



Feet in Hell, Spirit in Heaven: Spiritual Transformation of Chinese Travelers on the Camino de Santiago

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Abstract

The study aims to understand the precursors, catalysts, and dimensions of the spiritual transformation of Chinese travelers on the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage-tourist route in Spain. This research has adopted the theoretical framework of spiritual transformation by Pargament and his colleagues in collecting the transformative experience of Chinese Camino travelers reported in 139 blogs and stories. Thematic analysis is employed in analyzing the data. The study results show that Chinese travelers underwent spiritually transformative experiences, as observed in the changes in their relationship to themselves, others, nature, and the transcendent. These four dimensions are interconnected and experienced as something integrated with Chinese cultural and spiritual traditions. This study also explores the transculturality of spiritual experience, the important role of embodied engagement, and the critical and essential qualities of liminality in the transformative process on the Camino de Santiago.

Keywords Spiritual transformation · Liminality · Well-being · Cultural route · Camino de Santiago

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Introduction

As an essential dimension of human experience, much attention has been paid to spirituality in fields diverse as philosophy, religious studies, psychology, medicine, anthropology, and sociology. Christian thinkers have long been the leaders in conceptualizing spirituality in Western culture and history. Traditionally, they understood it as something related to the divine, in contrast to the worldly. Although in some research, the words 'religion' and 'spirituality' are still being used interchangeably, spirituality was conceptualized by some scholars to refer to the realm of the personal, beyond the field of religion, which often involves an emphasis on institutions and specific groups (de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012; Heelas, 2005; Rambo & Bauman, 2012; Sheldreake, 2013).

Spirituality is believed to be a multidimensional construct (Cook, 2004; de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012; George et al., 2000; Gomez & Fisher, 2003). William James (1902), while investigating the phenomenon of religious conversion, theorized that spirituality has to do with transcendence, which can refer to one's relationship with others, the universe, or divinity, depending on the perspective and belief system of the individual. Entering the twenty-first century, scholars such as Pargament and his colleagues (1999, 2002, 2006) defined spirituality as a search for the sacred, and 'the sacred includes concepts of God, the divine, Ultimate Reality, and the transcendent, as well as any aspect of life that takes on extraordinary character by virtue of its association with or representation of such concepts' (Hill & Pargament, 2008, p.2). Other scholars view spirituality as connectedness with oneself, others, the natural environment, and the transcendent (Cook, 2004; de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012; Gomez & Fisher, 2003).

Spirituality is never an utterly self-defined object since it is shaped by the historical, cultural, and social context of the subjects of such experiences (Bowman, 1991; Murray & Graham, 1997). Different cultures have different understandings of the transcendent and life meaning-making, which impact spirituality's cognitive, affective, and behavioral presentation (Rambo, 1999; Wang et al., 2020), both at an individual and collective level. For example, some scholars of Chinese spiritual traditions argued that spirituality in Chinese culture is often characterized by emphasizing the experience of transcendence as related to the integration of human life with nature in such a way that the divine is grasped in terms of the secular, whereas in Christianity and monotheistic traditions, the immanent-transcendent bipolarity is often more striking (Ji, 1993; Liu, 2011; Tong, 2010; Zhang, 2020).

Spiritual Transformation

Spirituality connotes dynamic life changes and growth (Guo & Ma, 2014; Lapierre, 1994). Changes in the spiritual realm, or spiritual transformation, are defined as fundamental changes in the place or the characteristics of the sacred (Pargament, 1999, 2006). Among the relevant studies, the theoretical framework proposed by Pargament and his colleagues gave much light to an in-depth understanding of the

phenomenon. They conceptualized the precursors, catalysts, nature, dimensions, and effects of transformation in the spiritual realm (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004; Pargament, 2006; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998).

According to Pargament and his colleagues (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004; Pargament, 2006), the situations or events that have occurred before reported transformation include long-term stress, acute stressful events, and interpersonal conflicts such as unhealthy family relationships. Other contextual elements associated with such experience involve religious or spiritual practice, such as religious activities, prayers, meditations, religious reading, community communion, social communication, music, nature, or intense exercise. At the core of the process, spiritual transformation involves changes along three dimensions, namely changes in one's relationship with the self, with others, and with the sacred. Such changes are generally positive and contribute to improved personal well-being, life perspectives, and connectedness with others and the sacred. We have the critical elements of the theoretical framework in Table 1.

