions that will respond to the monitoring.

The critical issue for the Grottoes is active or on-going deterioration of the wall paintings and polychrome sculptures in many of the caves – by this is meant that the mechanisms leading to decay are still active or can be re-activated under certain conditions, one of which may be visitor use. The design and implementation of monitoring and research strategies has been key to understanding the mechanisms of deterioration and, importantly, the link between deterioration and visitation. Monitoring of environment, condition of wall-paintings, and of visitors is the core of the strategy and is being undertaken in
four test caves. The objective is to determine the impact of visitors or visitations (an important distinction) on the deterioration of the wall-paintings. This has involved:

- Installing sensors to record air temperature, relative humidity, surface temperature, carbon dioxide, and infrared beam counters to record visitor numbers.
- Experiments with varying size groups and lengths of stay to understand the effect of visitation on the microenvironment of the caves over time; and
- Experiments to determine the air flow exchange when the door is opened to allow visitors in and the return of the cave microenvironment to baseline after the visitors leave and the door is again closed.
- Photographic monitoring of selected areas showing active deterioration.

![Figure 7](image1.png)

*Figure 7* Photographic monitoring of areas of active deterioration is carried on in certain caves at Mogao. Also shown is a humidity sensor and painted clay coupons, with varying amounts of salts, that serve as deterioration monitors.

In addition to environmental and condition monitoring, surveys and observations of visitors, especially during crowded periods, have been undertaken to establish also the degree of physical damage caused under varying visitor management conditions. What is observed is that people are much more likely to touch the wall paintings during periods of crowding (3.2% of visitors during Golden Week in May 2004) and that also during this period, as mentioned, the level of satisfaction of visitors declines for a range of reasons connected with crowding, noise and lack of good interpretation. The results of the environmental monitoring to date show that opening of cave doors results in rapid exchange with outside air, as visitors move in and out. Thus the limiting parameters are likely to be periods of high humidity (the summer months), and size limitations of the caves. As mentioned, once firmly established, these limiting conditions will determine the responses required to ensure that desired conditions are met.

Even having determined the carrying capacity of the site, its implementation is a step with many practical and political limits on it. As stated above, carrying capacity is not simply an absolute and immutable number, rather it will be a system integrating visitor management, condition monitoring, and the quality of visitor experience.

**Progress to date**

The visitor management studies are far from concluded, but some results to date especially in the area of visitor management studies, have already prompted a management response and enabled progress in negotiations with local tourism agencies. The vast and beautiful setting of Mogao is being strategically used to give visitors an enhanced experience of the significance of the site, to spread the visitor load, and to orient visitors prior to visiting the caves. A number of comparatively recent historic buildings (from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) have been sensitively restored and are being used as venues for interpretation of various aspects of the site’s history. The northern area of undecorated caves cut into the escarpment and used by the monks for living and study has been stabilized and will be open to visitors. All of these places can be used to engage the interest of visitors and allay pressure during hours of high demand (mid to late morning, particularly during Golden Weeks). There is a highly skilled art department in the Dunhuang Academy which, since the institution’s founding in 1944, has copied the wall-paintings as a means of studying them, but also so that the exact replicas (on paper) could be sent elsewhere on exhibition. Some seven of the smaller caves have been replicated on a 1:1 scale and are on display in the exhibition centre at the site. These have not proven popular with visitors to date mainly, it seems, because of ineffectual promotion to tour operators and to visitors themselves. The Dunhuang Academy plans to develop an orientation centre to provide visitors with information and basic interpretation prior to entering the grotto area, thus reducing the amount of time needed for the cave visit, while satisfying some of their presently unmet needs. The master plan calls for a holistic approach to visitation and the key to success will be planning the visitor flow through the orientation and exhibition centres on arrival and before going on a tour of the caves or visiting the other exhibitions during peak periods when the cave visits are temporarily at capacity.

Progress has also been made in coordination with the tourism authorities to spread out the timing of visits to the site. 85% of group visits to the site (which constitute by far the majority) are now pre-booked – at least the day before. A concerted media campaign including a visit by Dunhuang Academy Director Fan Jinshi to the Dunhuang mayor, extensive liaison and discussion

![Figure 8](image2.png)

*Figure 8* The Middle and Upper Temples (located in front of the Grotto Zone near the 9-Storey Pagoda) have been sensitively restored (left) and house displays on the 60-year history and development of the Dunhuang Academy (right).
with the tourism authorities and agencies, the temporary banning of tourism guides who refused to cooperate, and the setting up of a booking office in the Dunhuang Hotel linked by computer to the site have achieved this. This system has made an important advance in control of visitor numbers at Mogao, and has meant that during the 2005 October Golden Week crowding and overuse were dramatically reduced, and the site narrators were able to deal better with visitors and had better hours and working conditions. Additionally other tourist venues in the district have benefited, since because of the booking system, the numbers are spread much more evenly over the day.

Conclusion

All of this work on visitor management at Mogao and Chengde reflects the realization that tourism in the future, especially mass tourism, will undoubtedly be one of the greatest impacts on heritage sites. Given the generally poor coordination between tourism and heritage authorities there is a need to provide well developed strategies and quantitative data that will set limits on the number of visitors to fragile resources while enhancing the visitor’s knowledge and understanding of the site and pleasure in the visit. It is important that the authorities have this type of data (both from scientific research and monitoring, and from visitor surveys) to use as a bulwark against the pressures from tourism. Of equal importance is communication with tourism authorities and agencies as well as the potential or intending visitor.

Commercial tourism en masse represents a threat—one that looms at sites like Chengde and Mogao, but that has already overwhelmed many other tourist ‘destinations’. It is, of course, also an opportunity to tell the authentic story of the site and to educate and engage the visitor, and in rare cases to inspire or change the visitor’s way of seeing and thinking. Because tourism growth and planning outstrips the ability of heritage organizations to anticipate or respond to that growth, they have either been on the defensive or have embraced tourism to the detriment of the site. An appropriate balance can be achieved by strong management, armed with the tools of a good visitation plan that includes interpretation of the authenticity of the site, and limits on visitor numbers when and where circumstances demand that numbers be restricted. This is not easily achievable, nor can it be implemented overnight. But it is must be a goal for heritage site managers or inexorably degradation of authenticity will occur and the quality of the visitor’s experience will suffer. The real power lies with tourism—it generates vast revenues; heritage site managers must learn to engage tourism as a servant for the benefit of the site, and not see it, like fire, as the bad master.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge colleagues at Chengde and Mogao, in particular Dunhuang Academy director Fan Jinshi, and Po-Ming Lin, and Peter Barker, without whom our work in China would be impossible because of the language barrier. We thank Rick Miller and Jane Fujimoto for assistance with the images and Beverly Weisblatt for preparation of the manuscript.

References


Forêt, Philippe 2000 Mapping Chengde: The Qing Landscape Enterprise, University of Hawai’i Press.


Zhu Zhe 2005 ‘Are the annual holidays really that golden?’ China Daily 8-9 October.

Endnotes

1 During the 18th Century there was a system of three capitals: the formal capital in Shenyang (Mukden), the winter capital in Beijing, and the summer capital at Chengde (Forêt 2000)

2 Details of the connection between visitation and deterioration will be published by the GCI in the forthcoming (late 2006) proceedings: Conservation of Ancient Sites on the Silk Road: Second International Conference on the Conservation of Grotto Sites, June 28 – July 3 2004, Dunhuang, Gansu, PRC