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## Softly Enhancing Political Legitimacy via Red Tourism

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### Abstract

Political legitimacy-building and tourism studies help to explain how and why China's governing regime advanced Red Tourism to justify and reinforce its governance and legitimacy. A historical analysis of multilevel Chinese sources shows that the expressivity and value-ladenness that characterize visits to select historical sites permit governing regimes to softly augment their political legitimacy via political identity formation, political meaning framing, and nationalistic mobilization.

**Keywords:** political legitimacy; soft strategy; Red Tourism; strategic tourism; politicized tourism

### Introduction

Tourism influences societies economically, environmentally, psychologically, and politically (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012; Franklin, 2013; Godovykh & Riddersttat, 2020; Jaafar, Rasoolimanesh, & Ismail, 2017; Meng, Pham, & Dwyer, 2021; Pretes, 2003; Sharpley, 2018; Woo, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2016). Tourism has constructive power because it can function as an agent of seeing, being, experiencing, cultural inventing, and knowing (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001). Due to its management and discursive representation of social values, identities (i.e., ethnic, cultural, political, national, and regional), and history, tourism can achieve political goals such as political

identity formation, political meaning framing, and nationalistic mobilization (Gorsuch, 2007; Jung & Mittal, 2020; Pretes, 2003; Yan & Hyman, 2020; Zhang et al., 2018; Zhou, Zhang, & Zhou, 2021). Conversely, political ideologies and values can shape tourism development (Webster & Ivanov, 2016).

Many governing regimes (e.g., Britain, Cuba, Germany, Sweden, and the U.S.) have adopted tourism to enhance their political legitimacy (Anderson & Tabb, 2002; Koshar, 2002; Scranton & Davidson, 2007). As a pedagogical venue and representational platform, tourism is politically multidirectional, can shape public policies, and can create, express, and reinforce social meanings and political values (Hollinshead & Hou, 2012; Hollinshead & Suleman, 2017; Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001; Jureniene & Jurene, 2019).

Philosophers, sociologists, economists, and political scientists have studied political legitimacy, and tourism researchers have studied heritage tourism and tourism marketing (Buchannan, 2002; Habermas, 1975; Holden & Fennell, 2013; Jamal & Robin, 2009; Peter, 2017, 2020; Richter, 2009; Sharpley, 2018; von Billerbeck & Gippert, 2017; Weber, 2015; Weigand, 2015). However, few scholars have synthetically explored the links between politicized tourism and political legitimacy-building. Although some research has examined

the relationships between tourism and single political elements like ideologies, power, identities, and hierarchies, still lacking is a composite and intensive study of the underlying forces that motivate a governing regime to adopt legitimacy-enhancing tourism strategies (Gorsuch, 2007; Henderson, 2007; Kim, Timothy, & Han, 2007; Krutwyscho & Bramwell, 2010; Li, Hu, & Zhang, 2010; Pretes, 2003; Richter, 2009; Scranton & Davidson, 2007; Yan & Bramwell, 2008; Zhang et al., 2018; Zhao & Timothy, 2015; Zhou, Zhang, & Zhou, 2021). To address this lacuna, the analysis presented here focuses on one example: the marketing and consumption of Chinese heritage sites to boost the governing regime's political legitimacy, i.e., Red Tourism.

Partly working as a hidden persuader, Red Tourism uses marketing to extend socialistic values, memories, perceptions, and meanings (Packard, 1957). Commodifying and politicizing tourist sites reinforces the governing regime's ideology via branding and political advertising. Red Tourism reinforces Chinese nationalism because Red heritage sites often symbolize Chinese national pride and resistance to Western colonialism. In addition to happiness, prosperity, and good fortune, *red* in traditional Chinese culture insinuates orthodox, populist, and progressive treatment of social affairs. In contemporary culture, it also has revolutionary, socialist, leftist, and social justice connotations. Thus, *red's* interpretation is contextual.

Because social critics often lambast heavy-handed political governance, governing regimes increasingly choose *softer strategies*—such as entertainment media, pop culture, and social welfare programs—to extend their political goals (Jackson, 2009; Mirrlees, 2016; Nye, 2004, 2011; Rasu &

Raney, 2021; Wong, 2020). The links between soft tourism-related strategies and political value creation, identity building, community consolidation, meaning transfers, and meaning acceptance can reveal how governing regimes build political legitimacy. Thus, more studies about the contextualized mechanisms that link politicized tourism to maintaining or enhancing political legitimacy are warranted. Exploring Red Tourism can conceptually extend tourism studies. Moreover, an evermore prominent China warrants scrutiny of its political, social, and economic transitions.