Much of the research on spirituality has been conducted within the Christian traditions in Western countries (Gorsuch & Miller, 1999; Piedmont & Leach, 2002). The theories developed in those studies may not be entirely applicable to individuals who grew up in Eastern spiritual traditions, such as members of the Chinese or Indian population. Therefore, some scholars have called for a more indigenized theoretical exploration in China and other cultural contexts (Guo & Ma, 2014; Liu, 2015; Rambo & Bauman, 2012; Zhang, 2020). However, possibly due to the topic's sensitivity, current studies on spirituality in China are scarce and limited to specific research questions such as Chinese classics or the mental health of terminally sick patients.

The Camino de Santiago

The world-famous Santiago de Compostela Pilgrimage Routes, known as the Camino, are a web of world heritage routes heading toward the Galician capital in Northwestern Spain. The tomb of Jesus's apostle, St. James the Great, was announced as mysteriously *discovered* in this part of Spain in the ninth century. By medieval times, the pilgrimage roads that led to Santiago had already become one of

Table 1 Theoretical framework of spiritual transformation

Nature of spiritual transformation	A fundamental change in the place or the characteristics of the sacred in one's life
Precursors	Long-term stress, acute stressful events, interpersonal conflict
Catalysts	Religious practice, community communion, music, nature, intense exercise
Dimensions	Understanding in the relationship with oneself Understanding in the relationship with others Understanding in the relationship with the sacred
Effects	Personal satisfaction, low anxiety and depression, inner peace, forgiveness, deeper relationship with the sacred

Mahoney and Pargament (2004), Pargament (2006)

the most popular Christian pilgrimage pathways and a practical factor of European identity construction (Chemin, 2016; Council of Europe, 1987; Tilson, 2015).

After a documented decline in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the millennium-old pilgrimage route experienced a revitalization at the end of the twentieth century. Today the Camino has developed into a physically demanding, spiritually rewarding long-distance hiking trail (Felkai, 2019; Harris, 2019). Compared to their medieval counterparts, the contemporary pilgrims of the Camino have shown a wider diversity of motivations. Spiritual growth, culture, nature, leisure, personal wellness, sport, as well as religious motivations, such as closeness to God and atonement, are all factors that drive people to do the Camino in the new millennium (Amaro et al., 2018; Farias et al., 2019; Lois-González & Santos, 2015). Another significant shift is that the background of the pilgrims is more diversified today. The contemporary pilgrims come from all parts of the world, but most are from Europe, North and South America. In 2022, the pilgrims who made their Camino represented 193 countries and regions (Pilgrims' Office, 2022). Every day on the Camino, travelers from different cultural and religious backgrounds walk, eat, and rest together; they exchange ideas and form friendships (Zhang et al., 2021).

Various studies of the Camino pilgrims and their experiences indicated that, for many pilgrims, spiritual growth and transformation are among the most significant experiences of their Camino. Pilgrims reported their transformative experience in terms of increased personal well-being, spiritual growth, new life directions and meanings, and a sense of *communitas* with fellow pilgrims (Lopez, 2013; Luik, 2012; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016). Scholars explained these transformative experiences in light of Turner's (1969) concept of 'liminality' (Genoni, 2011; Lopez, 2013; Luik, 2012; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016; Oviedo et al., 2014), but their studies did not provide many details regarding the specific aspects or elements that fostered the transformative process. The studies of the general pilgrim experience of the Camino focused primarily on pilgrims from a Western background. Therefore, the present study intends to focus on Chinese Camino travelers to investigate their experience through the lenses of the previous theoretical framework on spiritual transformation while critically inquiring about its universal validity.

Specifically, this study aims to determine (1) what functioned as the precursors and catalysts that contributed to their spiritual transformation? (2) in which dimensions did Chinese travelers experience it? (3) what are the effects? (4) how does the transformative process occur? With a deeper understanding of the spiritual experiences of the Chinese on the Camino, we will examine the cross-cultural generalizability of the theoretical framework by Pargament and his colleagues. Moreover, we will also explore the interactions between a cultural-spiritual space such as the Camino de Santiago and the effects on the mental health of those who experience it.

Methods

Since the experience of transformation is subjective and symbolic, in this study, we found it appropriate to adopt a qualitative approach to catch the depth and rich dynamics of the transformative experience of Chinese Camino travelers and discover the

subtle elements involved in the process. For this purpose, the multi-faceted framework (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004; Pargament, 2006) would serve as a helpful tool to employ a theory-driven thematic analysis when treating the data on the transformative experience of Chinese Camino travelers.

