

Exploring the interaction ritual mechanism in red tourism: the case of Longhua martyrs cemetery

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Abstract. Under the framework of microsociology, red tourism can be regarded as a special form of natural ritual. Drawing on the theory of interaction ritual chains, this study employs both online ethnography and field observation to collect primary data, taking the Longhua Martyrs Cemetery as a case site to systematically summarize the interaction ritual mechanism of red tourism. The interaction ritual in red tourism consists of four components: ritual preparation, ritual process, ritual outcomes, and ritual continuation. Ritual preparation provides the objective conditions for tourists to become potential insiders of the interaction ritual. The ritual process involves tourists' co-presence with others, sacred objects, and the deceased. Through various forms of gathering, tourists experience short-term emotional sharing. The ritual outcomes constitute the immediate feedback of interaction rituals, including four dimensions: emotional energy, group solidarity, symbols representing the group, and moral sense. Ritual continuation refers to the long-term feedback after the red tourism experience. The entire process of the interaction ritual reflects the continuity of chains of encounters across different temporal and spatial dimensions. From the perspective of natural ritual, this study pays close attention to tourists' interactions and cognitive changes throughout the red tourism experience, expands the forms of gathering in the interaction ritual chain, and deepens the understanding of the dynamics of emotional experience in red tourism.

Keywords: interaction ritual chains, red tourism, Longhua martyrs cemetery

1. Introduction

In recent years, red tourism has become highly popular among visitors. From 2004 to 2019, the annual number of red-tourism visits rose from 140 million to 1.41 billion; learning revolutionary history and red culture through in-depth interpretation and immersive experiences has become a new trend [1]. To achieve high-quality development in the integration of culture and tourism, red-tourism destinations have incorporated technological elements, natural resources, and various emerging business formats into local red-tourism resources, and have developed a large number of red-themed cultural and creative products, attracting many young visitors and families with children [2]. The boom in red tourism yields multiple benefits [3]. Economically, red tourism not only transforms the cultural and historical resource advantages of old revolutionary base areas into economic advantages—thereby generating income through tourism and stabilizing employment [4]—but, with a market scale in the hundreds of billions, also directly promotes economic development and consumption upgrading in small and medium-sized cities. Politically, red-tourism resources carry the national memory of the Chinese nation since the modern era; they are an important carrier and medium that concretize socialist ideology [5], and constitute a key political project for strengthening cultural confidence and historical consciousness and for advancing Chinese-style modernization.

Red tourism can be regarded, within the scope of microsociology, as a special form of natural ritual without standardized procedures. Existing studies have blurred the categorization of rituals in red tourism, often equating ritualized activities, standardized behavioral patterns, or formal ceremonies with rituals, or discussing the definition of rituals from an anthropological perspective [6, 7]. However, formal ceremonies constitute only a part of the rituals in red tourism. In the context of red-tourism rituals, tourists engage in direct interaction rituals with historically sacred sites [8,9]. Although these rituals lack standardized procedures, they are equally capable of establishing mutual attention and emotional solidarity within the ritual [10]. Therefore, based on a careful analysis of the concept of ritual, this study focuses on the core elements, processes, and outcomes of natural rituals in red tourism, while also including formal ceremonies that occur during the tourism experience, thereby deconstructing the complete ritual of red tourism.

Collins's theory of interaction ritual chains emphasizes the mechanism through which successful interaction rituals transform individuals' short-term emotions into long-term emotional energy, and how this energy can be regenerated through further chains of interaction, thereby shaping new identities and social structures [10]. This theory is well-suited to explaining the entire process of natural rituals in red tourism. Empirical research on interaction ritual chains in tourism has primarily focused on synchronous interactions and gatherings among people [11]. However, the unique attributes of red-tourism resources can facilitate interactions in asynchronous contexts, such as with sacred objects left by previous visitors or the remains of martyrs [12, 13]. In addition, tourists in red tourism may experience transformations from short-term negative emotions to long-term positive emotions—for example, feelings of grief or regret evolving into resonance with revolutionary martyrs [14, 15]. Such bipolar changes between short-term and long-term emotions are less commonly addressed in other forms of tourism, indicating that studying interaction rituals in red tourism can expand the explanatory scope of interaction ritual chain theory within tourism research. Based on this framework, this study applies the theory of interaction ritual chains, takes the Longhua Martyrs Cemetery as a case site, collects data through online and field observation, and constructs an ethnography through coding to summarize the full process of interaction rituals in red tourism.

2. Research progress and theoretical foundation

2.1. Red tourism and rituals

In 2004, the first National Plan for the Development of Red Tourism was issued, marking a new stage of conscious development for red tourism [16]. The plan proposed that red tourism primarily refers to tourism activities organized around sites and landmarks commemorating the remarkable achievements of the Chinese people under the leadership of the Communist Party of China during periods of revolution and war. These sites, carrying revolutionary history, deeds, and spirit, serve as the medium for themed tourism activities in which visitors engage in remembrance, learning, and sightseeing [17]. With improvements in the quality of red-tourism development, in addition to traditional revolutionary sites, representative achievements in China's social construction—such as the Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau Bridge and the Wenchang Space Launch Center—have become new red-tourism destinations [18, 19]. Accordingly, the definition of red tourism requires expansion. In this study, red tourism is defined as tourism that relies on resources created or preserved by the Chinese people, particularly since 1921, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, in the contexts of revolution, war, and social construction. Through various forms of visiting, learning, and experiencing, red tourism enables visitors to understand Chinese history and perceive social phenomena or activities imbued with the spiritual connotations of different historical periods.

