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Traveling Through the Gulf: Tourism Geopolitics among Chinese Tourists in Travel Narratives

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Chinese tourists construct geographical imaginations of the Gulf region and understand China – Gulf relations through travel experiences. The study integrates Critical geopolitics and Feminist geopolitics as its theoretical framework, viewing tourism as an everyday practice through which geopolitical meanings are produced and negotiated. Methodologically, the research uses travel narratives from the Chinese tourism platform Mafengwo, and applies both thematic analysis and word frequency analysis to explore tourists' perceptions and experiences of the Gulf region. The findings show that tourists' geographical imaginations are gradually reconstruct through an embodied mechanism, which can also be considered as a dynamic process related to different period of travel. Tourists also interpret China – Gulf relations through their everyday encounters with infrastructure, culture, and economic cooperation. Among these narratives, forms of everyday nationalism can also be revealed. The study contributes to tourism geopolitics by highlighting the role of ordinary people in the construction of global geopolitical meanings and by providing a Global South perspective on China – Middle East relations.

Key words: tourism geopolitics, geographical imagination, Chinese tourists, Gulf region, China – Gulf relations

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1 Introduction

Nowadays, tourism is practiced all over the world and is still gaining in its influence (Weaver et al. 2023). The tourism industry has grown at an unprecedented rate at national, regional and local levels, with the advent of a much more mobile global society and the strengthening of inter-regional linkages (Franklin, 2004; 2008). In recent years, an increasing number of studies have noted that tourism does not only transform the local spaces, but also plays an active role in the formation of larger geopolitical landscapes. The word “geopolitics” here generally refers to the ways how human and geographic factors interact to shape domestic and international politics (Timothy, 2017), including state strategy, international relations, and global structures (Dodds, 2007; Kearns, 2009). More specifically, some scholars argue that tourism is currently considered as one of the most powerful geopolitical activities nowadays (Mostafanezhad, 2018) and has a close relationship with broader geopolitical phenomena such as migration, inequality and climate change (Hannam et al. 2014).

The geopolitical dimensions of tourism is also visible in nowadays China – Gulf relations: In recent years, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have gradually included China as one of the key partners (Matsuda, 2023). For instance, the trading and investment partnership between China and the Gulf region have expanded significantly since 2014 (Zhu, 2022). Besides, China and Gulf countries have also forged multi-layered partnerships in other fields, based on the principle of “mutual benefit” and “shared development”, promoting the cooperation model within the Global South (AI Shidhani & Baig, 2024). While Gulf countries have established geopolitical relations with the United States for a long time, they still have shown flexibility and selectivity in their dealings with China, such as permitting the Chinese company Huawei to invest in 5G infrastructure, despite pressure from the U.S. (Soliman, 2023).

More importantly, China's geopolitical reach in Gulf region is not confined to the diplomatic and economic realm; it has also been steadily expanding in commonplace activities, including tourism. This has been further increased by the facilitation of visas in recent years. As we can see, China and all GCC members have gradually introduced all-round visa-free policy, which has greatly reduced institutional barriers to cross-border mobility by 2025. So far, the Gulf region has become an increasingly important destination of Chinese outbound tourism (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Oman, 2025).

Previous research related to Chinese tourism and geopolitics tends to adopt a government-centred view. For instance, some studies discover that the Chinese government in the early 21st century began to view uncivilised behaviour of Chinese tourists (e.g. spitting, loud talking and graffiti in public places) as negative effects towards national image. As a result, it encouraged the idea of “civilized outbound tourism” and set up the behavior regulation mechanism to integrate the national image and the norm into the tourism activities (An et al. 2020; Pearce, Wu, & Osmond, 2013). Moreover, some studies also notice that by means of outbound tourism policies like the Approved Destination Status (ADS) system, the Chinese government has been able, to a certain degree, to channel the tourist flows to achieve its overall geopolitical agenda (Tse, 2013).

However, with so many macro-level research, less attention has been paid to how ordinary people participate in geopolitical meaning-making through everyday tourism practices. In fact, perceptions, experiences and stories about the cross-border mobility of individuals can constantly produce and reproduce spatial understandings and political meanings. This view is especially highlighted in the field of mobilities research, which sees tourism as a form of mobility practice that can be said to (re)produce spatial knowledge on various scales (King, 2015; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Meanwhile, in the important and yet largely under-studied field of China – Gulf relations, the study of the ways in which Chinese tourists interpret and rearticulate these relations through lived experiences of travel is still limited.

This study follows up on this by bringing the notion of geographical imagination to the fore, which is referred to how people cognitively and meaningfully build understandings of specific spaces. This study aims to

understand Chinese ordinary people's geographical imagination towards the Gulf region through analysis of their travel narratives, and to finally disclose their everyday construction of geopolitical meanings.

The study can answer two research questions, namely:

- (1) How do Chinese tourists construct geographical imaginations of the Gulf region during their travels?
- (2) How do Chinese tourists interpret and understand China – Gulf relations through their travel experiences?

This study is a theoretical intersection between critical geopolitics and feminist geopolitics in order to create an analytical framework that combines discourse analysis with embodied practice. The use of these methods allows the study to move from macro-level structures to individual experiences, and how geopolitical meanings are enacted and reproduced in mobility across the borders, and in everyday life. In this context, the concept of 'geographical imagination' is important for comprehending how people routinely create, update and reshape their spatial representations from various sets of information and experiences.

The study is methodologically conceived as a qualitative study, taking travelogues from the Chinese tourism platform Mafengwo as its empirical material, and viewing travel writing as an important medium to convey geographical imagination. The study will conduct thematic analysis and word frequency analysis tourists' narratives, which can both give an account of the complexity of tourist experiences and at the same time be grounded in empirical findings.

This study contributes at both theoretical and empirical levels. It is a theoretically oriented step towards bottom-up geopolitics, which focuses on the capabilities of ordinary tourists to produce geopolitical meanings, thus reacting to the current trends of decentralisation and multi-scalarity in geopolitical studies. Empirically, Chinese tourists-focused framework offers a Global South perspective by showing how Chinese tourists construct "self" and "Middle Eastern other," and serves as an important complement to the literature dominated by Western experiences.

The structure of this thesis is the following. It starts with a review of the relevant literature, including discussions in the fields of tourism geopolitics and

geographical imagination. It then provides the theoretical foundation and unpacks the correlation between critical geopolitics and feminist geopolitics. The methods and sources of data collection are then described. The next section is an empirical analysis of travel narratives of Chinese tourists. Finally, the thesis presents a summary of all the findings, including the theoretical and practical implications, and a reflection on the limitations of the study and ideas for future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Tourism and Geopolitics

The tourism industry is one of the major industries of the world, and in the recent years, it has been acknowledged as a geopolitical practice (Mostafanezhad, 2018). In previous research, surprisingly, tourism and geopolitics were regarded as incompatible areas. Violence, invasion, and political intervention are key themes of geopolitics, and were seldom seen as defining features of tourism, which was about pleasure, hedonism, and trivial consumption (Agnew, 2004; Dodds, 2007). The relationship between tourism and geopolitics started to manifest itself in a pioneering study that correlated some of Jerusalem's hotel changes with various geopolitical periods (Shoval & Cohen-Hattab, 2001).

As research has advanced, this separation is no longer feasible. Travel, especially international travel, inevitably deals with matters of state sovereignty, border control and international relations. The development of tourism is highly influenced by the political power as Huang and Liu (2024) claim. In this respect, tourism although seemingly a daily activity, is essentially geopolitical (Miller & Del Casino, 2020; Timothy, 2019).

Building on this recognition, the interest of scholars on the question of whether tourism is geopolitical has moved to how tourism is involved in geopolitical processes. However, within this overall transition, research has evolved along two lines of analysis.

On the one hand, a substantial body of research conceptualizes tourism in predominantly instrumental terms. From this perspective, tourism is understood as a policy tool through which states pursue geopolitical objectives, such as managing interstate relations and advancing national interests (An & Dittmer, 2023). This instrumental logic operates in both “hard” and “soft” forms. In its harder form, tourism is mobilized through regulatory mechanisms. For instance, targeted visa policies implemented by the United States restrict tourists flow in

line with security and political objectives (Seyfi et al., 2020). Similarly, China's "Approved Destination Status" (ADS) policy selectively opens tourism markets to specific countries, thereby reinforcing diplomatic alignments (Tse, 2013). In its softer form, tourism is often conceptualized as a form of soft power, contributing to economic exchange, the dissemination of national images, and the enhancement of international influence (Li et al., 2021).

On the other hand, a growing body of research emphasizes the constitutive role of tourism in the production of geopolitical meaning. Here, geopolitical meaning refers to how connections between different places are created, and how regions become linked and positioned within broader global systems. As Huijbens and Alessio (2015) argue, tourism can be understood as a form of global spatial expansion that reproduces power relations, echoing earlier imperial logics in how regions are incorporated into the global system.

Empirical studies further illustrate these processes. For example, Bennett and Iaquinto (2023) draw on the case of China to argue that polar tourism expands access to the Arctic and deepens engagement in the region. In doing so, it contributes to the rearticulation of territorial relations—that is, how different actors access, engage with, and claim relevance in the Arctic. Through these processes, tourism contributes to the repositioning of the Arctic within broader geopolitical frameworks. Similarly, Davis et al. (2020) show how tourism investment within the Belt and Road Initiative fosters new forms of connectivity and mobility that reshape regional power dynamics in the Western Pacific, while also reconfiguring how these regions are placed in global networks.

Importantly, this constitutive perspective is not limited to the international scale but is also evident in domestic contexts, where similar processes operate. At the domestic level, tourism serves as a key site through which national identity is constructed and spatial boundaries are defined, thereby contributing to the formation of an inward-looking geopolitical meaning. Waterton (2022), for example, demonstrates how heritage sites such as Pearl Harbor construct and consolidate particular national narratives through selective representations of history and space. In China, similar dynamics are evident. Rowen (2014) shows that cross-strait tourism practices often reinforce the

political principle of “One China,” thereby shaping how Taiwan is positioned within the national territory.

Scholars have further found that, in China, different forms of tourism play differentiated roles in shaping such inward-oriented geopolitical consciousness. “Red tourism” links revolutionary history with specific locations, fostering emotional identification with the ruling party and the nation (Zuo et al., 2017). “Ethnic tourism” promotes narratives of minority cultures while reinforcing ideas of national unity and existing power hierarchies (Lee & Abrahams, 2018). Meanwhile, “dark tourism,” by presenting histories of war and trauma, evokes emotional responses that shape perceptions of history and others—for example, the Lushun Japanese Prison Museum reinforces negative images of Japan while fostering patriotic sentiment among visitors (Weaver et al., 2018).