Hence, we conducted a multi- and post-disciplinary analysis to render a new perspective on the mechanisms, dynamic processes, and social implications underpinning tourism as a soft strategy for sustaining and enhancing political legitimacy (Hollinshead, 2010). We relied on eclectic approaches that show tourism can sustain and enhance such legitimacy by serving as an emergent socio-political instrument for governing regimes. Incorporating the social sciences' interpretive and critical perspectives on qualitative tourism research, we applied contextualized concepts, paradigms, methods, and strategies to multi-layered texts and contexts about socio-historically embedded heritage tourism (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015).

Our exposition proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the political legitimacy frameworks central to our analysis. Relying on sociology, philosophy, and political science, we elaborate on political legitimacy's connotations and socio-political importance. Then, we introduce how applying critical historical research method (CHRM) to archived data sources can reveal meanings, processes, elements, and interactions related to political legitimacy-building and tourism. Next, we

compare the efficacy of hard versus soft strategies to build political legitimacy. After discussing political-legitimacy-shaping forces in post-1949 China and the legitimacy crisis that emerged after the late 1980s, we assess the governing regime's adoption of Red Tourism as a soft strategy for promoting Chinese heritage and inculcating state-preferred political values. Then, we assess the mechanisms and agencies underlying Red Tourism's marketing, management, consumption, and influence on political legitimacy-building. Finally, we discuss the backlash to Red Tourism and close with the academic and managerial implications of politicized tourism and possible future studies.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Political Legitimacy and Political Legitimacy Building**

This analysis examines tourism and heritage consumption's multidisciplinary nature and political implications. Rather than being limited to tourism marketing or heritage management theories, it relies on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks—especially political legitimacy theories from philosophy, sociology, and political science—to understand Red Tourism's depth and importance.

#### ***Political legitimacy: Definitions and implications***

Political legitimacy's descriptive or Weberian dimensions, rather than normative connotations, is the theoretical approach taken here (Buchanan, 2002; Peter, 2017; von Billerbeck & Gippert, 2017; Weber, 2015; Weigand, 2015). Political legitimacy refers to *the uncoercive justification of political authority, including widespread acceptance of ideas, intentions, orders, rules, policy outcomes, or legal writs from the government, political leaders,*

*political parties, and other governing entities.* This definition reflects political legitimacy's will-based, belief-based, and fact-based conceptions (Peter, 2020). In some socio-cultural contexts, political legitimacy may also exist as instrumental legitimacy (i.e., possible indifference by governing regimes and the governed about the means for obtaining public consent when governance seemingly benefits society) (Peter, 2017, 2020).

National governments seek political legitimacy because it implies their citizens align with the governing regime's promoted values—even if immoral (Coakley, 2011). High legitimacy is essential to melding political ideas, parties, institutions, ideologies, rules, norms, and the state into a regime capable of securing citizens' trust and support. Such legitimacy can reduce the political and social instability that threatens economic growth, social cohesion, and national identity-building (Mazepus, 2017; Mirrlees, 2016; Przeworski & Limongi, 1993; Zuo, Gursoy, & Wall, 2017). It shapes and is shaped by values, meanings, identities, and perceptions upheld by various and possibly conflicting political or social interests. Integrating diverse values and perceptions that facilitate public policymaking and foster national identity-building enhances a governing regime's attractiveness and reputation, enabling it to obtain citizens' implicit and explicit consent at the lowest political and social cost (Nye, 2004, 2011).

#### ***Building and sustaining political legitimacy: Hard versus soft strategies***

The governed must continually endorse and (re)construct political legitimacy, which underpins political authority and justifies governance. When failures to meet internal or external challenges reveal the governing regime's immorality or

incompetence, the governed may criticize (i.e., give voice to) it, turn to alternative regimes (i.e., exit), or do both (e.g., refugees criticizing their motherland's government), weakening political legitimacy or inducing a legitimacy crisis (Habermas, 1989; Hirschman, 1970).