Ritual theory originated in the field of religion and was later extended to anthropological and sociological research [20]. Across different disciplines, the concept of ritual varies. In anthropology, rituals reflect the macro-structure of society, serving to maintain order or express culture and values. Microsociology, by contrast, treats rituals as local sources of action that, in certain contexts, bring together elements of social structure. Rituals are ubiquitous in daily life and can manifest as natural rituals—occurring without formalized procedures—through which mutual attention and emotional solidarity are established. In everyday language, however, "ritual" usually refers to formal ceremonies, which follow a set of standardized procedures; while the core elements, processes, and outcomes are similar to those of natural rituals, formal rituals more strictly distinguish between insiders and outsiders [10].

Within the scope of microsociology, Durkheim found that shared ritual practices can unite individuals into a moral community and divide society into the secular and the sacred [21]. Turner further emphasized the threshold dimension of rituals, through which individuals merge into a liminal group, achieving *communitas* among participants [22]. Graburn was the first to explicitly consider tourism as a form of ritual, defining it as a "modern pilgrimage" in which people leave their habitual activities, proposing a three-phase structure of tourism—secular–sacred–secular—where a complete tourism experience constitutes a ritual [23]. In this model, the pre-tour and post-tour secular phases correspond to "joyful anticipation" and "mixed outcomes of happiness and sorrow", whereas the experience during the tour is sacred and temporary [24]. As noted, "if half of a pilgrimage is tourism, then half of tourism is pilgrimage" [25]. In tourism studies, ritual theory has been integrated with performance theory [26], Benjamin's method [27], and interaction ritual chain theory [28], forming new research frameworks. This study discusses natural rituals in tourism from the microsociological perspective.

Red tourism, due to the characteristics of its resources and subsequent design, can be regarded as a special form of natural ritual. Ritual sites possess inherent resources that contain specific discourses, are sacred, and motivate participants to act in predetermined ways [29, 30]. Red-tourism resources include the birthplaces of historical figures, sites and relics of revolutionary events and activities, martyrs' cemeteries, comprehensive revolutionary museums, and other intangible cultural heritage [31]. These resources carry patriotic discourses and enable tourists to experience multiple emotional responses through visiting and interaction. In contemporary society, they elicit individual pride in a strong nation, allow for the sublimation of self-worth, and inspire individuals to closely link their personal destiny with that of the nation and people [8]. In this sense, red-tourism resources become sacred. Moreover, ritual sites can be consecrated through subsequent selection, expression, and rehearsal [9].

Under the design of red-tourism managers, natural red-tourism resources are combined with formal rituals that follow standardized procedures, such as commemorative activities. Formal rituals in red tourism create special contexts that distinguish the tourism experience from ordinary life, making it more meaningful [29]. Existing studies have blurred the categorization of rituals in red tourism. Some focus on tourists' experiences in ritualized activities and their effects on awakening collective memory, reinforcing collective identity, and constructing group emotions [6], emphasizing formal rituals in red tourism. Others, adopting an anthropological perspective, regard red-tourism rituals as standardized behaviors with transformative educational functions [7], neglecting natural rituals that arise when tourists interact with red-tourism resources themselves as sacred. Therefore, this study treats red tourism as a natural ritual while also considering formal rituals during the tourism process, deconstructing the changes in the core elements, processes, and outcomes of red-tourism rituals.

2.2. Theoretical perspective: interaction ritual chain theory

2.2.1. Development of interaction ritual chain theory

The theory of interaction ritual chains (Interaction Ritual Chains) emerged from the development of ritual theory in anthropology and sociology, drawing on Durkheim's and Goffman's interpretations of ritual, and falls within the domain of microsociology. Individuals' thoughts and moral concepts originate from ritual practices [21]. Rituals establish the moral order of society and the behavioral rules that individuals must follow. They constitute informal, secular, micro-level direct interactions, representing a way in which individuals assign symbolic meaning to their actions [32], giving rise to the concept of interaction rituals (Interaction Rituals) [33].

Within interaction ritual chain theory, the core of an interaction ritual is a process in which participants develop a shared focus of attention, allowing them to perceive each other's micro-rhythms and emotions. This interaction represents ephemeral encounters of emotional and conscious human groups in a given context, and emotions and consciousness are transmitted through prior chains of encounter [10]. Interaction rituals primarily involve four components or initial conditions: group assembly, barriers to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and shared mood. Through the short-term feedback of collective effervescence, they produce four main outcomes: group solidarity, emotional energy in individual, symbols of social relationships, and standards of morality [10]. The theory also emphasizes the transformation of intense, short-term emotional bonding into long-term emotional energy. The foci and symbols within interaction rituals can sustain group identity and influence the long-term accumulation of emotional energy. These foci and symbols encompass not only objects but also ideas, values, and ritual practices [34]. Past symbols, neglected sacred sites, and once-flourishing but now-declining symbols all serve as meaningful foci and symbols [10]. Long-term feedback occurs when the outcomes of one interaction ritual feeds back to influence the conditions of subsequent rituals. Individuals who have previously experienced group solidarity are motivated to participate again, thereby facilitating a long-term cyclical feedback loop from group solidarity to regrouping [10].