This study tends to follow the latter as through the dialogue between these contrasting viewpoints, the constitutive role of tourism is stressed. Tourism is not considered as a policy instrument only, but is brought to the foreground as a process of meaning-making, which is able to demonstrate the dynamic and emergent nature of geopolitical formation beyond a purely policy orientated approach.

After stating the connection between the tourism and geopolitics, the existing focus of the literature should be examined. As for a regional point of view, the studies on geopolitics and tourism have been particularly intensive on the Asian context. Asia has become a crucial region for tourism geopolitics due to various factors, such as the booming economic growth, political changes, post-colonial and neo-colonial dynamics, tourism product diversification, and the facilitation of cross-border mobility (Winter et al. 2008, An & Dittmer 2023). The development of tourism geopolitics and Asian studies has been mutually reinforcing in this process, which has furthered scholarly interest in this intersection between tourism geography and political geography.

As for the Asian context, existing studies also show a certain degree of “China-centricity” (Su & Teo, 2008). This is, to a certain degree, an indication of the increasing influence of China in the world of tourism and geopolitics. China's growing global presence in various fields, such as tourism flows, investment and

regional cooperation, makes it a very important starting point to understand today's tourism and geopolitics, as Mahbubani (2020) has pointed out.

All these contributions in the field of tourism and geopolitics, however, lead to the fact that existing studies focus mainly on macro level policies and governance. As Gillen and Mostafanezhad (2019) and Fayard (2023) criticize, geopolitical practices in tourism are not only state initiated but also incorporate the presence of micro-level actors like tourists. These individual elements can combine with other actors and forces to create new (and sometimes unexpected) geopolitical results or meanings (Dittmer, 2014). In other words, such interactions often occur outside formal structures of state power and are embedded in the everyday details of tourism practices. Precisely because they do not take the form of explicit “political statements,” they may exert more subtle yet far-reaching influences.

Against this backdrop, the following section of this literature review shifts the analytical focus from the state to the level of tourists, with particular attention to studies on tourists, geopolitics, and geographical imagination. This shift helps illuminate the micro-level mechanisms through which tourism geopolitics operates, and further reveals how tourists continuously participate in the construction of geopolitical relations through their practices.

2.2 Tourists, Geographical Imagination, and Geopolitics

2.2.1 Tourists and Geopolitics

As the central actors of tourism, tourists’ behaviors are closely intertwined with various geopolitical issues. As Mostafanezhad and Norum (2019) further note, interactions among tourists do not take place in a “neutral” space; rather, they are deeply structured by power relations and contemporary geopolitical tensions—dimensions often overlooked in traditional tourism studies that focus primarily on economic or cultural aspects.

However, it is insufficient to view tourists merely as passive subjects shaped by existing structures; they also possess a certain degree of influence. In earlier research, Van Houtum and Van Naerssen (2002) describe tourists as

“economically valuable strangers,” emphasizing their dual positioning: as outsiders entering a society while simultaneously being embedded within institutional regulation. Therefore, on the one hand, their mobility is regarded by governments as a resource with economic value; on the other hand, tourists are regulated and constrained by institutional frameworks and governmental logics. In certain contexts, the presence of these “valuable strangers” may even be perceived as a potential challenge to existing orders. For instance, when tourists’ behaviors become entangled with issues of security, governance, or social stability, tourism ceases to be merely a leisure activity and becomes directly linked to the operation of state power (Weaver et al., 2023).

As research has progressed, scholars have increasingly examined the role of cross-border tourists in shaping relations between states. Interactions between tourists and host communities are seen as having the potential to foster cross-cultural understanding, thereby influencing interstate relations and building national images (Farmaki, 2017). For example, tourism flows associated with essential sports events and cultural activities not only create spaces for interpersonal interaction but may also provide opportunities for diplomatic engagement and the easing of tensions between otherwise strained states (Gelbman, 2019).

But some scholars disapprove such processes, claiming that “understanding through tourism” do not occur automatically and have its negative side. Without meaningful interaction, tourists often fail to challenge their pre-existing perceptions of “the Other,” which even reinforces existing cognitive frameworks (Milman et al., 1990; Raymond & Hall, 2008). Moreover, as tourism expands in scale, issues such as overtourism can generate local social tensions, which in certain contexts may escalate into broader geopolitical tensions (Weaver et al., 2023).

While the literature discussed above has highlighted the broader effects of tourists’ practices—effects that are not always consciously recognized—it is equally important to emphasize their agency. From the perspective of agency, tourists should not be understood merely as passive actors whose behaviors “impact geopolitics” (An et al., 2023), but rather as agents who actively perceive, interpret, and construct meaning throughout the travel process. As Gelbman and Timothy (2010) note, when tourism destinations materialize and highlight socio-

economic differences, they not only attract visitors but also provide opportunities for tourists to directly encounter and experience these differences. In this process, tourists are not simply drawn into these spaces; they exercise agency in choosing where to go and how to engage. Some tourists, driven by curiosity and a sense of adventure, deliberately seek out politically significant sites such as enclaves and exclaves (Gelbman & Timothy, 2011), as well as active or abandoned demilitarized zones (Le & Pearce, 2011), forming situated experiences and understandings of these spaces through their travels.

Overall, existing research has tended to frame tourists primarily in terms of their functional roles in destination consumption, cross-border mobility, and interstate relations, while paying relatively limited attention to their role in meaning-making processes. Such perspectives, however, tend to overlook tourists' agency in everyday practices. In reality, tourists are not only participants in tourism experiences but also active subjects who continuously construct understandings of places and the world through their experiences, interpretations, and narratives. Through these processes, they have certain potential to contribute to shaping how places are positioned within broader relational networks, how differences between regions are articulated, and how connections are imagined and enacted (An et al., 2020). After these narratives and experiences are disseminated, tourists can even actively participate in the ongoing production of public geopolitical meanings.

Against this backdrop, understanding how tourists construct their perceptions of destinations becomes a crucial entry point for analyzing their role in geopolitical processes. The next section therefore turns to the literature on tourists' geographical imagination.

2.2.2 Tourists and Geographical Imagination

To understand how tourists make sense of places and areas, this study will use the concept of geographical imagination.

Before introducing the concept of geographical imagination, it is necessary to first revisit the idea of imagination. "Imagination" has been a problem for the humanities and social sciences for a long time. Early studies often positioned individual imagination in opposition to cognition, which was regarded as

objective, rational and real, and thus treated it as subjective or even illusory mental activity (Adams et al., 2015). However, as the studies have progressed, scholars have gradually proposed that such a two-part division is not appropriate. Imagination is not detached from life; rather, people use it to make sense of the world around them, developing concepts of the self, others, places, and society (Derrien & Stokowski, 2020). Therefore, more recent studies have generally adopted a more neutral stance and define imagination as a cognitive process through which individuals generate and organise meaning in terms of images or linguistic expressions (Arruda, 2015). At the same time, imagination is not just an individual psychological activity. Scholars have shown that cognition is always situated in an extensive number of social and cultural environments, and is thus influenced by factors such as media representations, cultural discourses, and other's experience (Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014).

When imagination is focused on "space", it leads to the concept of "geographical imagination". Geographical imagination refers to the cognitive process by which people understand unvisited spaces or places they have personally experienced. In the context of tourism, it relates to tourists' perceptions and expectations of destinations.

Some scholars have added that these perceptions and expectations are formed through the interaction of micro-level individuals and macro-level environments (Liu et al., 2024). That is to say, such imagination is formed in various ways, such as films, books, social media and the travel experiences from others (Zhang et al., 2025). This resonates with earlier discussions of imagination, highlighting that geographical imagination is not only an individual cognitive process but also a socially produced and shared structure of meaning.

A similar perspective is widely adopted within cultural studies. From this viewpoint, scholars have developed more systematic analyses of geographical imagination, often focusing on the relationship between tourists' pre-travel cultural expectations and their on-site experiences (Liu et al., 2024). Within this framework, geographical imagination is typically understood as a cognitive structure shaped by media representations and cultural discourses, emphasizing its cultural dimension in meaning-making processes. However, as tourism spaces have become increasingly politicized, recent studies have begun to situate

geographical imagination within broader contexts of power and politics (Li et al., 2025).

It is important to note that Park et al. (2018) find that tourists' geographical imagination is not always passively shaped by official or dominant discourses of power. Rather, it demonstrates a degree of agency in practice, as tourists continuously question, negotiate, and reconstruct existing geographical imaginaries—echoing the agency of tourists discussed earlier in this literature review. In other words, these studies highlight the dual nature of geographical imagination: it is both a product of existing power structures and discursive systems, and something that is actively mobilized and reproduced in practice, thereby contributing to the construction of new meanings.

In the context of outbound tourism, tourists' geographical imagination is generally more complex. Based on the research above, the imagination usually incorporates a place's history, social and cultural environment, and its place in the world. For example, Western tourists' perceptions of non-Western places are often shaped by colonial legacies, constructing these areas as differentiated and attractive "exotic Others" (Yang & Luo, 2024). At the same time, according to the dual nature of geographical imagination, although tourists' understanding is shaped by existing factors, they can still actively participate in these frameworks in practice and continuously construct their own interpretations (An et al., 2020). Here, geographical imagination is linked to broader global geopolitical trends; thus, it has become one of the ways that individuals learn about international relations and, through daily life, contribute to the gradual change of meaning in the world's political order.

It is also true for the case of Chinese tourists. With the rapid development of China's overseas tourism market, tourists' geographical imagination of foreign countries has diversified and become more complex. For them, geographical imagination in outbound travel is shaped not only by traditional cultural experiences but also continuously reconfigured through processes of social transformation, technological development, and global media environments (Zhu et al., 2021).

More specifically, some studies suggest that East Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan are often constructed as destinations that combine cultural proximity with modernity and consumer experiences (Yu & Ko, 2012), while

Europe is frequently associated with imaginaries of historical heritage and classical civilization (Salazar, 2012). Among these imagination, An et al. (2020) find out the unique subjectivity embedded in tourists' geographical imagination, which extends what prior literature has largely overlooked. Through their study of Chinese tourists traveling to Africa, they find that tourists' narratives may exhibit tensions with official discourses. They further argue that tourists, as active subjects, participate in the "geographical writing" of global politics, reflecting how they understand and hierarchize different regions within processes of globalization.

In all, tourists' geographical imagination can be understood as the way they agentically interpret specific places and regions under the influence of social imaginaries, media representations, cultural discourses and on-site experience. This construction of spatial meaning is also closely connected to understandings of interstate relations and the broader world order (Derrien & Stokowski, 2020). In this sense, individuals, in forming geographical imagination, also participate—actively, routinely, and in a decentralized manner—in the interpretation and expression of international order and power relations. In sum, geographical imagination is not only a form of spatial cognition but also a key pathway through which individuals engage in the construction of geopolitical meanings (An et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, while existing research has covered a wide range of destinations visited by Chinese tourists, there remains a lack of systematic investigation into how Chinese tourists construct geographical imagination in the context of the Gulf region, and how these imaginaries are connected to broader geopolitical understandings.