Data Collection

Questions regarding religion and spirituality are highly personal in China—the experience in the interviews that the authors conducted for another study on Chinese Camino travelers also confirmed this observation. Nevertheless, expressing personal spiritual experiences online seems less confrontational and less sensitive. Of course, the individuals usually presented such experiences in a socially acceptable way. For example, Chinese travelers tended to claim their atheistic background at the beginning of their travel blogs of the Camino as a justification for their non-religious motivation to make a trip that may have a religious undertone in the eyes of the Chinese public.

Written accounts are excellent sources for investigating spiritual experience in tourism (Norman, 2012). Autobiography has also been used as an effective research tool for gaining insights into lived human experiences (Reed-Danahay, 2001; Tripathi et al., 2020). Therefore, this study chose to look into the travel accounts posted by Chinese travelers who have completed the Camino and shared their personal experiences in the form of diaries or short stories. Such user-generated-content has the advantage of being non-intrusive, large in amount, easy to handle, and time-saving for research purposes; furthermore, the content usually reflects authentic feelings and thoughts of the authors who voluntarily share their experiences with others virtually (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Carson, 2008).

The data on Chinese Camino travelers' spiritual experiences were collected from two main sources: online travel blogs and personal stories from the social media group of Chinese Camino travelers. The blogs were collected from three major Chinese travel websites, namely Qyer.com, Mafengwo.cn, and Ctrip.com. The keywords we used for identifying the blogs were Chinese translations of 'the Camino de Santiago pilgrim route.' The selection criteria included (1) the authors have completed the Camino themselves either by walking or cycling, (2) the content must include the inner experience of the author, and (3) the content should be sufficiently rich. Therefore, the authors excluded those blogs with mainly photos and little text. The stories came from the written testimonies of some Chinese Camino Friends who formed a sharing group of more than 500 members on WeChat, mainland China's most popular social media platform. All the collected stories contained rich information on the inner experience of the Camino. For data analysis, one hundred and thirty-nine Camino accounts (from 82 blogs and 57 stories) were collected and marked as #1, #2... #139.

Data Analysis

This study employed a deductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step procedure, which aimed at identifying and analyzing critical themes on the precursors, catalysts, and dimensions within the data of the spiritually

transformative experience of Chinese Camino travelers while also being guided by the framework mentioned above. The following procedures were followed for treating the data: (1) familiarization with the data: the blogs and stories of Chinese travelers on the Camino de Santiago were read through back and forth, while notes of interesting ideas were taken; (2) generation of initial codes: all the blogs were coded based on the key conceptual aspects of the theoretical framework, including those codes relevant to the researched phenomena but not mentioned in the theories; (3) search for themes: a theme map in an excel spreadsheet was drafted based on the codes and their inter-relations, and text extracts were classified under each theme; (4) review of the themes: the pertinence of all the codes and themes was verified, to see if the grouping of codes needs to be rearranged to increase code/theme-extract congruence and clarity; (5) refining of themes: the themes were arranged in an internally consistent manner according to their core messages; and (6) production of reports: some major narrative threads in the data about the transformative experiences were outlined.

Results

Profile of Chinese Travelers

About two-thirds of those 139 Chinese Camino travelers were women. Half were under 30 years old, and nearly half were between 30 and 60. The two main groups among these Chinese travelers were students currently living in Europe and professionals working in China. At least 90% claimed they were not followers of any religion, and 6% disclosed that they were Christian (various denominations). Almost all of them chose to experience the Camino by walking. More than half of Chinese travelers started their journey alone, and on average, each spent 21 days on the way (Table 2).

Precursors and Catalysts

Two-thirds of the Chinese Camino travelers in this study were experiencing stress or going through a personal crisis prior to their journey, including stress from work, study, or from going through life transitions, such as graduation from university or leaving a previous job. Some reported feelings of anxiety, meaninglessness, confusion, or inadequacy (Table 3). In some cases, these feelings were linked to the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020.

All the catalytic contextual factors theorized by Pargament and his colleagues (2004, 2006) were found present and relevant, yet dressed in the garments of a travel experience on the Camino de Santiago: long-distance and intensive trekking, immersion in nature, exposure to religious practice, and communion with other pilgrims on the way. In addition, we have observed that the simplified, authentic lifestyle of the Camino has also contributed to the transformative experience of many Chinese travelers.