2.2.2. Red tourism and interaction ritual chains

Based on interaction ritual chain theory, existing empirical research in tourism has covered a wide range of contexts, including large-scale events [28], transformative tourism [35], museums [36], glamping in China [37], shared accommodation [38], heritage tourism [39], ethnic village tourism [40], and the hotel industry during the COVID-19 pandemic [41]. These studies have extended the application of the theory. For instance, Sterchele examined the anti-racism FIFA World Cup as a large-scale event and found that tourists regarded the shared memories of participation as sacred objects. After the event, tourists reproduced similar micro-level ritual interactions in local communities to pursue the same collective effervescence, thereby enhancing group solidarity within the community [34]. This cross-regional study extended the interaction ritual chain. Xiang et al., adopting a "people-place-object" perspective, focused on emotional energy as a core element of interaction rituals, and identified two types of interaction rituals—long and short—in the context of glamping in China. They further revealed the dynamic cycles, distribution, and compensation mechanisms of tourists' flow experiences and emotional energy [37], demonstrating the cyclical nature of interaction ritual chains. Li et al., examined the host-guest interactions in the "High Mountains and Flowing Water" toast ritual in ethnic village tourism, revealing that initial investment in ritual elements and the toast ritual itself drove the transformation of tourists' short-term emotional energy into long-term emotional energy, and that ritual emotions could be reactivated in everyday life through cultural symbols [40]. Moreover, the application of interaction ritual chain theory has expanded from offline contexts to a combination of online and offline contexts. Interaction rituals are extended through short videos on platforms like TikTok [42], or by maintaining contact with individuals met during events on social networks [11], thereby broadening the explanatory scope of the theory.

Existing research has primarily focused on synchronous, face-to-face gatherings and interactions among people in tourism contexts, with relatively little attention to interactions that occur asynchronously or across time and space. Red-tourism resources—such as the birthplaces of historical figures, sites and relics of revolutionary events and activities, martyrs' cemeteries, comprehensive revolutionary museums, and other intangible cultural heritage—are similar to war memorials in Western contexts

[31]. In his study of pilgrims at war memorials, Winter found that visitors express respect to soldiers through sacred objects such as crosses, flowers, woven items, letters, and national flags, and that these sacred objects possess the capacity, in the minds of visitors, to communicate with the deceased [12]. Furthermore, martyrs' cemeteries, as carriers of social memory, derive their significance from both the deceased and the nature of the wars that took place there [13]. Therefore, interaction rituals in red tourism may involve interactions not only with the deceased but also with previous visitors who left sacred objects, making these rituals richer than those in other tourism contexts. In addition, existing research has largely emphasized tourists' acquisition of positive short-term emotions and their transformation into emotional energy [28], paying less attention to the transition from negative short-term emotions to positive emotional energy. The emotional experiences in red tourism are similar to those in dark tourism: after visiting relic sites or martyrs' memorials, tourists are easily aroused to experience positive-negative mixed emotions such as sadness, regret, or despondency. When such complex emotions reach a deeper level, they can prompt reflection on contemporary realities, evoke resonance, and produce positive outcomes [14,15]. Thus, interaction rituals in red tourism may facilitate transitions of tourists' short-term and long-term emotional energy between negative and positive states.

In summary, the research framework constructed in this study encompasses three stages—pre-tour, during-tour, and post-tour—as shown in Figure 1. It focuses on how tourists enter the interaction ritual context of red tourism, engage in interaction during the ritual process, and experience the transformation and continuation of emotions into everyday life, thereby systematically deconstructing the interaction ritual mechanism of red tourism.

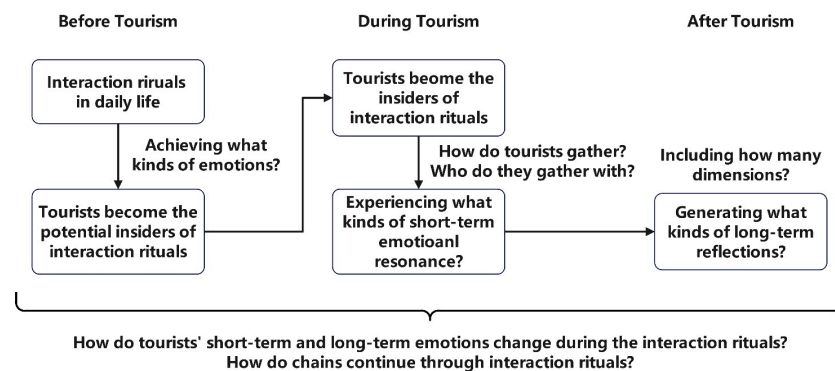


Figure 1. Research framework

3. Research methods and data sources

3.1. Case site selection: Longhua martyrs cemetery

The Longhua Martyrs Cemetery is a revolutionary memorial park in Shanghai. Its significance derives from its unique historical associations, linked to the identities of the deceased, the nature of the battles that took place on site, and the cemetery's construction, which have been continually expanded over time [13]. The site carries emotional and spiritual meaning, and its sacredness, cultural importance, social support, heritage, and commemorative value merit high respect [43]. In January 1931, the Kuomintang authorities arrested 36 Communist Party members in Shanghai, including He Mengxiong, Lin Yunan, and Rou Shi; in February of the same year, 24 of them were secretly executed, sacrificing their lives heroically [44]. In 1950, the remains of the "Twenty-Four Martyrs of Longhua" were exhumed in the Longhua area. Beginning in the 1990s, the Longhua Martyrs Cemetery was constructed, incorporating the Shanghai Martyrs Cemetery within its grounds.

Functionally, Longhua Martyrs Cemetery can be divided into four areas: the ceremonial square, the memorial area for heroic martyrs, the sites and relics area, and the Longhua Martyrs Memorial Hall. It is designated as a national patriotism education base and a nationally protected cultural heritage site. Artistically, the cemetery integrates thematic elements, axial lines, and three-dimensional architecture, symbolizing the alternation of "past", "present", and "future" [45]. In recent years, with ongoing thematic education activities such as the study of the history of the Chinese Communist Party and the popularization of red-themed TV series like *The Age of Awakening*, the cemetery has attracted a large number of visitors.

In summary, the Longhua Martyrs Cemetery represents a typical red-tourism resource and is suitable as a case site for studying interaction rituals in red tourism.