It is worth noting that tourism development in the Middle East has been linked to geopolitics to some extent in recent years. Waleed Hazbun (2004) was one of the first to integrate studies of Middle East tourism and geopolitics. In his research on the present-day Middle East, he believes that tourism development strategies are now included in the larger geopolitical plans of some Gulf countries. After the events of September 11, some countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, have been working to boost their tourism sectors to change their image abroad and strengthen their position in the world's tourism market. Therefore, given the above,

the Gulf Area has become a popular tourist destination and a hub for new geopolitical forces.

Given this, there is an increasing demand to conduct in-depth studies of Chinese outbound tourism in the Gulf region, as it has been less frequently covered in previous research compared with other areas such as East Asia, Europe and North America. Therefore, this paper aims to fill the aforementioned deficiency in current research. In the following section, we will put forward a particular theoretical system to provide some references for the analysis and research.

3 Theoretical Framework

In order to address the research gap mentioned above, this paper proposes a theoretical framework of tourism geopolitics. The foundation of this framework is the idea of critical geopolitics, which focuses on discourse and representation, and feminist geopolitics, which pays more attention to daily life and embodied experience.

3.1 Critical Geopolitics

At the start, geopolitics was closely linked to state-centric political thought. For a long time, it has been used to explain how geographical circumstances, the distribution of resources, and power at the level of the state are connected.

Geopolitics has traditionally studied how the geography of a country and all kinds of physical environments in that area influence policies domestically and internationally (Murphy et al., 2004; Tuathail & Dalby, 1998). In this tradition, space is generally considered to be an objective material condition, and the state is regarded as the central subject engaged in competition and expansion in a specific area. However, this theoretical school is associated with environmental determinism and state-centred approaches. Due to its connection with the ideological activities of Nazi Germany after World War II, it has become highly controversial. As a result, for a long time, geopolitics was regarded as a politically expedient and scientifically flawed system of knowledge, even criticized as a kind of "poison" or "pseudoscience" (Dodds, 2007). Therefore, the development of the field has been relatively slow in recent years.

Geopolitics has made a comeback in academic discourse only in recent decades, and this revival is closely related to the development of "critical geopolitics". Critical geopolitics has emerged as a response to and a critique of the classical theories of geopolitics, particularly concerning environmental determinism and state-centric views.

The first appearance of critical geopolitics occurred after the Cold War. At this time, the conflict between the two great powers has changed the situation in the world and people's perception of space. With the collapse of the bipolar system, the old models of geopolitics could no longer explain current phenomena, and many researchers have since studied how power is constructed and manifested in space in new ways. Therefore, at this time, critical geopolitics began to develop and change (Dalby, 1990; Tuathail, 1996).

The first criticism that critical geopolitics offers for traditional geopolitics is that "space" is not an objective reality to be uncovered, but rather something continually constructed through practices such as map-making, policy documents and academic discourse (Tuathail, 1996). In other words, people's perception of the world does not originate from what they believe to be an "actual" geographical situation; instead, it is gradually formed by talk, pictures and stories.

Based on this, discourse plays an important role in the study of geopolitics. Tuathail and Agnew (1992) believe that the state's actions of war or other overseas interventions need to be given meaning and legitimacy through discourse. The various political groups are likely to present specific scenes in different ways that are convenient to understand. For example, some areas are designated as "threatening", "unstable" or "strategically important", and thus may be included in foreign policy or military measures. The above labels do not only designate areas but also affect the people's perception of space and change their attitudes toward relevant political activities.

In this way, critical geopolitics is concerned not only with "what is happening" but also with "how events are being narrated". It believes that various actors, through language and narrative, divide the world into different kinds of regions and give them particular meanings (Agnew, 2003; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). As a result, space is no longer a fixed place in the world but has also become the site of continuous interpretation and struggle. Building on this, geopolitics can be regarded as a continuous and changing process of meaning production and dissemination through discourse.

Critical geopolitics has focused on the discourses of states, the media, policymakers and other elites for a long time. Although this way has offered some support for the study of how geopolitics is expressed and legitimized, little attention has been paid to the daily life discourse and practice of ordinary people.

Therefore, it is still not ideal for covering all tourists in an all-encompassing manner. Based on critical geopolitics, this study further adds the perspectives of feminist geopolitics to extend the analysis from how space is constructed at the macro-discursive level to how it is experienced and enacted at the micro level of daily life.

3.2 Feminist Geopolitics

Building on the foundations of critical geopolitics, feminist geopolitics, as an important theoretical strand, further advances the re-scaling of geopolitical analysis. Rather than remaining confined to macro-level analyses centered on states and elites, this approach extends geopolitics into the realm of everyday life and individual experience.

As Jennifer Hyndman (2012) conceptualizes it as “geopolitics from below,” feminist geopolitics emphasizes that ordinary individuals also “do geopolitics” in their daily practices. In doing so, it shifts analytical attention from institutional actors to micro-level subjects, echoing the classic feminist proposition that “the personal is political.” On this basis, feminist geopolitics offers a systematic critique of the masculinist and macro-centric assumptions embedded in traditional geopolitical thought (Dowler & Sharp, 2001), and further challenges binary distinctions such as public/private by highlighting the geopolitical significance of everyday life (Grosz, 1994; Massaro & Williams, 2013).

Therefore, many scholars have recently started to view tourism from a feminist geopolitical perspective. It can be traced back to Cynthia Enloe's first work (2014). In *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, she proposes that the ordinary, private and feminised areas of life, such as tourism, consumption and emotional labour, are all deeply intertwined with the world system. Enloe shows that the tourism industry mobilises gendered expectations, stereotypes and inequalities, and thereby redefines tourism as a subject of international relations study to bridge the gap between “high politics” and everyday life.

At the same time, feminist geopolitical studies have been focusing more and more on micro-level objects in tourism and have paid attention to people’s “mobile bodies” in spatial practices (Smith, 2017). Tourists' movements and stops

in different places are not just ways to move their bodies; they are also forms of knowledge that help individuals repeatedly gain awareness of, compare, and restructure their understanding of others and space. Although previous research on mobility and embodiment has identified the significance of transnational subjects, most of it has been focused on experiences of forced migration and involuntary movement; relatively little attention has been paid to international tourism, which is a more routine and voluntary form of cross-border movement (Hyndman, 1997; Mathers & Landau, 2007).

Some research has begun to study this problem experimentally. Dowler's (2013) study of walking tours in Belfast, Northern Ireland, is a typical case showing how the experience of tourists can act as a location for micro-geopolitical practices by retelling and mobilising historical conflicts in the process of reconciliation. Stein (2008) has also studied how the bodies of Israeli tourists in Palestine are constrained by military control and spatial segregation. Cumulatively, the above studies have shown that feminist geopolitics does not use "scale" as an independent object of study; instead, it views geopolitics as a dynamic process that is also connected to large-scale spatial relations. Therefore, geopolitics is now seen as an all-encompassing process linking embodied experiences of walk to local, regional, national and cross-border power relationships (Miller & Del Casino, 2018).

In light of this, feminist geopolitics can be used as an analytical tool for this study to focus on micro-level subjects, including their situated experiences and embodied practices. Chinese tourists' lived experiences and on-the-ground experiences in the Gulf countries are providing one of the main foundations for their knowledge of these places, which are also activating and modifying their previous geographical imagination. In other words, geographical imagination is not just formed by means of media portrayals or cultural discourse alone; rather, it is continuously altered and reproduced through lived experiences at different locations and with other people during a journey.

In addition, feminist scholars have made some reflection of the above theoretical path. Theoretically, a researcher is not immune to the situation of study and needs to reflect on this in writing. However, in practice, some critical scholarship often takes a seemingly objective and neutral tone, neglecting to acknowledge the social and academic position of the researcher; thus, it is often

assumed that analysis can be performed from a detached "view from nowhere" (Sharp, 2000). To avoid this flaw, one needs to know that all analyses are themselves located in space and time and are thus not entirely objective depictions (Hyndman, 2004).

This limitation is also present in this study; the analysis of Chinese tourists' geographical imaginaries is not "objective cognition" in the direct sense but rather an interpretation that has been influenced by a particular theoretical system. Therefore, Accordingly, while emphasizing the importance of tourists' narratives and experiences, this study also acknowledges the limitations of its theoretical approach and treats knowledge production as inherently situated.

3.3 A Tourism Geopolitics-Centered Framework

This study will draw out a theoretical framework based on the above discussion which would be based on geographical imagination as a central focus point of analysis of critical geopolitics and feminist geopolitics. The conceptual apparatus of critical geopolitics allows us to analyse how spatial meanings are being produced in discourse and in representation, and how geographical imaginations in narratives produce meanings of destination and IR. Feminist geopolitics, in turn, brings the focus to the micro level and embodied experience, highlighting how ordinary tourists' lived experiences and practices are involved in the construction and changing of geographical imagination.

In the existing research, these two approaches are used separately and not together. Critical geopolitics is focused on macro-level discourses and the spatial 'scripts' of elites, often neglecting the ways in which such scripts are experienced, negotiated and reconfigured at the 'micro' level. Feminist geopolitics brings embodiment, affect and lived experience to the fore, but also sometimes perhaps neglects to theorise the structures and discourses — including media representations, state narratives and global power relations — that shape and condition these experiences (Mostafanezhad, et al., 2021).

The study's overall theoretical contribution is to further develop and integrate the current body of knowledge and research about tourism geopolitics. This study

is an attempt at bridging the gap between structure and experience, discourse and practice by incorporating these two viewpoints into dialogue. It thereby contributes to a more comprehensive conceptualization of geographical imagination as discursively constructed and practice negotiated in the tourist's experiences, with macro-level representations and micro-level practices in a circular process, mutually constitutive in shaping tourists' experiences of place and international relations.

This framework also aligns with the current debate in the developing field of tourism geopolitics under the themes of “decentralization” and “multi-scalar dynamics”. Decentralization are based on a departure from state-, government-, and elite-centered approaches and a focus on the uneven but dynamic networks of relations which are embedded in everyday life (Huang, 2022). Multi-scalar dynamics refer to the scalar blurrings and flows of tourism geopolitics, and these are traversed at the body, place, nation and global levels (Rowen, 2023). In other words, tourism geopolitics is both grounded in place—manifested in tourists’ embodied and situated experiences—and trans-scalar, continuously connecting and reconfiguring relationships across different spatial levels (Sin et al., 2021; Seyfi et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2024).