Governing regimes sustain political legitimacy via hard and soft strategies. Because their citizens often resent hard strategies like inculcating regime-preferred values via formal education and state-controlled propaganda, such regimes may engage in alternative legitimacy-boosting approaches. By telling riveting stories, memorializing historical events, restoring cultural heritage, ritualizing political behavior, and visiting monuments, governing regimes may cultivate soft strategies that selectively frame, highlight, and dispense political information (Gorsuch, 2007; McCracken, 2005; Meladze, 2021; Qian, 2020). Mass media often institutionalize these discursive efforts. Assigning values—such as patriotism, anti-imperialism, national independence, national honor, political loyalty, and social responsibility—to heritage sites transforms them into *meaning vehicles* for creating collective identity, politicized consumption, and a shared community (Fayard, 2022; Hartmann & Su, 2021; Jung & Mittal, 2020; McCracken, 2005; Mirrlees, 2016; Pretes, 2003; Zhang et al., 2018).

Soft strategies can enhance political legitimacy by allowing a governing regime greater flexibility, persuasiveness, and courtesy in ruling its citizenry (Edney, 2015; Nye, 2004, 2011). Although limited media access can slow implementation, soft strategies often outperform hard strategies in naturalizing state-favored values, meanings, symbols, and political ideologies (Hollinshead & Suleman, 2017).

## **Critical Historical Research Method (CHRM) and Multilevel Data Sources**

Shifting socio-historical contexts can (re)define political legitimacy and tourism marketing. This redefinition demands a critical socio-historical understanding of strategic tourism and legitimacy building. Hence, the analysis summarized here applies CHRM to assessing the processes, mechanisms, representational functions, interpretive meanings, and other contextualized socio-historical aspects that drive Red Tourism and legitimacy building.

### ***Critical historical research method***

Rather than positing universal rules to explain quantitative regularities, CHRM elucidates the reflexive, fluid, open, and critical meanings of qualitative forces that induce social behaviors and events (Riley & Love, 2000; Yan & Hyman, 2018). CHRM clarifies context-dependent processes, connotations, discourses, and influences by unifying ontological realism and interpretive relativism. In addition to vividly and validly depicting particulars, it encourages researchers to scrutinize alternative explanations of social events by asking 'what if' questions related to time, human agency, and place (Qi, 2003; 2010).

CHRM is ideal for holistically exploring the scattered historical data needed to delineate historical facts (Yan & Hyman, 2018). It can indicate the contextualized links between the formation and interpretation of political meanings within changing socio-historical contexts. Aided by retrospective evaluation of relevant data, CHRM can help scholars focus on contexts and seek the most plausible alternative explanations. To enhance analysis validity, CHRM stresses the

critical interpretation of social phenomena within dynamic socio-historical contexts (Qi, 2003, 2010; Yan & Hyman, 2018).

Combining epistemological relativism (i.e., pluralistic interpretation of research objects) and ontological realism (i.e., existence of research objects within shifting socio-political contexts), CHRM enables the interdisciplinary inquiry of tourism's practical, imagined, situational, representational, and structural complexities (Hollinshead, 2010; Smith, 2005; Yan & Hyman, 2018). It can reveal tourism's social, cultural, and connective aspects within a socio-historical backdrop (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). By revealing the interdependencies of multiple dyads—politics versus markets, capitalist means versus socialist goals, private consumption versus collective identity formation, and tourism marketing versus political value indoctrination—CHRM can extend knowledge about the socio-historical ontology of politicized tourism. Here, broader themes such as political symbols, discursive power, social meanings, ideology framing, identity building, and heritage site marketing in China are scrutinized (Guo, 2019; Jung & Mittal, 2020; Qi, 2003, 2010; Wong & Zhang, 2021; Yan & Hyman, 2018).

### ***Multilevel data for critical interpretation***

By assessing the critical discourses within multiple qualitative data sources, the analysis presented here indicates how special meanings, symbols, and identities augmented and dispersed political legitimacy via the branding and consumption of politicized heritage sites. Data collected from online postings, second-hand sources, and personal interviews (online and in-person) reflect the Chinese governing regime's direct and indirect

involvement in Red Tourism.

The official Red Tourism website (<http://www.redtourism.com.cn/>) includes information about heritage site history, pricing, logistic support, promotion, and marketing. Government agencies (e.g., Ministry of Culture and Tourism, China National Tourism Administration) and semi-official entities (e.g., China Tourism Association, National Travel Trade Association) often post Red Tourism-related content online (e.g., government policies, self-regulation rules, heritage site financing proposals, industry or specific site branding). Mainly on WeChat, Youku, and personal blogging platforms, Red Tourists often post about their experiences. To prepare for, engage in, and evaluate possible heritage site visits, tourists often consider previous visitors' experiences.