3.2. Research methods

This study employed online ethnography and direct observation as its research methods.

Online ethnography, also referred to as virtual ethnography, focuses on ethnographic research conducted in internet contexts and typically uses qualitative methods for data collection [46]. Common techniques include content analysis, text mining, and online observation, with digital texts, images, and videos serving as research data [47]. Collected data are systematically organized, summarized, and analyzed to identify important patterns, trends, and relationships. Researchers can analyze data through coding, thematic analysis, network mapping, and other methods [48]. In this study, posts from the Rednote app were collected and coded to understand tourists' micro-level behavioral and cognitive changes before, during, and after red tourism experiences.

Direct observation requires researchers to pay attention to social interactions among participants, as well as verbal and non-verbal communication, within specific contexts [46]. It includes non-participant observation and semi-structured observation. Non-participant observation involves observing and recording behaviors, interactions, and contexts in situ without intervening with the subjects. Semi-structured observation builds on non-participant observation by using pre-designed observation indicators and recording forms to conduct systematic observation and documentation. To observe the interaction ritual processes of tourists at Longhua Martyrs Cemetery in a natural environment, this study adopted a non-participant observation approach, maintaining openness in the research. Additionally, to gain deeper contextual understanding, the study incorporated participant observation by experiencing certain interaction rituals at the cemetery while minimizing subjectivity and bias. During observation, researchers recorded observed behaviors, interactions, and contexts in real time, using notes, audio recordings, or video as data collection methods [49]. Research conducted at memorial sites, historical relics, or sacred places must adhere to ethical standards and principles, showing respect for the sites and the historical memory they represent, and avoiding any potentially offensive actions [50, 51].

3.3. Data sources

For the collection of online texts, the author searched the Rednote app in January 2024 using "Longhua Martyrs Cemetery" as the keyword. Three sorting methods—comprehensive, chronological, and popularity—were applied, yielding 141 notes. For the field investigation, the author visited Longhua Martyrs Cemetery on January 3 and January 21, 2024, observing tourists' interaction rituals and taking 70 photographs for real-time documentation. Because it was difficult to obtain informed consent from research subjects during observation [52], and because obtaining consent could affect tourists' natural behavior, covert observation was employed [53, 54]. After each observation session, the author used the photographs to reconstruct events and write corresponding observation notes, resulting in 70 notes. Finally, both types of data were organized using NVivo 12, and thematic analysis was conducted to complete coding.

4. Research findings

Red-tourism interaction rituals can be divided into four main components: ritual preparation, ritual process, ritual outcomes, and ritual continuation. Here, the ritual process refers to the interactive experiences that occur during red tourism, while ritual outcomes refer to the short-term feedback that tourists gain from these interaction rituals. Viewed through the lens of interaction ritual chains, these four components capture the micro-level emotional and behavioral changes of tourists before, during, and after red tourism experiences.

4.1. Ritual preparation

Ritual preparation comprises two aspects: emotional preparation and the ritual context. It constitutes an essential prerequisite for tourists to enter the encounter chain of red-tourism interaction rituals.

4.1.1. Emotional preparation

Emotional energy is a feeling of confidence, excitement, strength, enthusiasm, and proactive engagement when taking action, and achieving high emotional energy is a process of continual accumulation. Since interaction rituals allow individuals to gain emotional energy, a high demand for emotional energy motivates the occurrence of interaction rituals [10]—this represents the emotional preparation of individuals entering a new interaction ritual. Emotional triggers in daily life, such as watching red-themed TV series, commemorating special anniversaries, admiration for revolutionary martyrs, or the desire to rest and recuperate after study or work, stimulate tourists' eagerness to enter red-tourism interaction rituals to fulfill new emotional needs. This makes them potential insiders—participants in interaction rituals who possess a deep understanding of the culture, values, and norms of a specific social group [10].

Many tourists expressed a desire to visit Longhua Martyrs Cemetery after watching red-themed TV series: "Two years ago, I learned about you from *The Age of Awakening* and came to understand your identities as martyrs. I promised to meet you at

Longhua Martyrs Cemetery in Shanghai, but I missed the appointment once. Now I have finally fulfilled it. (R67—September 29, 2023)" Red-themed TV series serve as important resources for ideological and political education, visualizing red resources and possessing a unique capacity to cultivate emotional and moral engagement [55]. By watching these films, people gain cultural knowledge related to Longhua Martyrs Cemetery and are motivated to continue the encounter chains initiated through viewing performances—an important aspect of emotional preparation. Additionally, many tourists wish to visit Longhua Martyrs Cemetery on special commemorative dates, such as Qingming Festival, Youth Day (May Fourth), and Martyrs' Memorial Day. These dates integrate traditional Chinese culture with revolutionary culture, reflecting distinct Chinese characteristics: "Qingming is a day to mourn the deceased and express grief. The peace we enjoy today is inseparable from the blood and sacrifice of the martyrs. (R130—April 6, 2021)" Experiencing red tourism on such commemorative dates allows tourists to continue engaging with a uniquely Chinese discursive and emotional framework.