Table 2 Chinese travelers' profile

	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	49	35%
Female	90	65%
Age		
< 30	70	50%
30–60	65	47%
> 60	4	3%
Occupation		
Student	59	42%
Working	61	44%
Retiree	6	4%
Not indicated	13	9%
Religion		
Non-affiliated	126	90%
Christian	8	6%
Not indicated	5	4%
Route		
The French way	101	73%
Other routes	38	27%
Length		
A week or less	46	33%
More than a week	93	67%
Mode		
On foot	137	99%
On bike	2	1%
Organization		
Starting alone	72	52%
Starting with companions	67	48%

Authors' elaboration

Dimensions of Transformation

Profound changes in the relationship with the self, with others, and with the sacred were observed among most Chinese travelers. Such changes occurred in the form of improved affectivity, renewed attitudes, and life values, especially in the relationship with the self. Many contextual factors contributing to the changes from various dimensions were closely interrelated. A list of the themes and codes along the transformative dimensions is displayed in Table 4.

Table 3 Precursors and catalysts

Category	Count	Theme	Count	Code		
Precursors	84	Stress, anxiety	63	Life in general		
				Separation from nature		
				Work or study		
				The pandemic		
		Transition	38	Illness/death of oneself/family member		
				Interpersonal conflicts		
				Graduation		
Catalysts	84	Meaninglessness	37	Resignation from work		
				Does not know what to do next		
		Confusion	26	Turning 30 or 40		
				Break-up in relationship		
		Inadequacy	20	Meaninglessness		
Catalysts	84	Intense exercise	105	Overcoming physical challenges, exploring one's limits in the face of uncertainties		
				Nature	88	Positive feelings in nature
				Simple and authentic lifestyle	53	Simple way of living, being true to oneself
				Communion with community	41	Interactions and bonding with other pilgrims
				Religious practice	29	Religious rituals (including music, incense burning), religious faith of others

Authors' elaboration

Relationship with the Self

A majority of the 139 Chinese Camino travelers reported having renewed their relationship with themselves. The most obvious aspect is their improved mood. Strong feelings of joy, contentment, inner peace, freedom, relief, authenticity, and healing could be attributed to close contact with nature, distance from everyday stress, a simple lifestyle on the Camino, free expression of one's true emotions and thoughts, kindness of random strangers, exposure to religion-motivated behaviors such as donations and volunteering. Despite its physical hardship, the Camino was an emotionally rewarding experience for Chinese travelers. As a few of them put it: 'Feet in hell, spirit in heaven.' (#31, #33).

'I had a happy walk along the way, except for the inevitable physical fatigue and pain. I'm very grateful for this brief period of full freedom, which allows me to cut off temporarily from the life of the past. All the twenty-four hours are my own. I can walk, sing, read, talk, sleep. I can schedule the day as I wish. No need to report to anyone.' (#39)

Many Chinese travelers reported having acquired the courage and perseverance to confront themselves, others, and life challenges. Another fruit of the journey

Table 4 Dimensions of transformation

Dimension	Count	Theme	Count	Related factors or contexts
Relationship with the self—new feelings	93	Joy	81	Nature, simple lifestyle, kindness of others, being true to oneself, seeing new things/people, food
		Contentment	47	Being on the Camino, nature, having everything one needs, food
		Peace	42	Nature, religious rituals, religious sites
		Freedom/relief	39	Nature, away from everyday routine and schedules, simple lifestyle, breaking self-limits, being true to oneself, simple relationship
		Authenticity/purity	38	Being true to one's feelings, limits and needs, nature, frank communication
		Healing	19	Overcoming difficulties, being true to oneself, nature, kindness of others, religious rituals
New attitudes		Courage/perseverance	59	Overcoming difficulties/challenges, seeing others' strength, encouragement of others, being true to oneself, trying new things, nature
		Gratitude	47	Kindness of others, destiny/God, religious rituals, the journey, nature, food
		Acceptance	44	The journey, accepting self-limits/life changes, being true to oneself, <i>yuanfen</i> (destiny)
New values		The Camino is life	39	Full of unexpected changes, full of challenges, <i>yuanfen</i> (destiny), walking to a destination, personal journey
		A balanced lifestyle is important	22	The journey, nature, simple lifestyle, attention to well-being and inner growth
		Harmony with nature is important	16	Nature
Relationship with others		Religion is meaningful	14	Religious rituals/sites, religious faith of others
		Kindness is important	13	Kindness of others
	47	Interconnectedness with other people	41	Sense of <i>yuanfen</i> (destiny), sense of pilgrim community/family/comrade-in-arms (group meal, going through difficulties together)
		A warm, genuine relationship	39	Kindness of others, frank communication