National, local, social, and scholarly archives contain information about Red heritage site consumption and management. National media such as *Guangming Ribao*, *Renmin Ribao* (*the People's Daily*), *Xinhua News Agency*, and local newspapers printed near historical sites publish stories about Red Tourism. *Lvyou Ribao* (*Tourism Daily*) discusses Red Tourism-related marketing, news, and laws. Scholarly tourism research in Chinese or English also includes second-hand information. In total, roughly 200 such writings or postings were scrutinized.

Fourteen in-person, telephone, and online (via Zoom or Skype) depth interviews revealed the motivations, processes, and perceived meanings underpinning tourists' site consumption and tourism operators' management (see Appendix). Qualified tourists included anyone who previously toured a Red heritage site for cultural, natural, emotional, or political reasons—whether self-

initiated or sponsored by an employer (or *Danwei*, which includes companies, state agencies, or state-owned enterprises). Qualified tourism operators included owners or managers of private, state-owned, or joint-ventured tourism companies (often called *Lvxingshe* or *Lvyougongsi*) and full-time or part-time couriers. Participative observations, assisted by informal chats with heritage site tourists and nearby residents, also provided valuable data. Assessing such multileveled sources with CHRM can identify the multifaceted connotations and relationships among Red Tourism marketing, consumption, and political legitimacy-building.

### **Socio-historical Sources and Embeddedness of Post-1949 China's Political Legitimacy**

Political legitimacy generally derives from traditional (e.g., norms, habits, values, or social ethos), charismatic (e.g., attractive personal characteristics), or rational-legal (i.e., via social institutional arrangements) sources (Weber, 2015). Many such sources shaped China's historical, modern, and contemporary political legitimacy.

The traditional Chinese governing regime's political legitimacy was often called *Zhengtong* (orthodox genealogy or justified governance) and mythologized as heaven's representative or mandate. Societal values such as patriotism, nationalism, and collectivism fostered it (Hartmann & Su, 2021; Qi, 2003, 2010). This legitimacy entailed caring for four social groups (i.e., *Shi* (gentry scholars), *Nong* (peasants), *Gong* (craftsmen or workers), and *Shang* (businesspeople)), protecting China from Northern nomadic aggressors, maintaining a moral and peaceful social order, managing a national irrigation system, and coping with natural disasters (Guan, 2009; Qi, 2003, 2010; Sima, 2009; Spence,

2012; Wittfogel, 1957).

Political events, symbolic values, and nationalistic sentiments or identities broadly defined the overlapping and interacting political legitimacies of the post-1949 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chinese government (Spence, 2012). After it defeated several enemies from 1921 to 1949, the CCP established a governing regime. Anti-imperialism movements, an anti-Japanese war, a cultural revival, modernization, economic nationalism, and industrialization were critical to recovering post-1949 China's honor and power (Guo, 2019; Qi, 2003, 2010). Political measures that address such factors can secure instrumental legitimacy (which focuses on an authority's usefulness) that can evolve into substantive legitimacy (which focuses on the internalized normative beliefs, respect, or trusting authority) (Peter, 2017, 2020; Weigand, 2015).

To enhance the CCP's post-1949 political legitimacy, private property nationalization, land reform, industrialization, the Korean War effort, and border skirmishes with India and the Soviet Union were imbued with nationalistic and patriotic meanings. The pre-1979 Class Struggle (*Jieji Douzheng*) ideology, often accompanied by nationalism and developmentalism, pervaded CCP policies meant to boost political legitimacy by satisfying proletarian interests and securing national independence (Baum, 2018; Spence, 2012).

### **Post-1980s Challenges to Chinese Political Legitimacy**

Since the 1980s, evermore counterfeit products, financial scams, violent crimes, thefts, social distrust, and environmental degradation have challenged traditional Chinese values such as

honesty, mutual assistance, diligence, allegiance, and thrift (He & Chen, 2007). Waning traditional values drove many Chinese to criticize their governing regime for creating, neglecting, or exacerbating a social malaise. Exchange programs for academicians and university students, tourism, and personal consumption of Western media introduced values such as democracy, liberty, equity, human rights, and individualism. Nationwide acceptance of alternative values challenged socialistic ideology and threatened Chinese cultural security, indirectly discrediting the governing regime's political legitimacy (Baum, 2018; Edney, 2015; Guo, 2019; Yan & Hyman, 2018).