In order to facilitate this analysis, the research design, data collection techniques and data analysis techniques used in this study will be explained below.

4 Methodology

To address the research questions outlined above, this study adopts a qualitative approach, analyzing travel blogs about the GCC countries published by Chinese tourists on online platforms. The following sections introduce the research design, data collection and processing procedures, thematic coding conducted using MAXQDA, the use of word frequency analysis as a supplementary method, and the ethical and reflexive considerations of this study.

4.1 Research Design

A qualitative research paradigm has been used in this study. Qualitative research can provide a more in-depth understanding of the subject of the research, more richness and details in the data gathered by the researcher, according to Mason (2002). It also emphasizes understanding social phenomena by examining how individuals assign meaning to things within specific socio-cultural contexts (Della Porta & Keating, 2008). Qualitative research is more suitable for revealing the multi-level and complex processes of social meaning making within the narrative, which is especially suitable for the analysis of tourists' lived experiences in travel compared to quantitative approaches, which are mainly interested in macro-level trends.

Research materials are mainly the travel blog posted by Chinese tourists on the Internet. The decision to use this choice is based on the understanding that the creation of travel narratives can be considered as the production of “geographical imagination”, thus offering material that is both tangible and meaningful with which to respond to the research questions (An et al. , 2020). As Tavares and Brosseau (2006) have said, the expression of the travel writing is complex, in that it not only describes the place visited by the author and the experiences he had there, but also expresses his interpretations and evaluations of the place, the tourist attractions, the religious culture, and the social order. Furthermore, by

piecing together bits of information on various countries and regions, travel narratives can produce partial knowledge of the spatial order of the international world, which thus can gradually generate geopolitical knowledge (Bender, Gidlow, & Fisher, 2013).

Meanwhile, the selected travel blogs as the prime research material is also directly related to the theoretical framework adopted in this study. The framework emphasises that geopolitical meanings do not exist solely at the macro-discourses level; but are constructed and reproduced on a daily basis through everyday stories. The travel texts have a certain analytical value as well, from a feminist geopolitics perspective. They are texts with feminist characteristics as they reflect geopolitical knowledge as “situated knowledge” or “partial perspective” (Hyndman, 2004). In these discourses, uncertainty, subjectivity and lived experience are not a hindrance for the analytical dimensions, but are instead an indication of how tourists' geopolitical understandings are produced in lived experience and situated practices.

4.2 Data Collection and Processing

Data selection in this study takes the travel blogs published by Chinese tourists on the Mafengwo website as research materials. Mafengwo is one of the most influential online travel communities in China, where users record and share their travels as “travel notes.” As a user-generated content platform, Mafengwo has more than 600,000 travel blogs on the site covering travels all over the world. It boasts a vast user base and a vast amount of travel contents, and is viewed as a major travel information source with more than 760 million downloads, which has been dubbed by the media as China's “travel bible” (An et al. 2020). It thus offers a representative and rich collection of materials for analysing the expression of Chinese tourists' experiences in travel talks.

This study used web scraping techniques using python for collecting data from travel blogs on the travel destination of six member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Search keywords were the names of the six GCC countries: “United Arab Emirates,” “Saudi Arabia,” “Qatar,” “Oman,”

“Kuwait, ” and “Bahrain” and all travel blogs found on the Mafengwo website were covered in data collection.

Data collection was between January & February 2026. A python script was created to automatically obtain the travel blog pages in the search results and to retrieve text data like publication time and main text. A total of 794 entries were collected. There were no private or restricted data and all data was taken from publicly available sources.

Since this is a study of relatively complete and reflective travel narratives, as a starting point, a text length filter was applied. To make sure that the samples of travel experience described in the entry are in detail and have analytical meaning, the entries with less than 500 Chinese characters were eliminated. This threshold is further corroborated by an initial sampling exercise on shorter texts where it was found that close to 93% of texts under 500 characters were mostly at the surface level – either logistics (e.g. visa procedure or travel arrangements) or brief and descriptive" – surface level contributions with little reflection or narrative depth. Thus removing these shorter entries allows to improve the analytical quality of the dataset since it focuses on texts that provide a more detailed description of perception and interpretation and meaning-making.

Moreover, the study only included travel blogs published after December 2022 since China's COVID-19 prevention and control policies had been adjusted. The travel blogs on the platform about the Gulf region go back to as early as 2018, but the travel restrictions related to the global pandemic caused a severe decrease in the outbound tourism from China in 2020, 2021 and 2022. China's outbound tourism slowly picked up in December 2022 as the policies were adjusted (Li et al. , 2026). Thus, choosing travel blogs that were created after this period not only to provide a more accurate picture of tourists' actual travel experiences in the post-pandemic era, but also to demonstrate the new travel mobility and geopolitical environments affecting their perceptions, thus enriching the timeliness of the study.

Finally, additional data cleaning was done. Duplicate entries and texts not related with the research topic were eliminated. Moreover, a manual process of selection was performed to verify that the chosen travel blogs belonged to bloggers who visited the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and

did not just copy and paste travel guides or gather information. This helped to ensure the validity of the data set.

The result of this filtering and refining process was a data set of 343 valid travel blogs. The extent of these travel narratives is reasonably large, so that a considerable amount of data can be gathered, and discursive patterns and commonalities can be identified from the data, thereby creating a solid empirical foundation for the analysis.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is the main method used to analyse the data in this study. Thematic analysis involves a process of identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning in the data of a qualitative study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Systematic coding and categorization can help researchers make links between seemingly unrelated chunks of text and draw conclusions regarding the major themes of the data that represent the meanings of the data (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016).

Prior to coding, the data set was explored by an initial reading to become familiar with the stories in detail. This familiarisation process allowed for the identification of recurring themes, descriptive patterns and the identification of initial analytical directions in the travel accounts.

At the beginning a round of pilot coding was done, since it is a relatively large sample size. In particular, stratified sampling was conducted based on the distribution of travel blogs in the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), to select 100 texts as a pilot sample proportionally to the distribution.

In this study, a systematic qualitative analysis, following the thematic analysis procedures defined by Kuckartz (2014), was done. Open coding was used, with brief descriptions being given to sentences or sections of text which contained the key meaning. As mentioned by Kuckartz, the steps of open coding are processes of exploration, comparison, conceptualization and categorization, and the goal is to find initial concepts and variations in the data.

An inductive coding approach was used – coding categories were derived incrementally while reading and comparing the data, and abstracting from the data

itself. This approach is based on Kuckartz's method described in his book, which takes an inductive approach to the development of categories, and is used here to be open for emerging patterns. While the theoretical framework above has already given some indications for coding, it is also possible with this strategy to discover new themes which may extend or challenge the theoretical framework. As Rivas (2012) mentions, there are already some theoretical frameworks which can offer analytical shortcuts but they also come with their own structures of interpretation which can limit the openness with the data. In this way I will indicate later how each theme relates with the theoretical framework and also present the themes which are emerged inductively from the data.

During the analysis process, basic codes were carefully clustered and developed into more general categories and themes. This was an iterative and recursive process, with constant movement between data, codes and themes to aid in refining and validating interpretations (Bazeley, 2013). Ambiguous and unclear text segments were revisited and re-coded to ensure coherence of analysis and accuracy of interpretation during this process.

A preliminary coding framework was created through coding and comparing the data obtained from the pilot sample. The same framework was then used for the rest of the data to see if it was applicable and explanatory. The coding scheme was flexible and when new concepts arose or the data could not be captured by the existing categories, the coding scheme was revised and revised.

MAXQDA is a widely used qualitative data analysis software that assisted with systematically organizing, annotating and categorizing large amounts of textual data during the coding process (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). All gathered travel blogs were imported to MAXQDA and an analysis was done step-by-step along the coding framework.

Finally, the comparison and integration of the relationships among codes revealed the core themes of this study, namely tourists' travel practices in the Gulf region, the shift in perceptions before and after travelling and the narrative constructions of China – Gulf relationships. These themes reflect the two main analytical dimensions of the theoretical framework: the construction of spatial meanings and discourses of international relations highlighted in critical geopolitics and the micro-level experiences and embodied practices highlighted in feminist geopolitics. Moreover, this inductive method enabled emergent themes,

for example “using China as a reference point, ” to be identified and to be used in subsequent analysis.

To make the coding process more explicit, Table 1 summarizes the core themes, sub-themes, and their corresponding theoretical dimensions.

Table 1. Coding Framework

Core Theme	Sub-themes / Codes	Description	Theoretical Link
Tourist Practices in the Gulf	Travel activities (consumption, food etc.); interactions with local culture; mobility experiences	Captures how tourists engage with destinations through embodied practices and everyday activities	Feminist geopolitics (embodied practice)
Perceptions and Transformations	Pre-travel expectations; post-travel reflections; re-evaluations; geopolitical positioning (i.e., situating Gulf countries within global)	Reflects how tourists construct and revise their understanding of the Gulf through experience	Critical geopolitics (spatial knowledge production) + Feminist geopolitics (embodied experience)
Narratives of China–Gulf Relations	Comparison with China; cooperation with China; daily relations with China	Shows how tourists interpret international relations through everyday narratives	Critical geopolitics (international relations discourse)
China as a Reference Point (emergent)	“China as standard”; self-validation of China’s development path; strengthened patriotic sentiment	Emergent theme highlighting how tourists use China as a reference point to understand others and reflect on China	

In general, as Rivas (2018) highlights, thematic analysis should not simply be about identifying the surface level themes but the conceptual themes within them. The themes emerging from this study can not only be used to summarise recurring experiential patterns in the data but can also serve as a base to underpin a more

detailed analysis of how the Chinese tourists can take part from the bottom up in the construction of geopolitical meanings.

4.4 Word Frequency Analysis

In this study, word frequency analysis is as a supplementary method in parallel to the thematic analysis. It tries to help identify the words that are repeated in the text and also acts as a reference for the subsequent qualitative interpretation. It is specifically meant in this study as a exploratory instrument to get a first overview of the tourists activities and experiences, including what they most often mention as attractions, activities and engagements. It is a mistake to equate qualitative research with ignoring the numbers, says Sandelowski (2001); patterns of numbers can also help in meaning-making. Patterns in data can include noticing repeated expressions, which can help to mitigate the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of particular materials in the data that may be done based on subjective determination (Westergren et al. , 2021).

In this regard, a word frequency analysis was performed in addition to thematic coding of the texts on travel blogs. This involved calculating the frequency of the lexical items within the corpus, as well as removing semantically weak or too generic items related to tourism (e.g., "hotel", "restaurant", "flight", "itinerary") that do not have a lot of value for the analysis, and also stop words.