Table 4 (continued)

Dimension	Count	Theme	Count	Related factors or contexts
Relationship with the sacred	32	Gratitude	34	Kindness/encouragement of others
		Religion feels good, powerful, sacred	21	Religious rituals/sites, religious faith of others (praying/volunteering/donation/kindness)
		Trust in the transcendent	21	The journey, <i>yuanfen</i> , kindness of others
		Interconnectedness with nature/cosmos	17	Nature, the journey, communion with peers
		Gratitude for life/the sacred	15	The journey, pilgrim mass, kindness of others
		Religion is important, meaningful	14	Religious rituals/sites, religious faith of others (volunteering/donation/kindness)
Authors' elaboration				

was an accepting attitude toward personal limits, life uncertainties, or imperfections. They often expressed gratitude during the journey for others and life in general. Such positiveness sharply contrasted with the heaviness these Chinese travelers felt before embarking on the Camino.

It is worth noticing that to some travelers, feeling a sense of courage or acceptance may come after an emotional breakdown caused by the difficulties they experienced. The cathartic triggers may come from various sources: bedbug bites, bad weather, injuries, or the full occupation of hostels. The success in overcoming all kinds of difficulties on the Camino, or witnessing others successfully overcoming their challenges such as carrying heavy backpacks, traveling long distances daily, fighting depression or terminal illness, and coping with the loss of their beloved ones, facilitated an inner transformation from weak to strong. The encouragement of others also helped Chinese travelers grow their inner strength.

‘I’m also thrilled that I have met these lovely people. They made me change, more cheerful, more confident in myself.’ (#40)

‘We almost collapsed halfway, crying out loud for different or no reasons. He [the companion] took out his knife to cut the shell off my backpack. I grabbed the knife and told him: from now on, I will not give up, not on any day in my life.’ (#116)

The Camino journey renewed the ways Chinese travelers view their lives. After the Camino, they showed a preference for a lifestyle closer to nature, more simplified, more authentic, and more wellbeing-oriented.

‘As noisy as the Chinese people, the Italians are far more straightforward in expressing their emotions. They laugh aloud when they are happy, cry aloud when they are sad, get mad when it’s unbearable, hug and kiss you like family members when they like you. Exposed to the impermanence of this life, why not be your authentic self?’ (#121)

‘After passing the hills, the plains, the coasts, the fields, I gradually got rid of the external constraints and focused more on my inner strength. I started to believe I *can* choose a life I desire, just like walking the Camino.’ (#125)

‘If I must give a meaning to the Camino, returning to nature and rediscovering the most authentic life would be the meaning of this way.’ (#139).

Relationship with Others

The Camino journey has renewed Chinese travelers’ relationships with others, too. The positive interpersonal experience generated among Chinese travelers a sense of gratitude and appreciation for authentic interpersonal communication and random kindness along the way, both from their peer pilgrims and from the locals, including the residents, pilgrim hostel volunteers, shop keepers, and policemen.

‘The uncle (a truck driver) stopped me and passed to me a bunch of grapes. I thanked him immediately but he just waved me ‘Buen Camino’ and started his

truck and drove away. It moved me so much and you can't tell how much strength his kindness has given me.' (#12).

'There are no blankets in the public albergue. After asking the entire village, I finally borrowed one from the local parish. Although I'm not Christian, but at this moment I'm grateful and pious.' (#72).

A sense of membership in a time-transcending community of pilgrims who engage in their existential pursuit of meaning was keenly felt. Chinese travelers often expressed a sense of bonding through vocabulary denoting kinship. This feeling of family-like bonding was often reinforced by mutual greetings, frank and friendly communication, caring mutual assistance on the way, and some group activities such as pilgrim dinners at the hostels, religious prayers, or masses.