4.1.2. Ritual context

The context serves as both the prerequisite and the starting point for interaction rituals. Within a given context, human groups with emotions and consciousness experience momentary encounters, forming what is known as an interaction ritual chain [10]. The context for interaction rituals in red tourism is provided by red-tourism resources and the patriotic discourse they embody [8], which carry a sense of sacredness. The site of Longhua Martyrs Cemetery was formerly the Kuomintang Songhu Garrison Command and served as the place of sacrifice for the "Twenty-Four Martyrs of Longhua". The prison and execution sites of the former Songhu Garrison Command reconstruct the scenes in which revolutionary martyrs were imprisoned, struggled, and ultimately sacrificed their lives. The martyrs' tomb area houses graves of revolutionary martyrs who died across different periods, providing a quiet and orderly environment. The Longhua Martyrs Memorial Hall exhibits the revolutionary history of Shanghai prior to liberation through relics, historical documents, and interactive installations. The architectural design of the Tomb of the Unknown Martyr, the memorial hall, the stele garden, and the memorial square creates a solemn atmosphere. Red-tourism resources function as tangible symbols, while the history and revolutionary spirit they embody act as intangible symbols. These intangible elements can evoke group solidarity among insiders [10], shaping the concrete context in which red-tourism interaction rituals occur and providing the objective conditions for potential insiders to initiate such rituals.

4.2. Ritual process: interaction rituals in red tourism

Red-tourism interaction rituals constitute a single-focus, multi-form gathering that triggers tourists' short-term shared emotional experiences. The focus refers to the object or activity that participants collectively attend to during an interaction ritual, serving as a prerequisite for the generation of shared emotional experiences [10]. A single-focus indicates that, although a red-tourism site may contain multiple red-tourism resources, the historical events and meanings they embody are consistent; therefore, tourists in a red-tourism interaction ritual have only one central focus. Multi-form refers to the multiple modes of gathering available to tourists during the interaction ritual, allowing the chain of encounters to continue in different forms across these modes.

4.2.1. Gatherings with co-presence of tourists

Interaction rituals are fundamentally processes of bodily experience, and the physical gathering of people at the same location is one of the prerequisites for initiating an interaction ritual [10]. Through gatherings marked by bodily co-presence, individuals perceive the presence of others and demonstrate tendencies to follow or align with them [57]. This generates rhythmic emotional transmission, which in turn reinforces long-term feelings of belonging and moral commitment [34]. In red-tourism interaction rituals, gatherings involving tourists' bodily co-presence encompass both natural rituals and formal rituals simultaneously.

Natural rituals occur with an element of randomness, encompassing both direct interactions experienced personally by tourists and the observation of interactions between others within the ritual context. For example, after watching the story enacted in the "Multimedia Sculpture Theater of the Twenty-Four Martyrs of Longhua" inside the Longhua Martyrs Memorial Hall, a tourist could not help but cry. Upon noticing that she was holding flowers to pay respects to martyr Chen Yannian, a staff member voluntarily explained the hero's deeds, took photos, handed her a commemorative hero bookmark, and accompanied her to the martyrs' tomb area to offer flowers. Through the interaction ritual, this benevolent emotion was shared between the staff member and the tourist (R88—June 24, 2021). Negative emotions can also be transmitted through interaction rituals. As shown in Figure 2, two students stepped onto the lawn where the Tomb of the Unknown Martyr is located, prompting security personnel to intervene. In a similar situation, a tourist overheard a security guard shouting at students climbing the sculpture: "Get down! You are not allowed to step on this... you are stepping on the ashes of martyrs!!" This utterance not only immediately quieted the noisy environment but also caused the tourist to feel "a chill down my back, sensing a weight beyond words. (R68—May 8, 2023)" The students' uncivil behavior, violating the ritual context, and the guard's words facilitated the transmission of silence and anger within the interaction ritual.



Figure 2. Security guard preventing children from stepping onto the lawn in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Martyr – January 21, 2024

Formal rituals constitute a crucial component of interaction rituals in red tourism, and participation in immersive formal rituals can more rapidly evoke tourists' emotional experiences [14]. On special commemorative days, the plaza at Longhua Martyrs Cemetery hosts a wreath-laying ceremony that includes multiple prearranged elements such as offering flowers, raising the national flag, singing the national anthem, and singing the Internationale. These ceremonies attract tourists to spontaneously participate in the formal ritual: "Upon entering the plaza, we immediately saw police officers and some visitors paying respects to the martyrs. We joined them, laying flowers, saluting, and singing the national anthem. The entire ritual felt so overwhelming. In that moment, I felt profound reverence. My heart was stirred, and patriotic feelings welled up naturally. (R103—July 6, 2021)" Emotions such as awe, reverence, and excitement are shared among tourists participating in the formal ritual.

4.2.2. Gatherings with sacred objects

Sacred objects are physical entities or symbols in social life that represent the shared values and beliefs of a social group. Through these sacred objects, individuals participate in and reinforce these values and beliefs, thereby fostering social cohesion and order [21,58]. In the interaction rituals at Longhua Martyrs Cemetery, sacred objects refer to tangible items provided by the cemetery or brought by other tourists for the purpose of paying respects or commemorating the martyrs. These objects carry the emotions of both the providers and the bearers. When subsequent tourists enter the red-tourism interaction ritual context and encounter these sacred objects, the objects act as symbols, enabling tourists to resonate emotionally with the staff or earlier visitors who participated in the ritual. This shared emotional experience reflects collective identity and group solidarity [10]. Through the transmission of emotional energy, sacred objects contribute to the continuation of the interaction ritual chain in red tourism.

The sacred objects at Longhua Martyrs Cemetery include items provided by the cemetery, such as hero bookmarks and commemorative badges, as well as offerings brought by other visitors, including food, flowers, letters and postcards, message cards, and souvenirs. Different sacred objects carry distinct meanings, enabling tourists to experience varying forms of emotional resonance during gatherings with these objects. As shown in Figure 3(a), a tourist placed a bouquet with a message card in front of the explanatory plaque at the site of martyrdom. Similarly, in Figure 3(b), a tourist positioned a commemorative badge depicting martyr Chen Qiaonian in front of his tombstone, allowing subsequent visitors entering the ritual context to experience emotional resonance through the sacred objects.