Due to historical and emerging social, economic, and political challenges, the post-1989 governing regime's political legitimacy shrank (Baum, 2018; Spence, 2012; Wedeman, 2004). These challenges triggered internecine conflicts caused by (1) old ideologies that espoused continuing socialist fundamentalism, stoic lifestyles, greater reliance on will rather than technology, and nationalistic distrust of Western values, and (2) new open-door and reform policies that characterized the transition from a fundamentalist socialist autarky (*Shehui Zhuyi Ziji Zizu Jingji*) to a socialist market economy (*Shehui Zhuyi Shichang Jingji*) (Baum, 2018; Berry et al., 2016). Furthermore, intellectuals' enlightenment and increased international experiences destabilized societal beliefs about the regime's political legitimacy.

During the 1990s, growing economic privatization and layoffs of state-owned-enterprise workers, awareness of officials' corruption, and beliefs about relative economic deprivation spurred nationwide social turmoil that challenged the governing regime's political legitimacy (Cai, 2002; Gurr, 1970; Lin et al., 2020; Urbanska & Guimond, 2018; Yan,

2009). Later, nostalgic discontent further pared its legitimacy. Many older Chinese cherished past regimes and deprecated the current regime as politically, economically, and culturally degenerate (Qian, 2020). Partly meant to memorialize and mythologize Mao's *clean time*—a period naively eulogized as without violent crime, corruption, theft, or moral decadence—many Chinese nostalgically participated in music shows, plaza or square dancing (*Guangchang Wu*), grassroots memorial conventions, small private gatherings, and cultural tourism (Baum, 2018; Hirschman, 1970; Yan, 2009; Yan & Bramwell, 2008; Zhang et al., 2018; Zhang & Ge, 2019).

### **Reinvigorating Chinese Political Legitimacy Softly via Red Tourism**

The post-1980s governing regime deployed several hard strategy mechanisms—formal education, public propaganda, administrative orders, laws, and rules—to reinvigorate its declining political legitimacy (Baum, 2018). Although such mechanisms may work, they are politically and economically expensive, inflexible, and elicit public discontent, especially among intellectuals and university students. Instead, soft strategies such as Red Tourism—encompassing techniques and channels for softening the regime's image and advancing its preferred political values, ideas, meanings, or images—are less heavy-handed. Several depth interviewees (i.e., Red tourists and tourism couriers or operators) claimed that consuming and managing Red heritage sites influences Chinese society profoundly. One middle-aged tourist mentioned that Red Tourism is “an indirect educational program that transmits patriotism, nationalism, and socialism to many, if not all, Red tourists unconsciously.” Although politically left-oriented interviewees castigated it as



vulgarized socialism, and right-oriented interviewees criticized it as a CCP propaganda instrument, Red Tourism promotes socialist values effectively.

Softly sustaining a regime's political legitimacy is like marketing commercial brands. Red Tourism's marketing and consumption merge commercial (e.g., logistic services, economic exchanges, local GDP growth, personal experiences) and political discourses (e.g., revolutionary history, patriotism, nationalism). Such marketing and consumption also integrate tangible (e.g., heritage sites scenery, historic buildings) and intangible elements (e.g., political meanings, imaginations, identifications).

Politics is about *who gets what, when, and how* (Lasswell, 2018). Through tourism, people can seek meaning, transcendental experience, and an other-centric life purpose, whereas governing regimes can seek public support for patriotism, nationalism, and other preferred political values (Willson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013; Yan & Hyman, 2020). Hence, exploring how, by whom, for whom, with whom, and in what sociopolitical contexts tourism was initiated, marketed, delivered, consumed, and interpreted can provide insights into Red Tourism and political legitimacy-building in China.

### ***Underlying supply and demand elements of Red Tourism***

Red Tourism can metaphorically market *socialism with Chinese characteristics*, a reform-oriented political doctrine that distinguishes the post-1979 CCP from hardline Maoism (Baum, 2018). Red Tourism substantiates two interrelated mechanisms that underlie tourism's sociopolitical functions: (1) the politicization, often unconsciously, of

tourists' experiences, and (2) the commodification of political heritages that explicitly and implicitly enhance citizens' acceptance of regime-preferred values and ideologies (Nye, 2004, 2011; Scranton & Davidson, 2007).

Value-laden and expressive heritage site selection, marketing, and consumption serve political, economic, cultural, and social goals (Basu, 2007; Li et al., 2010). Societally and historically structured supply and demand elements motivated Red Tourism's creation, maintenance, marketing, consumption, and interpretation. From the supply side, Red heritage sites enhance the governing regime's legitimacy by rekindling the *cherished old but good corruption-free times*. Hence, domestic and expatriate Chinese are the primary audience to experience and internalize marketed meanings associated with Red sites. (Note: Red Tourism includes virtual visits often conducted via online videos infused with populist, socialist, or communist doctrines.)