'When I was attending the pilgrim mass with more than a hundred walkers, I again felt a sense of belongingness, something I can share with others... We, at the square of the Cathedral de Santiago, come from different countries, have different skin colors, and vary in age, education, and occupation. However, in essence, our lives are not very different. Our happiness and pain, struggles and distress, sufferings and joy are all similar...' (#1)

'I like very much the pilgrim hostel tonight. We cooked together, sang, and danced together. Even if we don't know each other and will bid farewell tomorrow morning, it still feels like we are a family.' (#11)

'Life always needs such a sense of ritual. People of different nationalities, races, skin colors, and faith traditions did together an incredible thing. We have now arrived at the square before the Cathedral, enjoying our satisfaction and joy. At this moment, my name, like those of millions of pilgrims in history, will be remembered by the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.' (#22)

Interestingly, many Chinese Camino travelers often attributed their encounters with people on the Camino to the mysterious play of *yuanfen*, originally a Buddhist concept that refers to a sense of destiny or serendipity, because such encounters were often unexpected, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. This interconnectedness with other pilgrims worldwide also reminded some Chinese travelers of the Confucian ideals of 'great harmony under heaven' (*tianxia datong*) and 'benevolence' (*ren*). Facilitated by the mysterious '*yuanfen*' perception and the heartfelt community and family bonding, this feeling of unity was sometimes extended to all members of humanity.

'People came to the Camino for various reasons. We have different nationalities, cultures, and skin colors, but we meet, get to know each other, and become acquainted at a certain time. Life has arranged for us a wonderful journey of *yuanfen*.' (#21)

'The *grandma* was the first to hug me [during the peace greeting in a mass]. I was surprised and confused, hesitating whether I should join the hugging. The grandma and Gloria opened their arms to me at once, and I hugged them back. I felt shocked. For the first time, I understood the true meaning of *great harmony under heaven* and *benevolence on Earth*.' (#36)

‘Indeed, black skin, white skin, yellow skin, native speakers of English, Spanish, Chinese... how are they essentially different? When I feel happy for your happiness, rejoice for your joy, till eventually reach the realm of ‘no-self,’ the entire universe becomes one; there is no more differentiation between yours and mine. I think, maybe that is what heaven looks like.’ (#88)

Relationship with the Sacred

The Camino experience brought many Chinese travelers positive feelings and novel attitudes toward the sacred. Either through exposure to religious rituals such as pilgrim masses or blessings, or through witnessing the devotion of religious believers in their prayers and benevolent behaviors demonstrated in volunteering in pilgrim hostels, especially those that run on donations, Chinese travelers felt beauty, sacredness, and power of religion and acknowledged the value of religious faith. Under the influence of religious interactions and the belief in serendipity (*yuanfen*), coupled with the inner strength that has grown on the Camino, Chinese travelers developed a stronger connection with the transcendent, which they expressed through having trust in destiny or life in general.

‘An unexpected rain kept me in a chapel. A musician was playing the instrument, a surreal sound crystalized in this simple but solemn space; all the earthly noise was gone. That was the sound of heaven... A *grandma* approached me and passed me a rosary... When the mass ended, I returned it to her, but her trembling hands held my hands, and she asked me to take away the gift of God... My first time feeling the power of religion in only forty-five minutes... I held this most precious gift, feeling so moved, words couldn’t describe it. Whenever I get in difficult situations or feel confused, I put this rosary in my palm, remembering the moment I was treated gently by the world... As an atheist, I felt the great power of religion at the end of the Camino. After I came back, I consciously read histories about religion. I’m not yet a believer, but on this millennium-old way, I’ve always been treated kindly.’ (#47)

‘I stood under the *Cruz de Ferro* (the iron cross) for some time. I have recognized that my biggest burden is fear. I fear failure, of getting hurt, fear that I won’t be happy, that nobody loves me because I don’t deserve it, fear that my life has no meaning... Now, I believe that my life is part of the eternal life. What I think in the mind won’t change that fact.’ (#73)

Relationship with Nature

Pargament and his colleagues (2004, 2006) did not mention this dimension in their theoretical framework of spiritual transformation. However, we deem it necessary to address it here as a dimension of its own, as the results across other dimensions showed that closeness to nature has changed Chinese Camino travelers’ feelings and thoughts about themselves. The intensive contact with nature on the Camino also

made them feel existentially connected with the natural environment and feel their authentic self.