"Many people came, leaving numerous flowers for Yannian and Qiaonian, along with many letters. It brought me to tears... Some even placed peanuts and candies at the tombs of Yannian and Qiaonian... it was overwhelming. (R109—July 7, 2021)" In the plot of the TV series *The Age of Awakening*, peanuts and candies were the favorite foods of martyrs Chen Yannian and Chen Qiaonian. These items, as sacred objects, extend the encounter chains established by watching the series into the red-tourism interaction rituals, causing several tourists who enter the ritual context at different times to experience emotional resonance and weep. "...There were not only fresh flowers but also greeting cards written to them, explaining how prosperous China is today;

there were photos of Yang Jiechi during China–US talks, showing them that we need not be as humiliated as we were at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. If they are watching from above, they would surely be very pleased. (R93—May 9, 2021)" The contrast between the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the 2021 China–US dialogue reflects the changes in China's comprehensive national strength and international status. The photos and their conveyed meanings, as sacred objects, communicate feelings of pride and satisfaction among different tourists, enabling the red-tourism interaction ritual chain to continue through emotional resonance.



Figure 3. (a): Previous visitors leaving flowers and notes at the site of martyrdom – January 3, 2024



Figure 3. (b): Previous visitors placing commemorative badges depicting martyrs in the cemetery – January 21, 2024

4.2.3. Gatherings with the deceased

In many religious and cultural contexts, the body of the deceased is regarded as a sacred object. It is not merely a physical entity but carries special symbolic significance and value, linked to the individual's soul, memory, and personal characteristics [59,60]. In the context of red-tourism rituals, revolutionary martyrs fought and sacrificed their lives at these sites, and were ultimately buried there; their bodies thus constitute unique sacred objects. For those who understand their revolutionary deeds and spirit, these bodies also function as special symbols. Funerary rituals exemplify the sacredness of the deceased's body, making it an object of collective experience for social groups while expressing respect and commemoration [61]. The revolutionary undertakings driven by these martyrs constitute a special form of interaction ritual, characterized by strong altruism, generating high-intensity ritual solidarity and emotional energy [10]. In red-tourism interaction rituals, when tourists witness the burial sites of revolutionary martyrs and learn about their deeds, they experience gatherings that co-presence with the deceased, sharing short-term emotions. This demonstrates how the interaction ritual chain continues across temporal and spatial contexts.

In the interaction rituals at Longhua Martyrs Cemetery, tourists engage in various forms of interaction—offering flowers, bowing, presenting food or commemorative items, praying, speaking to the deceased, writing message boards, walking around graves, and leaving letters or postcards—to achieve gatherings co-present with the deceased. As shown in Figure 4(a), students in school uniforms hang personally written message boards on a peach tree at the exit of the Longhua Martyrs Memorial Hall, expressing respect for the martyrs through written words. For tourists, flowers, food, and commemorative items function as sacred objects capable of bridging the human and spiritual realms [12], while interactive acts such as bowing or speaking directly convey respect and gratitude to the revolutionary martyrs: "Standing there, I couldn't help but cry; I really found myself talking to them, saying that I didn't bring milk candy for Qiaonian today, and that I would enjoy my life fully. (R133–2022, September 30)" At the same time, by visiting the historical sites and memorial hall, tourists directly learn about revolutionary deeds, achieving gatherings co-present with the martyrs themselves. As shown in Figure 4(b), the dim environment of Longhua Prison, where martyrs were once detained, enables tourists to imagine and connect across time and space with the martyrs: "The guardhouse entrance was incredibly oppressive. A mother brought her child, intending for the child to see up close, but the child was too scared; I really couldn't imagine what the predecessors experienced inside... (R69–2023, October 1)" Another tourist observed: "Slowly going through each hero's story, I reached the first-floor corner. A huge statue appeared on the horizon, half submerged in the ground, the left arm raised high. Looking at the emptiness, it represents the countless new generations of descendants—it lifts up the New China! (R45–2021, August 22)" Through gatherings co-present with the martyrs themselves, tourists momentarily share emotions that the martyrs may have experienced, such as fear, resilience, and hope, thus extending the interaction ritual chain of the revolutionary cause into the present.



Figure 4. (a): Students in school uniforms hang message boards on a peach tree – January 21, 2024

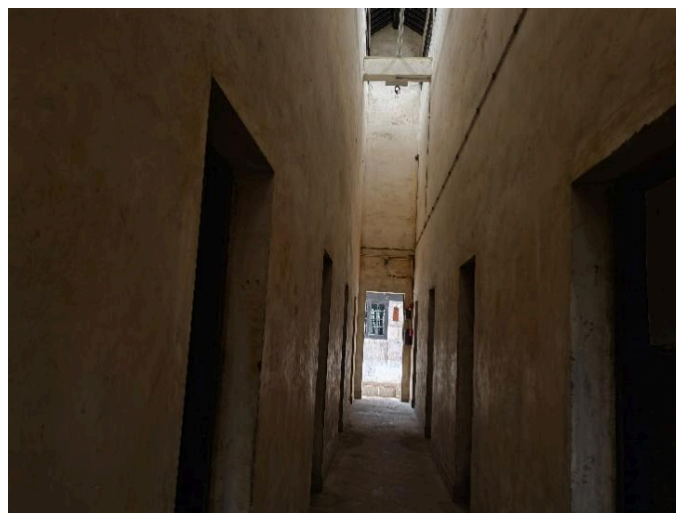


Figure 4. (b): The confined environment of the former Kuomintang Songhu Garrison Prison – January 21, 2024

4.3. Ritual outcomes: short-term feedback of interaction rituals

Visitors, as insiders, experience short-term shared emotional responses through the single-focus, multi-form gatherings of red tourism interaction rituals. Their emotions and values generate short-term feedback encompassing four dimensions.