From the demand side, many Chinese express their dissatisfaction with the governing regime by visiting Red heritage sites embodying clean government. In addition to satisfying hedonic desires, bandwagoning with other people's consumption of Red Tourism induces more demand for it (*Lvyou Ribao*, various issues). To relieve concerns about government corruption, the regime used Red Tourism to re-instill government officials' fundamentalist revolutionary values, especially sacrifice, morality, a stoic lifestyle, and self-control.

Red heritage management, along with Red Tourism's marketing and mass consumption, satisfy two desires: (1) tourists' desire for hedonic pleasure, nostalgic experience, historical explor-

ation, nonconsumption (*stand-off* effect), conspicuous consumption (*stand-out* effect), collective consumption (*stand-with* effect), and political and social identity-seeking (*stand-in* effect), and (2) the governing regime's desire for political legitimacy spurred by domestic tourists becoming more politically conscientious and socialistic-minded. Although Red Tourism's unintended effects include tourists' hedonic pursuits and host-area economic growth, its intentional quality for the governing regime is value-laden political marketing and ritualized ideological influence (Franklin, 2004). Thus, Red Tourism is simultaneously commodified (because it uses marketing to boost consumption) and decommodified (because it advances political meanings and values for collective identity building).

### ***Politicized heritage sites***

By imbuing nationalism, patriotism, and socialism with heritage-specific meanings, politicized tourism *softly* delineates, sanctifies, and enhances the CCP's political legitimacy (Wagner, 1992; White, 2017). Tourists generally believe these sites, often located in remote, underdeveloped rural Old Regions (*Laoqu*), embody profound meanings (e.g., social integrity, resistance to social decay or oppression, social justice, and social purification) for Chinese revolutionary history. Such sites include Yanan, Jinggangshan, Ganzhou, Gutian, Ruijin, Changting, Xibeipo, Zunyi, and Xinguo (Gu, Ryan, & Zhang, 2007; Hung, 2018; Lin, 2015; *Lvyou Ribao*, various issues; Tang, Zhang, & Yang, 2021; White, 2017). Some sites, often arranged as city museums, are in relatively wealthy metropolitan areas such as Shanghai (the CCP's birthplace), Nanchang (one Red Army birthplace), Beijing (the Red Capital and Chairman Mao Memorial Hall site), Wuhan (the modern proletarian

movement's center), and Guangzhou (the communist movement's main initial base in Southern China) (Li et al., 2010; Wagner, 1992; Zhao & Timothy, 2015). History and its embedded interpretation can suggest marketing strategies (Miranda & Ruiz-Moreno, 2020). Hence, statues, monuments, theme parks, Red education bases (*Hongse Jiaoyu Jidi*), and museums were erected in these locations to brand the CCP's martyrs and heroes, propagate socialist history, legitimize proletarian ideology, and delineate revolutionary genealogy (*the People's Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, various issues).

Relevant news stories and ads in government-sponsored media show Red Tourism promotes political heritage more than cultural heritage and encourages public discourses that augment political legitimacy (*Guangming Ribao*, *Lvyou Ribao*, *the People's Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, various issues). By advancing the governing regime's socialistic values and enhancing its political legitimacy, Red Tourism functions as a *politicized cultural hub* and provides a *soft* way to reinvent, reinterpret, and re-present old values (Lukács, 2000). Red Tourism reflects tourists' tacit consent to the regime's top-down hegemonic views and inspires bottom-up participation in building, justifying, and enjoying the regime's political legitimacy (Jackson, 2009; Locke, 1980; Mirrlees, 2016; Peter, 2017; Rousseau, 2019).

Red Tourism's historically key revolutionary sites invite political pilgrimages. For example, a survey of major Chinese media shows visiting heritage sites along the Long March's path—an 1930s expedition believed crucial in rescuing the CCP and the Chinese Red Army from Nationalist Party attacks and sieges—(re)educates contemporary Chinese about abstinence, fortitude, collectivism,

and self-sacrifice (*Guangming Ribao, the People's Daily*, various issues; Salisbury, 1987; *Tourism Daily*, 16 December 2021). These values conform to Chinese society's traditional values (e.g., diligence, loyalty, benevolence, allegiance, filial piety, and thrift) and can justify and strengthen the governing regime.