More specifically, these terms were excluded because they tend to be standardized and routine facets of travel which are common to most tourist experiences, and thus do not help to distinguish meaningful patterns in perception or interpretation. Such structurally recurrent expressions are not included in the analysis, which is intended to highlight the more context-specific expressions and thus to reveal more experiential scenes, and tourists' situated interpretations and meaning-making processes.

A frequency table of the most occurring words was created to give a more intuitive sense of the distribution of the high-frequency words. Through this, the word frequency analysis will be able to show the repetition of focus points in tourists' narratives more clearly, which will support evidence in developing themes.

Table 2. High-Frequency Terms in Chinese Tourists' Narratives of the Gulf

Region					
No.	Term	Frequency	No.	Term	Frequency
1	Desert	2427	6	Openness	611
2	Mosque	2079	7	Spices	595
3	History	1327	8	Gold	545
4	Culture	1319	9	Global	516
5	Islam	678	10	International	503

4.5 Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, the researcher follows the ethical procedures in social science research which are participating in the data collection process and data analysis process (Robson 2024; Faculty of Social Science, 2024). The data in this study are all from the travel blogs published on Mafengwo that are available to the public. These texts are submitted by the users and are not in any way private and restricted. However, this study is careful in using this type of user-generated content and it considers any potential ethical issues in the analysis process. In particular, all personal data (such as username, profile data) that can be seen has been de-identified during the processing of the data in order to safeguard the privacy of the users.

In addition, the data that are gathered are for academic use only. From the data storage point of view, all textual data are stored on personal device of the researcher with proper care taken on data protection and are not given to any third parties. The analysis focuses exclusively on the narratives presented in the texts and the meanings and perspectives they convey, rather than evaluating or judging individual authors. Through these measures, this study seeks to balance the use of publicly available data for academic inquiry with the minimization of potential harm to platform user.

Moreover, large language models (LLMs), specifically OpenAI ChatGPT, were considered as supporting instruments in the process of research and writing of this thesis. The main uses of these tools were for brainstorming, translation (especially for those Chinese materials) and checking grammar. Ideas, arguments, analysis and the final interpretation of this thesis are the responsibility of the

author. In this study, generative artificial intelligence was used following academic integrity and ethical guidelines as applicable to the Faculty of Social Science (2026).

4.6 Reflexivity

Byrne (2018) argues that reflexivity should be embedded throughout all stages of qualitative research.

Firstly, I reflect the process of research itself. Identification and interpretation of themes in this study is mostly dependent on the researcher's reading and interpretation of text data, thereby there is a possibility of subjectivity. Further, coding was performed independently, which may also add to the interpretive bias. However, as Johnson and Waterfield (2004) suggest, the goal of qualitative research is not to eliminate researcher influence entirely, but to make the research process transparent. Accordingly, this study systematically documented the processes of coding and theme development, and repeatedly returned to the original texts for comparison and revision to ensure that interpretations remained closely grounded in the data. Moreover, when developing themes, care was taken to identify data segments that weren't quite aligned with the dominant interpretation, and avoid only using data that supports preconceived arguments.

Second, I reflect on my positionality as a researcher. As a Chinese researcher, I am able to closely interact with the cultural backgrounds and linguistic details contained in those travel stories. But this cultural proximity also informs the way that I read some of those stories. For example, in the Chinese-to-English translation of passages, every effort was made to maintain the meaning and expressions of the original as closely as possible, despite the help of LLMs. Meanwhile, I also reflect that translation may also be an interpretive process, especially when dealing with culturally specific or colloquial terms which might not be directly translatable into English.

In sum, reflexivity in this study is not only a methodological consideration but also an ongoing process of critical self-examination. Through these reflections, the study seeks to enhance its overall rigor.

5 Analysis

This section of this research discusses in detail the themes that emerged during the coding process. It investigates, first, the geographical imagination of tourists, and the mechanisms of its change, in the Gulf area. Second, it examines the understanding of the tourists about the China – Gulf relations in their narratives. Finally it examines the way in which tourists develop a sense of self through a reference system of China, through both comparison and reflection on others.

5.1 Tourists' Geographical Imagination of the Gulf Region and Its Mechanisms of Change

5.1.1 Geographical Imagination Before Departure

In the pre-departure phase, tourists' geographical imagination of the Gulf region is generally rather abstract and has a high symbolic component. According to Scarpi and Raggiotto (2023), the spatial and social distance serves as a confirmation of idealized images of destinations, which may give them a more stylized image than real-life image. In this process the Gulf region becomes a “distant other space (27th October, 2023)”, in which concreteness is diminished and symbolic attributes are increased in the making of the Gulf region by the Chinese tourists.

In addition to both spatial and social distance, this research contends that this abstract imagination is also heavily mediated by a number of forms of mediation. As there is no direct experience, the tourists derive their knowledge about the places from secondary sources including travel experience of others, social media, films and television. This leads to a “mediated geographical imagination”, where the information shared in these ways is to some extent abstract and partial, indicative of the Gulf region (Li et al. , 2025).

Of these mediated sources, the mass media has been especially studied in terms of its influence on dominant representations of the Arab world. It is

important to note that previous studies have pointed out the crucial role that Western media has played in shaping perceptions of Arabs and Gulf countries (Said, 1978). The literature indicates that the Arab world is usually portrayed as a region of conflict, threat, and backwardness (Al-Jaber et al., 2018). Yet, this study reveals somewhat different pattern in the geographical imagination of the Chinese tourists as compared to the Western media. By contrast, these kinds of negative framings are not salient in the narratives analysed in this study. Rather, Chinese tourists focus on more positive or neutral symbols like “wealth” and “mystery.” For example, one tourist wrote:

“Is the saying ‘a cloth on the head, and the richest in the world’ really true? This time, I decided to visit this distant place that has always felt sacred and mysterious to me.” (19th November, 2023)

Among participants in the collected travel narratives, a lot of tourists also reported that they had first heard the words “Gulf region” due to popular culture and celebrities. Some, for example, said that their initial attraction to the United Arab Emirates was *the Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* film; others were drawn by endorsements from popular Chinese celebrities like Liu Yifei and Jay Chou. Their stories often have a “mystery” element:

“Liu Yifei even became a tourism ambassador for Abu Dhabi. When I saw that promotional video, I was completely captivated. It felt like a place full of mystery and charm—impossible to resist exploring!” (1st March, 2024)

Besides mass media and popular culture, this study shows that the perceptions of the Arab world among individuals have initially inculcate through their educational experiences as well. In this way, education may be seen as another significant “mediating form” involved in the formation of the pre-travel geographical imagination, and as a way to transfer knowledge institutionally. As one tourist commented:

“Stories I knew from childhood, like Aladdin’s magic lamp and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, along with the fascinating Arab culture we learned in class, all made the Gulf region feel worth exploring.” (2nd April, 2023)

Lu and Xu (2018) share that general education has a fundamental part in the cultivation of individuals' worldview. In the Chinese context, basic education

sometimes refers to the introduction to the Arab world in the geography, history course or literature and audiovisual materials in the world. In this process, Arab culture is often portrayed in a symbolic way, and fails to give much insight into the present social realities, thus contributing to an abstract conception of the region among tourists from China.

It is worth making it clear that this study examines the formation mechanisms of pre-travel geographical imagination mainly from the media that can be identified and explicitly expressed in the travel narrative. But this does not mean that these are the only factors that affect. In practice, peoples' geographical imagination can be influenced by a much more nuanced range of elements and experiences, such as their personal experiences, social networks, the marketing of tourism and their personal cultural and political backgrounds. These have not been included in this study as they are not always visible in the stories. In other word, this study brings into focus a “mediated pathway of construction”, as manifested in narration, instead of a comprehensive description of all the mechanisms which affect pre-travel cognition.

To sum up, Chinese tourists' geographical imagination of the Gulf region during the stage of pre-departure is mostly abstract and symbolic, to some extent with a relatively special orientation under the influence of Chinese context. This study also shows that such 'abstraction' is strongly related to spatial and social distance and is constantly produced via several mediation channels. However, this type of geographical imagination is not fixed, but displays obvious dynamism during the travel process that follows. The next section then looks into the processes of how these initial imaginaries are changed through practices upon the arrival of tourists to the destination.

5.1.2 Geographical Imagination After Arrival

In this section, this study reveals that established imaginaries are constantly updated and reconstrue on the ground. For example, some tourists, after their direct experience of the destination, realize that their perceptions which were formed by their previous experience are limited:

“My understanding of Abu Dhabi came from Fast & Furious. Landmarks such as the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the Emirates Palace, the Yas Marina F1 Circuit, and the Liwa Desert formed my initial impression. But when I actually set foot here and saw people dressed in traditional Arab clothing, it felt completely different.” (20th April, 2023)

Furthermore, tourists' geographical imagination, as they physically interact with certain spatial settings, progressively evolves from abstraction towards an increasingly detailed and comprehensive construction. As one tourist did put it:

“When people talk about the UAE, most probably think of extreme wealth, ultra-modern architecture, and luxurious seven-star hotels. But in reality, this fascinating country offers so much more—you can experience thrilling extreme sports, witness a unique landscape where desert meets the sea, discover desert wildlife, explore museums and art galleries, and encounter a rich mix of cultures and religions.” (8th October, 2023)

This story is definitely a multi-layered experiential understanding. The tourists' imaginaries, initially based on notions of “luxury” and “wealth,” are broadened through experience to encompass natural landscapes, cultural difference and daily life.

Some tourists' understandings even develop beyond a surface level diversity. As travel progresses further, deeper observation of social structures and development patterns becomes evident, indicating a more critical and nuanced perspective. For instance, tourists identify tensions within the fast-paced processes of modernisation in the Gulf societies, such as:

“The discovery of oil brought rapid wealth to Abu Dhabi and Dubai, but also created an uneven form of modernization: on the one hand, rising GDP; on the other, relatively low educational participation. On the one hand, local citizens supported by welfare; on the other, migrant workers engaged in physically demanding labor for low wages. On the one hand, women with some degree of independence; on the other, women adhering to traditional roles.” (4th March, 2024)

“I also saw both diversity and division. Despite the city's wealth and prosperity, there are clear inequalities and social stratification. Most of the population consists

of foreigners—many from India and Pakistan—who occupy lower social positions, doing hard work for low pay...” (4th March, 2024)

Most notably, in some narratives, this growing awareness of social structures and development trajectories extends further into a re-evaluation of the Gulf region's position within the global system. In this process, the Gulf countries are re-located within the global economic, political and cultural networks. Tourists' perception changes from “distant, peripheral, resource-dependent states” to “active agents with international significance,” in which individuals are involved in the bottom-up process of creating geopolitical meanings (An et al. , 2020).