4.3.1. Emotional energy

Emotional energy is the core outcome of interaction rituals [10]. In red tourism interaction rituals, the emotional energy acquired by visitors includes gratitude toward the revolutionary martyrs and satisfaction with their current lives, as well as personal commitments to self-improvement and ideals. For example, one visitor expressed: "Thank you, martyrs, for everything you have done for the country. Have you seen it? This prosperous era is as you wished! (R103–July 6, 2021)" In the ritual context, visitors recognize the continuity between the revolutionary cause promoted by the martyrs and the present development of China, generating strong feelings of consolation for the martyrs and gratitude. This emotional energy extends into visitors' personal lives: "I wish to take the martyrs as role models, to become someone with true talent and knowledge, contributing to the country and society, and advancing the boundaries of human cognition. (R43–June 8, 2023)" and "I look forward to the day we can address each other as comrades! (R7–October 26, 2023)"

Through the ritual, visitors actively commit themselves to contributing to the development of the nation and society, pursuing the same communist ideals as the revolutionary martyrs—manifesting a high-intensity form of emotional energy.

4.3.2. Group solidarity

High-intensity and persistently stable emotional energy fosters group solidarity, enabling participants in interaction rituals to recognize their identity as group members, experience pride, and be motivated to make positive changes [11]. For instance, one visitor reflected: "As a 25-year-old new youth, freshly graduated and entering society, I cannot be defeated by current emotions nor be complacent. I must learn from the passion of our predecessors, strive forward, and remain resilient and unyielding! (R45–August 22, 2021)" Many visitors self-identify as "new youth" or "Chinese youth", indicating their recognition of a shared identity with revolutionary martyrs. This reflects both cultural identity and recognition of the Chinese national community [62], demonstrating the manifestation of group solidarity.

4.3.3. Symbols representing the group

Symbols representing the group are emblematic markers through which individuals feel connected to the collective. These sacred symbols include visual icons, texts, gestures, ideas, values, and rituals [34], and they help maintain group membership through various forms of transmission [10]. In the context of red tourism at Longhua Martyrs' Cemetery, the most prominent symbol is the "Longhua Spirit". It represents the martyrs' unwavering loyalty to the nation, the people, and their beliefs, as well as their courage and responsibility in shouldering historical duties at a young age [63]: "The predecessors who fell one after another

persisted not because they saw hope, but because only by choosing persistence could hope be realized! Even if tens of thousands oppose me, I go forward undaunted, unrepentant through nine deaths. (R99–June 25, 2021)" Furthermore, many visitors cited Zhang Kaifan's poem in *Reflections from Prison* mourning the Five Martyrs of the Left League and other progressive youth as an expression of the Longhua Spirit: Longhua forever gazes at lofty winds, Heroes fall but their ambition remains. Inside the walls, peach blossoms; outside, blood, Equally vivid, equally red [64]. This demonstrates visitors' recognition of the Longhua Spirit as a symbolic representation within the red tourism ritual context.

4.3.4. Moral sense

Moral sense refers to individuals' commitment to upholding justice within the group, respecting group symbols, and preventing violations by transgressors [10]. In red tourism interaction rituals, visitors exhibit a strong moral sense, directly expressing their intention to remember history, cherish peace, honor martyrs, and demonstrate love for the Party and the country: "While we, as young people, pursue food, entertainment, and study, we must not forget how our good life came about. It was paved with the blood of countless martyrs. That eternal flame through wind and rain is our ever-burning Chinese heart. (R97–August 16, 2021)" When transgressions occur within the interaction ritual, visitors are driven by their moral sense to act: "...All the notes on this tree reflect visitors' heartfelt respect for the martyrs after touring the memorial hall and cemetery, aiming to establish a spiritual connection with them. What do you mean by writing this? It's inappropriate. I then asked the staff to remove it. (R34–July 31, 2023)" Visitors' strong identification with the revolutionary martyrs and the Longhua Spirit motivates them to express anger and take immediate action against behaviors that dishonor the martyrs, thereby preserving the sanctity of the symbols within the interaction ritual.

4.4. Ritual continuation: long-term feedback of interaction rituals

The short-term feedback of interaction rituals contains a high degree of group cohesion. As this group cohesion gradually dissipates, visitors seek to regain emotional stimulation and make efforts to gather again [10]. The form of such gatherings is not limited to those occurring within red tourism interaction rituals; they represent the continuation of short-term feedback. After participating in interaction rituals at Longhua Martyrs Cemetery, some visitors make red tourism commitments, such as returning to the cemetery or visiting other sites with symbols similar to those at Longhua, like Nanjing Yuhuatai. Some visitors reflect on their emotional preparation prior to entering the ritual context: "Outstanding television dramas awaken the patriotism and consciousness of the populace, prompting large numbers to voluntarily visit the martyrs' cemetery. While this is undoubtedly a positive outcome, a deeper question arises: when this fervor cools and all returns to calm, will that initial reverence, that fighting spirit, and that passionate dedication still endure? (R53–January 13, 2023)" Visitors contemplate what can serve as emotional preparation to motivate entry into ritual contexts once the emotional stimulus from red media fades, thereby extending the chain of experiences initiated by the revolutionary martyrs' deeds and spirit. Furthermore, some visitors actively create new interaction rituals to deepen their understanding of the martyrs' stories: "I went back and read the 'Shanghai Martyrs Letters,' feeling the spirit of the young people from a hundred years ago. (R65–July 5, 2023)" Through reading, symbols like the Longhua Spirit—initially created by revolutionary martyrs and experienced by visitors in the red tourism ritual context—enter the visitors' cognition, achieving a third-level cycle of the symbol [10].