Red Tourism's reinvented and reinterpreted past promotes the CCP's officially preferred glorious and brave history. It also rekindles a collective memory or culture that nurtures local identity and increases local residents' awareness of and pride in their hometown's history, culture, norms, and values (i.e., creates symbolic capital that allows local people to distinguish themselves from other people) (Bourdieu, 1998; Mirrlees, 2016; Tang, Zhang, & Yang, 2021). For example, Jinggangshan's residents are proud the governing regime recognized their mountainous hometown as a sainted area that nourished the Chinese revolution, whereas Yanan's residents cherish the time (from 1937 to 1948) when Mao and other communist leaders were their neighbors (Gu et al., 2007; Hung, 2018; Lin, 2015; Salisbury, 1987; Tang, Zhang, & Yang, 2021; Zuo et al., 2017). Like some religious or commercial sites that express tangible and intangible heritage values, a church in Tingzhou that hosted a military hospital for the Red Army in the 1930s was reframed as a *patriotic education base* to advance socialist ideologies (Djabarouti, 2020; Meladze, 2021; White, 2017).

Economic incentives are vital to Red Tourism (Gu et al., 2007; Zuo et al., 2017). New technologies facilitated the marketing of Red heritage sites. Nearby residents often espouse Red Tourism, as it attracts state and private investment, induces higher demand for related products (e.g., food, medical care, transportation, hotels, souvenirs),

and creates jobs. Political legitimacy building and economic growth coexist in Red Tourism.

Red Tourism, local economic growth, and political career-building are symbiotically related. Many local governments invested heavily in Red Tourism, often with substantial financial support from the central or provincial governments, because they assumed it was an environmentally sustainable industry. Red Tourism may boost local economies and their officials' professional prospects when *local GDP increase* is the main criterion for evaluating officials' performance (Gu et al., 2007; Huang, 2005).

Hence, Red Tourism shapes public memory as well as personal and collective selves (Tang, Zhang, & Yang, 2021). It creates symbolic and economically vital venues for Chinese tourists to align with CCP ideologies entrenched by socialist education, economic growth, and other post-1979 changes. To manifest a regime-preferred socialist consciousness, tourists internalize the meanings attached to Red Tourism. Often subconsciously, family members and other associates may mimic those behaviors.

### ***Consumer diversity and diversified consumption experiences***

Although Red Tourism consumption strengthens the governing regime's political legitimacy, no unifying experience drives it. Several younger depth interviewees reported visiting Red heritage sites to see the attractions and socialize with friends. Some of them echoed one interviewee's claim that "we know Red sites contain a lot of government-preferred values. But we visit those sites for fun or to develop relationships with new friends." In contrast, many older Chinese who

spent their youth at heritage sites participate in Red Tourism nostalgically, partly due to their government's Sent-Down (*Xiafang*) project, which from the late 1950s to 1970s assigned millions of educated youths and young students (*Zhiqing*) to remote rural or mountainous areas for socialist (re)education (*Shehui Zhuyi Zai Jiaoyu*) (Pan, 2003; Rene, 2013; Spence, 2012; Yang, 2009). For example, one 75-year-old tourist was melancholy about Red sites that "remind me of my elapsed youth and the pure socialist past." Collective memory and politicized discourses encourage future nostalgic trips to such sites, as melding an *authentic socialist past* with personal experiences can help tourists recall, reinvent, reinterpret, reinvigorate, express, and consume certain symbols and meanings (Zhou et al., 2021).

In pre-1949 China, boycotting consumers purchased Chinese-made brands to express national loyalty and anti-colonialism (Yan & Hyman, 2020). Similarly, many contemporary Chinese chose Red Tourism to express their political inclinations via mass consumption of a reified political history, reflecting an idealized image of a corruption-free governing regime. Some older depth interviewees reported that Red Tourism reflects their attitudes about the *good old days* eulogized as job security, social harmony, national pride, and personal morality. The aforementioned 75-year-old tourist reminisced that "Red Tourism temporarily relieves many of my old pals and me from the current corrupt and me and degenerated society by recalling our social purity, trustful interpersonal relationships, economic security, and political righteousness. However, almost no officials care about these values now."