For example, tourists come to recognize the region's critical role in the global economy :

“This region holds some of the world's richest oil reserves and is one of the largest producers of oil and natural gas. These resources are crucial to the functioning of the global economy.” (12th December, 2024)

They also reflect on its geopolitical importance:

“Located at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, this is a key geopolitical zone and a stage for great power competition.” (12th December, 2024)

As travel deepens, tourism is further a means for tourists to perceive the aspirations of the Gulf countries to be global. Some of these, for example in the case of Saudi Arabia, refer to “an ambitious plan to transform into a post-oil economy”, and the attempt to lure foreign capital and talent. Meanwhile, every day experiences of mobility are also visible globally, with tourists reporting that “workers, managers, and professionals from all over the world are everywhere (1st March, 2025)”, thus tangibilising the region's insertion into global networks. Interestingly, some of the iconic urban landscapes are also given generic meanings by tourists. For instance, Burj Khalifa is not only considered a landmark, but also a symbol of the UAE's standing as a global city of innovation (22nd July, 2025).

These travel stories illustrate how tourists have developed an understanding of the Gulf area as a ‘node’ within global flows, thus completing their perceptual shift from a localized to a global imagination. These accounts are therefore an important space in which the geographical imagination of the traveler is made

available, allowing for their engagement in the making of global geopolitical space.

To sum up, the geographical imagination of the tourists in the post-arrival phase is expanded from the sign to multiple dimensions, and then enriched to the knowledge of society systems and globalization. This is a generative and dynamic process of geographical imagination. This will be further explored in the next section, which will investigate the processes through which such changes can occur, and thus better understand how tourists become involved in the production of geopolitical meaning as they travel.

5.1.3 Embodied experience as a key mechanism

Thus, how is this dynamism achieved? This study claims that it is embodied experiences of tourists during travelling that is the key. The abstract geographical imagination that is created before departure can only be continually revised and enriched from abstract to concrete by encountering the world through the body, perception and practice.

Theories of embodied cognition in the cognitive sciences can help to explain this process. Varela et al. (1991) were among the first who proposed an embodied approach in the field of cognitive science. They combine elements from a variety of fields in their work, such as phenomenology, science, Buddhist practice, and human cognition, and they examine how these areas are connected (Farina, 2021). The general theme among scholars in the field of embodied cognition is the contribution of the body to cognition. Many of these theorists explicitly think of embodied cognition as a way of thinking where the structures outside the nervous system, the body and its surroundings, are active contributors to and parts of cognitive processes (Clark, 2008; Rowlands, 2006; Sutton, 2007).

Some tourism researchers have associated travel with “corporeal travel” (Veijola & Jokinen, 1994). They focus on an apparently obvious but easily forgotten fact: tourists move around and around in space with “clumsy, vulnerable, aging” and gendered, racialized bodies. These are through which the direct contact with others, objects and material environments can be made, the base of geographical imagination. This view also corresponds to the main concern of

feminist geopolitics that emphasizes lived and embodied experience in the construction of spatial knowledge. But Feminist geopolitics is also interested in understanding these embodied experiences in the context of the larger power, identity and inequality structures compared to the theories of embodied cognition.

Here, the concept of feminist geopolitics can be useful to understand why the geographical imagination can be abstract and then gradually grow into more complex and layered understanding. Urry (2008) proposes that tourists' bodies are caught up in “sensory landscapes” of particular spaces as they move through, pause in, touch and feel spaces, which are influenced by social norms, cultural tastes and ideological frameworks. This means that the perception of the body can never be separated from socio-cultural meanings, which creates such an interaction that perception can be interpreted. As explored in Caribbean tourism by Mimi Sheller (2004), the tourist goes through multisensory encounters: the exotic taste of fruits, the scent of flowers and the sensation of the heat of the sun and the humidity. These embodied experiences create these spaces as tropical pleasure sites, sensuality, and sites of tourist consumption and these are then elaborated upon in more complex and expansive imaginations, including postcolonial representations of the Caribbean.

More specifically, two levels of embodied experience can be considered. On the sensory level, tourists are in touch with the destination environment by stimulating several senses: touch (urban spaces, climb, glide, walk...), smell (climate and temperature), taste (local food) and hearing (various languages and sounds). These concrete sensory practices constantly recreate and enrich a geographical imagination which has been abstracted. For instance some tourists reported:

“I found myself in a desert city, witnessing architectural marvels rising from the sand...” (9th February, 2025)

“Dubai is extremely clean. In all the attractions, hotels, restaurants, amusement parks, and airport restrooms I visited, none had any unpleasant odor.” (12th December, 2025)

“I felt very safe here —no worries about theft or scams ... Even if you don't understand, people still smile and nod.” (9th March, 2025)

Such sensory and emotional experiences can be combined with the overall 'destination' understanding. For example, impressions such as “clean,” “safe” and “high quality” enable tourists to understand the level of social governance, as do impressions of “architectural wonders in the desert” that enable tourists to deepen their knowledge of modernization. This is a process that unfolds over time, where geographical imagination moves from one, uncomplicated label to a more complex and layered understanding, replete with the dynamism mentioned above.

Secondly, the sense of kinaesthesia is also of great importance. Tourists interact with the space in a “being there” sense, through the perception of movement provided by the muscular and the joint system, for example the feet/ground contact and the movement of the body over the space (Gil, 1998). One tourist stated that he visited the UAE Presidential Palace:

“I paused for a long time in the entrance hall before walking further in. There are many exhibition halls —some explain the development of the UAE, others offer a deeper understanding of Arab culture. I felt the palace was very considerate of visitors, especially the seating, which is very comfortable. You can rest well when you get tired.” (3rd February, 2023)

In this narration, the actions of the body, like “pausing,” “walking” and “resting,” indicate that tourists don't experience space in a uniform, continuous way. The gestural dynamics of this body work, in addition to forming their sense of presence, also familiarize them with the geographical destination's society and culture. Meanwhile, the focus on details like “comfortable seating” also showcases the extent of the tourism infrastructure. Such materiality sustains the body—enabling it to rest, recuperate and continue to travel—and also slightly affects the first impression tourists have of the place.

This study also reveals that, as a result of the different spaces tourists experience, the scenes they see, and the activities they perform, tourists' geographical imaginations may also be asymmetric.

The core dimensions of the travel blogs mentioned by Chinese tourists are identified by the word frequency analysis on the blogs. Chinese tourists' experiences in the Gulf do not seem to go along one path, but rather oscillate between opposing dimensions including tradition and modernity, and locality and

globalization, indicating that the terms are diverse focal points in the experiences. Not only “desert (2427),” “mosque (2029),” and “Islam (678),” all of which are related to tradition, religion and regional culture, are among the top ten high-frequency words but also modernity and globalization related terms: “openness (611),” “global (516),” and “international (503).

The overall differentiation is also manifested in individual travel reports. Some tourists, for instance, in the same destination—Dubai—concentrate on the internationally-known theme parks:

“I only came here for this and wasn’t interested in anything else. The global theme park has six immersive zones … each with a distinct style, showcasing the city’s global inclusiveness.” (22nd February, 2024)

Such narratives reflect a focus on urban modernity and global entertainment culture. In contrast, other tourists emphasize traditional spaces:

“The reflections of skyscrapers became increasingly dazzling, and the air felt filled with the scent of money. The glamorous surface felt strangely unreal and distant. Instead, the earthy-colored buildings in the old districts moved me more. A city’s future is important, but so are the traces of its past.” (30th December, 2024)

In this instance, the tourist is not fully taken up by the image of the Gulf that is being created through the modern landscapes but rather a feeling of distance and unreality. They turn their focus to traditional spaces, which are regarded as symbols of previous life, in which they sense deeper cultural and historical meanings.

Remarkably, this asymmetry is not only within destinations, but also between destinations. For instance, one of the tourists wrote about Oman:

“Oman is actually not far from us, also part of Asia, located on the Arabian Peninsula. Compared with the rest of the Arab world, it is relatively low-key—it is neither as wealthy as Saudi Arabia or Dubai, nor as unstable as Yemen or Lebanon.” (2nd March, 2024)

Tourists are repositioning the Gulf countries relative to each other analytically, by comparing Oman to the other countries. These practices across destinations yield more complex and material geographical imaginations.

From this, it is clear that the embodied experiences of the Chinese tourists in the Gulf are diversified, and understandings of the Gulf are selectively constructed by different experiences. This is not only revealing of geographical imagination's variation but also that it is a dynamic, tensionful and unstable process of becoming.

In sum, the research question of this section is how Chinese tourists build geographical imagination of the Gulf countries during travel and can be answered by analysing the travel blogs of Chinese tourists who traveled to the Gulf countries. First, it discovers that the geographical imagination is experienced, transformed and re-created at the various stages of travelling. At the pre-departure phase, tourists' knowledge about the Gulf is abstract and symbolic and influenced by interplay of different channels, which alligns with the literature mentioned above (Liu et al. 2024; Zhang et al. 2025).

This research also focuses on the dynamic nature of geographical imagination in the post-departure stage. Previous research tends to be more interested in fairly fixed cultural and economic determinants (Chen, 2024; Johnson et al. , 2024; Li et al. , 2019; Watkins, 2024), which falls short of addressing the dynamic nature of tourists' perceptions ranging from pre-trip expectations to in-tourism experience and post-tourism reflections (Li et al. , 2025; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

Meanwhile, different from the previous studies which focus on the geographical imagination as a cognitive result, the embodied practice is identified as the key mechanism for the dynamic formation of the geographical imagination. This is in line with the feminist geopolitics that focuses on the importance of individuals as “mobile bodies” within spatial practice (Smith, 2017). The body is a key intermediary that tourists re-interpret a destination, whether through multi-sensory perception (vision, smell, hearing and touch) or through kinaesthetic practices (walking, pausing and resting). Therefore, tourists' geographical imagination is dynamic and is built up through the continuous interaction of body and the environment, which gradually includes tourists in the process of constructing geopolitical meaning.

Lastly, this study also shows that the mechanism is not uniform and linear but differentiated. On the one hand, the different tourists make different projections of the same destination on the basis of their interests and the routes they take, while on the other hand, these embodied experiences of the various destinations also

make it impossible to understand the “Gulf region” as a homogeneous whole, and instead make it up of multiple, differentiated spaces.

5.2 Tourists’ understanding of China – Gulf relations

This study also reveals that in the process of creating geographical image of the Gulf, tourists' cognition does not only stop at the process of understanding the place only, but also reading into China – Gulf relations. Like the geographical imagination of the Gulf mentioned above, it is also a process whereby the tourist is involved in the making of geopolitical meaning but the analytical level is extended beyond the appreciation of a single space to the thinking about inter-state relations.