5. Conclusion and discussion

Based on Interaction Ritual Chains theory, this study systematically summarizes the mechanism through which red tourism interaction rituals generate visitors' national identity, encompassing four key stages: ritual preparation, ritual process, ritual outcomes, and ritual continuation, as shown in Figure 5. In interaction rituals occurring across different times and spaces, the chain of experiences continues and cycles in multiple ways. First, the ritual preparation stage is the prerequisite for visitors to enter the red tourism ritual context and become insiders. Emotional preparation refers to visitors' emotional needs arising in daily life that drive their desire to participate in red tourism interaction rituals, while the ritual context is constructed based on red tourism resources and their patriotic discourse, forming the setting in which interaction rituals occur. Second, the ritual process stage refers to the actual occurrence of red tourism interaction rituals. Visitors gain short-term shared emotional experiences through single-focus, multi-form gatherings. Within this process: Gathering with others' bodily co-presence includes both spontaneously occurring natural rituals and participatory formal rituals. Gathering with sacred objects involves visitors interacting with tangible items left by others for the commemoration or veneration of martyrs; emotional resonance across non-synchronous temporal contexts is achieved through the transmission of these sacred objects. Gathering with the deceased refers to visitors' co-presence with the bodies and personas of revolutionary martyrs. Through red tourism, the revolutionary cause is extended via interaction rituals, and visitors achieve emotional resonance with the martyrs across time and space. Third, the ritual outcomes stage represents the short-term feedback of interaction rituals, encompassing four dimensions: emotional energy, group

solidarity, symbols representing the group, and moral sense. In red tourism interaction rituals, visitors experience profound changes in emotion and values. Finally, the ritual continuation stage occurs after the conclusion of the red tourism interaction ritual, reflecting the long-term feedback of the ritual. Symbols experienced during the ritual enter visitors' cognitive cycles, generating new emotional energy and sustaining the chain of interaction rituals over time.

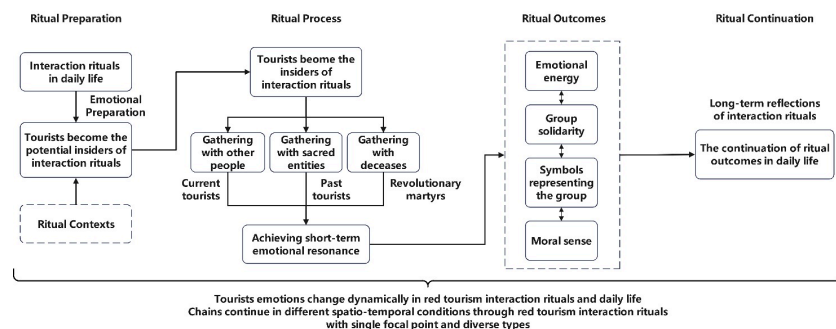


Figure 5. Mechanism of interaction rituals in red tourism

This study makes several contributions. First, while previous research has seldom examined Red Tourism rituals from the perspective of microsociology—treating rituals mainly as formal ceremonies that strongly influence visitors' memory and behavior [6]—this paper, by clarifying the concept of ritual, defines Red Tourism as a form of natural ritual. It deconstructs the spontaneous interaction rituals arising from different types of gatherings and simultaneously confirms the importance of formal rituals in Red Tourism, demonstrating that both ritual types share core elements, processes, and outcomes [10]. Second, empirical studies on interaction ritual chains in tourism have primarily focused on interactions and gatherings among people [11]. This study extends the forms of gatherings in Red Tourism to include co-presence with sacred objects and the deceased, highlighting the sacred attributes of Red Tourism resources. By adopting a cross-temporal and cross-spatial perspective, it explains the shared emotional experiences that visitors acquire through different types of gatherings and shows how interaction ritual chains are maintained in both short- and long-term contexts. This broadens the explanatory scope of interaction ritual chain theory, making it applicable to rituals occurring at communist sites [65] or war memorials [66] outside China that similarly possess sacred attributes. Third, prior studies have shown from the perspective of emotional arousal and mixed emotions that visitors' feelings in Red Tourism can shift from short-term negative emotions to long-term positive ones [14, 15]. This paper confirms this process through the lens of interaction ritual chains and further demonstrates that long-term stable emotional energy sustains the ritual chain even after the Red Tourism interaction ends. Visitors not only generate group solidarity, symbolic representations, and moral sense but also continue the interaction ritual chain cognitively in daily life, deepening the research on emotional experiences in Red Tourism.

As a channel for disseminating socialist core values [67], Red Tourism's effectiveness depends on allowing visitors to experience interaction rituals with clear focal points and diverse forms of gatherings. For managers of Red Tourism resources, this implies the need to excavate the spiritual strength behind the resources and transform it into tangible symbols that visitors can directly perceive. For instance, at Longhua Martyrs' Cemetery, historical relics, architectural layouts, and orderly displays of artifacts and interactive installations can convey the core symbol of the "Longhua Spirit" while narrating revolutionary history clearly. Additionally, encouraging visitors to write travel notes after experiencing Red Tourism can attract more potential participants into the ritual context, extending the interaction ritual chain in multiple forms. By enabling more visitors to engage directly with Red Tourism, the educational significance of these resources is realized, enhancing social recognition of socialist core values while also delivering value through the tourism industry [68].

Due to research limitations, this study focuses only on traditional Red Tourism resources and does not address interaction rituals arising in new forms of Red Tourism, such as the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge [18] or the Wenchang Space Launch Center [19]. Future studies could investigate the mechanisms of interaction rituals in these emerging Red Tourism contexts.

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