‘At some moments on the Camino, I felt as if I had turned into a grass, a tree, a stone, a pile of dirt... totally integrated with nature while quietly watching this secular world.’ (#95)

‘It’s like treasure-hunting in nature, full of happy surprises and admiration: the green fields, the yellow flowers, the furry sheep, the curious horses. When feeling tired, we sat under the clear blue sky, listening to the birds singing, and smelling the fragrance of the trees. What is a mobile phone? Where are my worries? The ego that’s often magnified in the cities has disappeared without a trace. On the Camino, I forgot myself but also reclaimed myself.’ (#123)

Discussion

The Fourth Dimension

Pargament (2006) conceptualized the three dimensions of spiritual transformation, namely one’s relationship with the self, with others, and with the sacred. However, the importance of nature in the transformative experience of Chinese travelers revealed in this study recommends a more penetrating role that nature plays in the process. Nature has reminded Chinese Camino travelers to be more aware of their authentic selves, a balanced lifestyle, and an existential connection with other beings on Earth. Some scholars have acknowledged this connectedness with the natural environment as an essential component in the conceptualization of spirituality (de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012; Reed, 1992).

An Integral View on Spirituality

The results demonstrated that these four transformative dimensions are closely inter-related. For example, it is the synergy between a closer relationship with nature (Oviedo et al., 2014) and the people on the Camino (Cazaux, 2011; Farias et al., 2019; Tykarski & Mróz, 2023) that contributed to an improved affective well-being, a renewed sense of self, an enhanced interpersonal bonding, and a more open attitude toward religious faith. What is more, by attributing their encounters with others to the play of *yuanfen* or serendipity due to the power of the transcendent, Chinese travelers felt a time-encompassing connectedness with their companions. Sometimes such a sense of intrapersonal connectedness was extended to the entire humanity, including those who have been there in the past. Attributing the providential *yuanfen* also helped them become more relaxed and serene when conceiving future or unexpected life events.

A multidimensional connectedness has been one of the key features of Chinese spiritual traditions. Man, nature, and the transcendent have long been conceptualized as integral parts of a holistic life, as expressed in the Confucian and Daoist concept of ‘unity of heaven and man’ (Guo & Ma, 2014; Jen-Kuen, 2013; Liu, 2011;

Tang, 2005). The unity of the living and the deceased—the domain of ancestors, has been a core Chinese traditional belief too (Tian, 2019; Xia, 2017). The Buddhist concept of ‘predestined relationship’ in the interaction among people has been popular among the Chinese population till today (Bai, 2004).

A Universal Spiritual Space

In a traditionally Western cultural-spiritual environment like the Camino de Santiago, Chinese travelers tend to interpret their transformative experience in light of cultural or spiritual concepts that feel familiar to them (Zhang et al., 2021). On the one hand, this reflects how home culture shapes one’s understanding and expression of spiritual experience. On the other hand, it shows that transformation per se is not necessarily inhibited by the ‘foreignness’ of the space in which it occurs. In an increasingly changing time, open-minded, inclusive spaces such as the Camino are particularly needed for people of culturally diverse backgrounds to explore and express their spirituality, encounter each other, and discover their universal connection.

The Importance of Embodied Engagement in Spiritual Transformation

In addition to the positive effect of long-distance trekking on mental health and interpersonal relationships (Chan et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2009; Roberson & Babic, 2009), how embodied engagement functions in the transformative experience of Chinese Camino travelers is also worth noticing. In Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory, transformation is initiated by a reflection and re-evaluation of one’s previous knowledge or values that are challenged by the perceived differences of other people, often from a different culture. Then, new behaviors are adopted when new knowledge and values are integrated into one’s previous cognitive system.

However, we have inductively observed in this study that many Chinese travelers first adopted a behavioral pattern significantly different from the one applied in their familiar life routine, such as possessing a minimum number of belongings, spending a significant amount of time in nature, and engaging in plentiful physical exercise. These new behavioral patterns induced a renewed sense of wellness, which prompted them to re-evaluate their previous lifestyle and values. They reported developing new knowledge and perspectives: a simple, balanced lifestyle is more authentic, fulfilling, and meaningful.

Similarly, overcoming physical limits brought self-confidence, walking with pain led to acceptance of oneself and life in general, and participating in religious rituals such as offering a sign of peace in liturgy or joining a thanksgiving prayer before community dinners all nurtured more appreciation and openness toward religion. Contrary to the regular transformative learning process, behavioral pattern changes can lead to mindset changes (Mezirow, 1991). This observation confirms the significance of embodied engagement in the transformative process (Pung et al., 2020; Urry & Larsen, 2011).

A Closer Look at Liminality

The existing literature on the Camino pilgrim experience often attributes transformation to the 'liminality' of the pilgrimage journey (Genoni, 2011; Lopez, 2013; Luik, 2012; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016; Oviedo et al., 2014). 'Liminality' refers to the disorienting state as an individual goes through a 'rite of passage.' Under a liminal state, previous social values and structures are temporarily suspended, the previous norms are reviewed with a refreshed perspective, and new norms are yet to be established (Turner, 1969). This 'disorientation' also happened to Chinese Camino travelers as they entered a space where their accustomed social roles and cultural structures were reshuffled.