In this section, it can be observed that Chinese tourists pay particular attention to how China (and Chinese people) participate in production and consumption activities in the Gulf region, incorporating China’s economic and social presence into their interpretive framework. At a macro level, this perception of “China’s presence” is closely related to the growing interdependence between China and the Gulf region (Kassomeh & Qanas, 2023). State-level cooperation has not only reshaped regional development patterns but has also become highly visible through cultural exchange, infrastructure construction, commercial activities, and population mobility. It is on the basis of this visibility that tourists are able to translate abstract inter-state relations into concrete and intuitive experiences, documenting them in travel narratives through references to Chinese history, Chinese projects, Chinese enterprises, and Chinese communities.

Some tourists encountered historical China – Gulf connections when visiting museums:

“During the Age of Exploration, Oman was an important port for trade between China, India, and Arab countries, and the only port city on the Arabian Peninsula along the Maritime Silk Road. Zheng He led over a hundred ships on seven voyages to the Western Seas, landing in Oman three times. Merchant ships brought linen, wool, and spices to China, and carried silk, porcelain, and camphor to Oman.”

(2nd March, 2024)

In this account, the tourist situates China – Gulf relations within a longer historical framework by referencing the Age of Exploration and the Maritime Silk Road, discursively reinforcing a sense of long-standing connection rather than a recently emerged geopolitical arrangement.

Other tourists describe contemporary cooperation between China and the Gulf: *“Chinese supermarkets and authentic Chinese restaurants are everywhere between the buildings, Chinese is widely spoken, and the area is full of lively atmosphere. Nearby is Dragon Mart, a large Chinese wholesale market. Living here feels just like home ... The guide drove us through the Chinese district, enthusiastically introducing Dragon Mart, a market shaped like a giant dragon. It’s a real business legend, with annual transactions once reaching hundreds of billions of dollars, even surpassing Dubai’s tourism revenue at its peak. Tens of thousands of Chinese goods are distributed from here to over 50 countries in the Middle East and Africa.”* (28th December, 2025)

“The Infinity Bridge, which opened in 2022, is a Belt and Road project built by a Chinese construction company.” (3rd March, 2024)

Such narratives reveal the deep embedding of China within local economic and social spaces. These spatial practices, carried by commercial networks and infrastructure, reflect China’s regional influence and connectivity. In this sense, tourists’ narratives represent a form of “everyday geopolitics,” where macro-level state cooperation and strategic arrangements are concretized within ordinary travel experiences.

However, to further understand how tourists participate in the bottom-up construction of China – Gulf relations, it is not sufficient to identify their attention to Chinese elements alone; it is also necessary to examine the attitudes and evaluations embedded in their narratives. Existing research has discussed China’s involvement in the Gulf, with some adopting a critical perspective (Ameyaw-Brobby, 2018), suggesting that economic cooperation—especially under the Belt and Road Initiative—may lead to “debt traps,” although such studies also acknowledge its early developmental benefits. In contrast, the perspectives found in Chinese tourists’ narratives appear less influenced by such critical discourses.

This study finds that their evaluations tend to be more positive and, to some extent, resonate with China's official geopolitical discourse, which emphasizes "peaceful development" and "win-win cooperation" in global engagement (Chen & Duggan, 2016; Strauss, 2009). For example:

"Along the way I saw several Chinese brands: Gree, Huawei, Hikvision, Chery, Geely... Seeing these made me even more curious about how much influence China has in Oman." (5th December, 2022)

Here, the visibility of Chinese brands not only serves as concrete evidence of influence but also stimulates the tourist's curiosity, reflecting an implicit recognition of China's expanding role and positioning it as a regional actor.

Some tourists also note:

"I learned that Huawei and Visit Qatar have signed a memorandum of understanding to strengthen Qatar's position as a global tourism hub. This agreement, signed at the Arabian Travel Market in Dubai in 2025, marks an important milestone in their shared vision of enhancing tourism experiences and driving high-value demand through advanced technology and marketing platforms, achieving sustainable growth." (9th May, 2025)

"Al-Sina'iya, established in 1975, is one of Saudi Arabia's industrial centers. The Yanbu Refinery, China's largest investment project in Saudi Arabia, is located here. It aligns with Saudi Arabia's economic transformation strategy and also exemplifies mutually beneficial cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative." (29th October, 2023)

In these accounts, visitors' presence in China is translated into a positive exchange of technology and capital for development, with words like "enhancing", "stimulating" and "achieving growth". This provides a positive image of China's involvement and frames China – Gulf relations within a non-confrontational and cooperation-oriented geopolitical discourse. Tourists are less likely to be skeptical and to embrace a "critical interpretation" than are the critical.

Analytically speaking, this fairly uniform praise can be both a full and neutral view or a view that has been selectively built through various mechanisms. Algorithmic systems, through their structural functioning, can promote a greater

degree of homogeneity of the content, which leads to selective exposure while restricting the diversity of perspectives (Ahmmad et al. , 2025). These systems are very often geared towards optimizing the monetary advantages for platforms and advertisers instead of fostering a more diverse and informative social understanding (Metzler & Garcia, 2023).

Consequently, on a tourism site like Mafengwo where emotion, attractiveness and consumability are essential to amplify content, there is a greater chance that content that is emotionally positive, attractive and consumable may be amplified, while that involving conflict, inequality, or controversy may be marginalized or filtered. The more important aspect is that this mechanism not only works on the distribution of content but also indirectly has an impact on the production of content. User-generated platforms tend to have specific preferences for what stories are told and creators will modify their stories to suit the platform to achieve visibility. As such, the stories told to, and told by, tourists are already designed and embellished, and create a partial geopolitical image.

Secondly, from a point of view of media and discursive environment, content production in the Chinese internet context is set in the framework of institutional regulation and management of platforms. Regulations like the Regulation on Internet Information Service of the People's Republic of China (2004), the Cybersecurity Law of the People's Republic of China (2016) and the Provisions on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content (2019) provide for the monitoring, review and regulation of platforms and the promotion of a 'positive and healthy' online culture. In this context, governance not only entails the process of filtering out dangerous content, but also the structuring of visibility by means of the review and distribution processes (Shang, 2026). Dissemination of negative or critical perspectives is often accompanied by greater uncertainty or limitations, and the chances of them becoming part of mainstream narratives are low. Meanwhile, this governance narrative is also being used to influence the creation of content, such that the creators want to prevent themselves from being exposed to risks, and stick to safer, more mainstream-oriented stories. Thus, public images of China – Middle East relations are influenced by media contexts and serve to reinforce dominant discourses especially in the framework of increased cooperation between China and the Middle East. Development-oriented,

constructive narratives more likely to circulate and be recognized while critical perspectives are less visible.

In summary, this section answers the second research question: during travel, Chinese tourists not only identify “China’s presence” through on-the-ground observation but also gradually construct an understanding of China – Gulf relations. However, this understanding is not a simple reflection of reality; rather, it is shaped by platform visibility mechanisms and media discourse environments, resulting in a predominantly positive interpretive orientation that resonates with official geopolitical narratives. This process constructs China as a development-oriented and cooperative geopolitical actor. While it reflects a form of bottom-up geopolitical construction, it also exhibits clear selectivity and partiality.

In addition, this study finds that in some narratives, tourists use China as a point of reference to compare with Gulf countries. This comparative process often extends into emotional identification and value judgment, reinforcing recognition of China’s development path and related affective orientations. Based on this, the next section will further analyze these comparison practices and the emotions and identities they produce.

5.3 Comparative Practices with China as a Reference Point and Nationalism

In this section, based on the results of inductive coding, this study identifies a theme that was not predetermined by existing theory but gradually emerged from the data: some tourists do not stop at understanding relations between China and Gulf countries, but instead use China as an important frame of reference for comparison. At times, these comparisons are further transformed into evaluations and judgments with nationalist tendencies. For example, tourists wrote:

“Although the Middle East is very wealthy, I am only a tourist there. Nowhere is better than my own home, and nowhere is better than my own country.” (14th September, 2025)

“Along the way, I saw many places marked with Chinese infrastructure. China’s reputation as an ‘infrastructure powerhouse’ is truly well deserved. I feel proud of my country.” (30th December, 2024)

More specifically, such judgments are inseparable from Chinese tourists’ everyday tourism practices in Gulf countries. Through continuous comparisons of spaces, landscapes, and lived experiences, corresponding evaluations gradually take shape. For example:

“Abu Dhabi feels somewhat like Shanghai or Xiamen—very comfortable; Dubai feels somewhat like Hong Kong or Beijing, with a higher urban density.” (20th April, 2023)

“If you only buy groceries from supermarkets and cook for yourself, the cost of living in Oman is almost the same as in China’s first-tier cities.” (2nd March, 2024)

“Once I saw these buildings, I still felt that ancient Chinese architecture is more beautiful.” (10th June, 2024)

“Any ancient town in China could easily outperform this place.” (30th December, 2024)

On the surface, such statements may appear to be merely expressions of personal travel preference. However, “China” here is no longer simply a geographical or political concept, but is transformed into an everyday frame of reference that is repeatedly invoked during travel. In these examples, tourists compare unfamiliar spaces with everyday experiences in China, incorporating difference into a familiar cognitive framework and thereby reducing the difficulty of interpretation.

Furthermore, these comparisons also imply an evaluative ordering. Expressions such as “like Shanghai” and “like Hong Kong” position China’s first-tier cities as implicit standards of development and modernity. In the latter two examples, phrases such as “easily outperform” and “China is still more beautiful” construct a clear hierarchy of superiority and inferiority at the level of language. In this process, China is not only established as a point of reference but is also assigned a higher value position, gradually becoming a source of nationalist identification and evaluation.

This study argues that the nationalism emerging in tourists' narratives does not depend on explicit political expression and can be understood through the lens of "everyday nationalism." This perspective emphasizes that national identity is not only shaped from the top down by the state, but is also continuously generated and reconstructed through individual experience, interaction, and emotion in specific contexts (Antonsich, 2016; Benwell & Dodds, 2011). Theoretically, everyday nationalism can be traced back to Michael Billig's (1995) concept of "banal nationalism," which understands nationalism as a "way of life" reproduced through language use, symbols, and everyday practices. However, this theory still tends to understand national identity as a relatively stable structure shaped by the state and government (Jones & Merriman, 2009; Antonsich, 2016).

By contrast, everyday nationalism places greater emphasis on individuals' agentic practices in specific contexts. It argues that national meaning is accepted, experienced, and produced through diverse processes in concrete situations, and is marked by contextuality, fluidity, and relationality (Antonsich, 2016; Benwell & Dodds, 2011; Jones & Merriman, 2009). This perspective pays particular attention to the mediating role of contextual factors. For example, in their study of the Malvinas/Falklands dispute, Benwell and Dodds (2011) find that public territorial emotions are diverse and shaped by geographical proximity, personal and family experience, generational differences, and specific political events. This differs from Billig's assumption that nationhood is pervasively present across time and space. Therefore, everyday nationalism offers a more explanatory analytical perspective for understanding how nationalism among Chinese tourists is generated through comparison with Gulf countries.

Beyond immediate comparisons in everyday tourism practices, as tourists' understanding of the Gulf region deepens, these comparisons further extend to more structural dimensions such as national development paths. In this process, they are transformed into identification with China's current development trajectory and take on nationalist expression. One tourist wrote:

"Doha, Qatar was a small fishing village only a few decades ago. With the discovery of underground oil and natural gas, it has now developed into an international metropolis that stands out in the Middle East, with per capita GDP

rising to the highest in the world. Another small fishing village that developed rapidly is Shenzhen in China. Shenzhen did not discover oil or natural gas underground, but through technological innovation, it gave rise to a large number of high-tech companies such as Huawei, Tencent, and DJI ... If Shenzhen's permanent population were the same as Qatar's 2.85 million, Shenzhen's per capita GDP would already far exceed Qatar's. "(23rd November, 2023)

In this case, the tourist places Doha and Shenzhen within the same historical framework through the shared starting point of the "small fishing village," thereby establishing comparability. Notably, as an important experimental zone of China's reform and opening-up, Shenzhen has undergone a rapid transformation from a fishing village into a modern metropolis since it was designated as a Special Economic Zone in the 1980s (Yeung, 2015). This developmental experience is implicitly mobilized in the narrative as an important reference for understanding and comparison.

However, in the subsequent narrative, the development paths of the two places are clearly differentiated: Qatar's development is attributed to resource endowment, while China's development is emphasized as relying on technological innovation and industrial capacity. In this comparison, "resource-based development" and "innovation-driven development" are assigned different value meanings. The narrative also introduces population size as a variable, recalculating per capita GDP in a way that produces a conclusion more favorable to China. In this process, China's development experience is not only presented but also endowed with legitimacy and superiority through comparison.

Based on the above analysis, this study finds that tourists can also generate emotional identification with their own country in the context of cross-border tourism. As Gries (2004) points out, national identity evolves through international interaction, and international tourism is an important arena in which such interaction unfolds.

Existing studies generally recognize a close relationship between tourism and nationalism, particularly in the construction and reproduction of national identity. Tourism often serves as an important medium for displaying national cultural heritage, historical landmarks, and natural landscapes. By emphasizing shared

history and values, it strengthens individuals' sense of belonging and collective identity (Kuci, 2024). However, such studies mostly focus on identity formation mechanisms based on domestic culture and space—that is, strengthening national identity through “displaying the self.” Even studies that focus on tourists as a micro-level group tend to concentrate on the formation of “territorial nationalism,” namely how tourism practices within one's own national or territorial space stimulate patriotic sentiment. For example, Huang's (2022) study of Chinese tourists in the South China Sea emphasizes the direct connection between visiting national territorial space and national identity.

By contrast, this study reveals a different path through which nationalism is generated, one characterized by external reference points. These comparative practices with external others also show clear layers: from analogies and perceptions based on everyday experience to structural comparisons of national development paths, national identity is gradually activated and strengthened in this process.

Overall, this finding further deepens the analysis developed in the previous section in response to the second research question. Specifically, this comparative process not only connects China with Gulf countries but also implicitly constructs a cognitive framework through which tourists understand their own country's level of development and international position, thereby giving these narratives potential geopolitical significance. At the same time, this finding also expands the domestic-experience-centered analytical framework commonly found in tourism and nationalism studies, further revealing how national identity is generated and transformed through global mobility and everyday interaction.

6 Conclusion

The relationship between tourism and geopolitics is discussed from an intersectional perspective in this research. And it examines how Chinese tourists are involved in the geopolitical meaning-making process while traveling to the Gulf region. Although the scholarship has started to recognise the place of tourism practices in geopolitics, it continues to be dominated by a state-level approach on strategies and discourses, and/or by the analysis of tourism practices within a particular region. A relative lack of attention has been shown to the role played by ordinary tourists in the production of geopolitical meanings in concrete travel experiences, especially in the Gulf, where it is a relevant but little studied context.

Building on this, the study conceptualizes geographical imagination as a key mediator connecting individual experience with global spatial cognition, and treats tourists' travel blogs as important textual sites where such imagination is generated and constructed. In terms of method, thematic analysis is mainly used in this study, and word frequency analysis is used as a supplement to answer the following research questions: (1) How do Chinese tourists construct geographical imaginations of the Gulf region during their travels? (2) How do Chinese tourists interpret and understand China – Gulf relations through their travel experiences?

First, the study finds that Chinese tourists' geographical imagination of the Gulf region is continuously reconstructed across different stages of travel, forming a dynamic process. This contributes to existing research, which often focuses on a single stage and pays limited attention to how tourists' cognition evolves throughout the travel process (Li et al., 2025). In the pre-departure stage, Chinese tourists primarily rely on indirect information, resulting in geographical imagination that is abstract, symbolic, and mediated. Notably, these pre-travel imaginaries tend to revolve around relatively positive or neutral symbols. This differs from Western media narratives that often frame the Arab world in terms of conflict, threat, and backwardness, and instead reflects an imagination shaped by the Chinese socio-cultural context. Upon arrival, tourists' understanding is not

only revised but also expands from singular symbolic representations into more multidimensional and concrete forms, eventually deepening into observations of social structures, development models, and global positioning.

The study further finds that the key mechanism driving this dynamism is embodied experience, including multisensory interactions such as sight, smell, and hearing, as well as bodily practices such as walking. Through these, tourists develop a sense of “being there” and continuously adjust their understanding of the destination. At the same time, differences in movement paths, spaces, and activities lead different tourists to perceive distinct dimensions even within the same journey.

Regarding the second research question, the study finds that tourists construct their understanding of China – Gulf relations by identifying “China’s presence” and incorporating China’s economic, cultural, and social participation into their interpretive frameworks. Whether through references to the historical Maritime Silk Road or observations of contemporary Chinese projects and enterprises, tourists translate abstract inter-state relations into concrete and experiential forms of knowledge, reflecting a form of “everyday geopolitics.” This understanding is often characterized by a strong positive orientation. Tourists tend to use terms such as “cooperation,” “development,” “enhancement,” and “growth” to interpret China’s involvement in the Gulf, thereby implicitly participating in the production of meaning surrounding China – Gulf relations. In this process, China is constructed as a geopolitical actor oriented toward cooperation and development. This perspective differs from some critical studies that interpret China’s involvement in the region as a “debt trap.” However, it should be noted that such narratives are also marked by selectivity and partiality, shaped in part by platform visibility mechanisms and specific media environments.

Importantly, some tourists use China as a key reference point to compare with Gulf countries. These comparisons go beyond surface-level spatial perception and gradually extend into expressions of national identity. In this sense, the study reveals a distinct pathway for the formation of national identity. Unlike previous tourism research, which tends to focus on nationalist sentiment rooted in domestic space and cultural heritage, this study shows that national identity can also be

activated and constructed through cross-border tourism via comparison with others.

In terms of contributions, this study makes several theoretical advances. First, by integrating critical geopolitics and feminist geopolitics, it bridges the gap between discourse analysis and embodied practice, placing them within a unified analytical framework and developing an integrative approach. Second, it advances tourism geopolitics from a bottom-up perspective by highlighting the agency of ordinary tourists in the production of geopolitical meaning. It demonstrates how individuals participate in the construction of state relations and global spatial meanings through everyday practices of comparison, evaluation, and narration, responding to the current theoretical shift toward decentralization and cross-scalar analysis in geopolitics (Huang, 2022; Rowen, 2023).

At the empirical level, this study not only examines the relation of China-Gulf relation but also enriches the understanding of Chinese tourists' cross-border practices. Existing research has largely examined China's geopolitical practices from a macro perspective, focusing either on official geopolitical discourse (Strauss, 2009) or on how state ideology is embedded in everyday domains such as tourism (Chen & Duggan, 2016; Tse, 2013). However, bottom-up perspectives from ordinary individuals remain relatively limited (An et al., 2020). This study therefore provides an empirical perspective grounded in "Chinese micro-experience," revealing how individuals from a non-Western context understand both others and themselves through global mobility, and contributing new empirical insights to tourism and geopolitics research from a Global South perspective.

However, there are some limitations to this study. First, it's mainly based on travel blogs that are put on the web. Such texts are useful as they help to capture reflection and the construction of narrative after travel, but are not able to fully illustrate immediate emotional experiences or perceptions that have not been put into words during travel. Second, the blog authors are people who are willing to put their experience into the public sphere, which could lead to a bias in terms of expression and social characteristics, and, consequently, affect the representativeness of the findings. Moreover, travel blogs tend to provide a wealth

of visuals like photos, which should be considered in a multimodal approach to meaning-making in travel discourse. But it is not systematically done in this study.

Given these constraints, a number of avenues for further research exist. From a methodological perspective, an integration of in-depth interviews and participant observation might be helpful to get a better and immediate understanding about how the geographical imagination is produced as some experiences might be implicit that might not be captured in the textual analysis. For future research, the use of visual or semiotic analysis might also be included so that it can give a more complete picture of the meaning-making processes (Rose, 2016).

From a perspective of research target, China's cross-border mobility, as it has been turning into a giant of outbound tourism, not only does it transform the global tourism geopolitics landscape but also demonstrates the everyday practices of ordinary people in geopolitical meaning-making. In future studies, different forms of transnational tourists (from other social classes, age groups, mobility experiences, etc.) could be studied and categorized, which can help us investigate the tourists' imagination in different social positions. It could also be based on areas of greater geopolitical tension, such as border zones, disputed territories, strategic nodes and so on, illustrating the way tourism practices are shown in more complex power relations.

Lastly, this study recommends further research should look more into tourism literature from Global South context. This research is still largely based on Chinese cases and literature, possibly restricting the comparability and the depth of analysis. The inclusion of research from Asia, Africa and Latin America would also provide a variety of development strategies and the socio-cultural contexts, which would prevent a single case bias and enrich the theoretical framework by providing a more pluralistic and dialogic approach.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that incorporating Chinese tourists—the largest outbound tourist group in the world — into analysis is crucial for understanding the interaction between global tourism and geopolitics. Chinese tourists' travels in the Gulf are not merely processes of consumption and spatial experience, but also involve the ongoing production of geographical imagination, the reinterpretation of state relations, and the gradual activation of national identity. Through embodied presence, spatial mobility, everyday comparison, and

affective judgment, tourists transform observations of “others” into reflections on the “self,” thereby implicitly participating in broader geopolitical meaning-making. Tourism thus becomes an important mediator connecting individual experience with global power relations, revealing how everyday life is deeply embedded in and contributes to the production of geopolitics.

7 Reference

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