Why is liminality so crucial to spiritual transformation? Because it allows for a disconnection from inauthenticity. According to Eckhart Tolle (2016), a German spiritual teacher, many individuals with a modern mentality have the false belief that one's identity is defined by tangible and intangible possessions that are convertible into social credit, such as the possession of appearance, talent, fame, virtues, social roles or life stories. When people relate to themselves, others, nature, or the transcendent based on such identities, their relationships cannot be authentic. The human-to-human relationship will become an interaction between social roles or resources they possess. The human–nature relationship will occur between the owner and the properties. The human–transcendence relationship will be an extension of one's egoistic self. According to many spiritual teachers, such identifications and the resulting inauthentic relationships are rooted in various forms of human suffering (de Mello, 1990; Tolle, 2016). However, the Camino journey temporarily cuts one off from those inauthentic connections.

Nonetheless, to make spiritual transformation possible, there also needs to be a (re)connection to authenticity. Being introduced into the liminal state enabled by the Camino journey, Chinese travelers were in touch with their immediate physical conditions, genuine emotions, actual needs, and authentic desires instead of their ideals or social expectations. They related to their peers as co-searchers of authentic selves instead of as potential competitors; they enjoyed the liveliness and beauty of nature rather than perceived it as a cradle of resources for benefit; they developed a sense of trust in the transcendent and openness toward religious faith instead of confining themselves to the concept of atheism. In this way, their relationships with the sacred, nature, others, and themselves were renewed. They felt authentically (re)connected. To be connected with the most authentic reality is the most essential element in spirituality (Miller, 2004, p. 459; Tolle, 2016, p. 78).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

However, the present study is inevitably limited in some respects: Spiritual experience is often abstract and difficult to express in complete clarity. Chinese Camino travelers sometimes articulated this experience using philosophically abstruse stances or poetic quotes in their travel blogs. Therefore, this study could have

overlooked nuances between the lines. Moreover, the fact that some Chinese travelers did not record very detailed accounts of their affective or spiritual experiences in their blogs does not necessarily mean that those individuals did not have such experiences. Their photos may tell more, but this study is limited to text analysis only. Also, to bridge linguistic traditions and cultural realms, one of the authors, proficient in Chinese, extracted the initial set of codes. This procedure inevitably entails a certain level of subjectivity in generating the codes. Although the netnographic study ensures high external validity, it complicates data synthesis.

In future research, to track spiritual experience and its internal dynamics more precisely, finding out when and how exactly the ‘disconnection’ and ‘reconnection’ occur during a journey, a pre-journey and a post-journey survey questionnaires could be developed and administered. The results of this research could be compared with other studies carried out in similar settings that also possess elements of nature, physical exercise, interpersonal interactions, and the sacred, to gain insights into the universal commensurability of the multidimensional experience of transformation and its implications in short-term and long-term effects on personal well-being. Walkable cultural routes, such as *Vía Francigena* in Italy, the *Kumano Kodo* in Japan and the *Ruta del Inca* in Peru, would be suitable candidates for such research objectives.

Conclusion

The current research added a non-Western perspective on the phenomenon of spiritual transformation through the rich and transformative experiences displayed by Chinese Camino travelers in a traditionally Western cultural–spiritual space. Changes in the relationship with oneself, others, nature, and the transcendent were interrelated in their transformative experience. This study reexamined the phenomenon of liminality as a quality inherent to transformation on the Camino and argued that a multidimensional disconnection from what is inauthentic is not sufficient to speak of spiritual changes; there must be a reconnection with what is authentic as well.

This study may inspire the development of cultural route heritage trails such as the Camino de Santiago as a platform for promoting wellness and nature tourism. Besides some required physical involvement, availability of sufficient encounters with nature, people, and the sacred would be conducive to a profound, transforming experience of the participants. The results also shed light on personal well-being and spiritual growth promotion, particularly for those individuals from non-religious backgrounds. For example, hiking along the Camino could be incorporated into personal growth or self-help and offered to individuals and groups, highlighting the elements of multidimensional disconnection and reconnection. The first-hand experience of going through a liminal state and transformation on the Camino could also contribute to increased resilience amid uncertainties and challenges, especially in today’s rapidly changing realities.

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