Red tourists share their experiences via online platforms (e.g., WeChat, Youku, personal blogging

accounts), in-person word-of-mouth, and other communication channels. For example, they often use social media to encourage friends and family to visit these sites virtually. A brief survey of these platforms suggests many Red tourists share details about the scenery, logistic services, and personal meaning of heritage sites with online friends (*Wangyou*). Although several depth interviewees criticized some Red heritage sites for poor service or high fees, tourists' experience sharing, storytelling, and consumptive engagement (or *Panbi*, a social behavior that downplays conspicuous consumption) perpetuate these sites' political values. For example, one tourist said, "the poorly serviced socket for phone charging in the hotel always annoyed my girlfriend and me...The Wi-Fi was also weak. But the site is beautiful." Another tourist complained that "greedy restaurants at the site charged me 40 yuan (roughly \$5.60 U.S.) for a small bowl of porridge with a few pickle pieces. But I learned a lot of history from the visit."

The descendants of famous Chinese revolutionaries or previous leaders (*Hong Er Dai* or *Hong Shan Dai*) often participate in Red Tourism (Guo, 2019). An extensive chat with one descendant revealed a political identification with his forefathers and an eagerness to sustain *Red traditions* or *Red genes* via Red heritage site pilgrimages. Although such elitist engagement can further personal career-building efforts, inherent political identity-building in Red Tourism consumption enhances the governing regime's efforts to indoctrinate younger generations.

Chinese political leaders often participate in Red Tourism to signify their revolutionary roots, justifying them as the legitimate successors of former socialist leaders. For example, Chinese government leaders' trip to Gutian, a likely Red Army

revival site, attracted national attention and additional visitors (Zhao & Timothy, 2015). Compared to explicit (i.e., *I endorse this product*), implicit (i.e., *I use this product*), and imperative (i.e., *You should use this product*) endorsements, such a co-present celebrity endorsement (i.e., celebrities and products appeared jointly) tacitly enhances political legitimacy by growing Chinese consumers' acceptance of regime-preferred political values while minimizing social resistance (McCracken, 1989, 2005).

### **Major Red Tourism Sponsors**

China has no centralized or procrustean guidelines for Red heritage management because local situations often condition it. However, institutions such as the Chinese government, political leaders, state-sponsored tourism companies, tourism training institutions, private companies, consumer networks, and supporting agencies advance Red Tourism. For example, the governing regime invests in a transportation infrastructure that encourages Red Tourism.

Other governmental or para-governmental agencies involved in Red Tourism include the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) and its local branches, the China Tourism Association (CTA), and the National Travel Trade Association (NTTA). These agencies apply conventional marketing strategies and inter-organizational efforts to advance Red Tourism and finance it with national, provincial, or local government funds (Gu et al., 2007; Wong & Zhang, 2021; Zhao & Liu, 2020). State-controlled or sponsored media (e.g., Chinese Central TV), provincial or local TV stations, magazines, and newspapers also market and propagate news about Red Tourism (CNTA, CTA,

NTTA websites). In addition to the National Tourism Press (*Zhong Guo Lvyou Chubanshe*), some provinces have a government-sponsored publisher that disseminates materials related to Red Tourism.

The China Tourism Institute, Beijing Tourism Institute, and hundreds of tourism and hospitality management programs housed in Chinese universities train Red Tourism workers. A review of Chinese tourism colleges' or departments' websites indicates that students majoring in tourism or hospitality management must complete courses in Chinese revolutionary and cultural history, business management, statistics, computer application, and sociology. Many tourism colleges ask students to learn English, Japanese, Russian, or French to facilitate conversing with international tourists. Depth interviewees with Red heritage couriers indicated they must obtain a tourism certificate. A former courier cogently claimed that couriers must proficiently share these sites' political meanings with tourists. "If you are not a good storyteller of these sites and their meanings, it's better for you to change to a different career."

Besides the governing regime's sponsorship, post-1990 Red Tourism relied on market institutions and tourism companies to attract and deliver tourism service infrastructure (Hung, 2018). Since the early 2000s, Red Tourism skyrocketed because private/state-owned companies and other institutions offered services (e.g., insurance, transportation, hotel, food, health, and public security) that facilitated it (Li & Hu, 2008; Li et al., 2010; Zhao & Timothy, 2015). For example, a survey of major government-sponsored media platforms showed that high-tech companies encouraged tourists to brand Red heritage sites via social media (Cui,

2021; *Lvyou Ribao*, various issues; Wang et al., 2021; *Xiaoxiang Morning News*, 2021).

Neither private companies nor official sponsorships solely underpin Red Tourism. Instead, private companies' investments reinforce Chinese tourists' participation and encourage bottom-up sponsorships. Aided by government-assisted festivals, subsidies, and advertising, Red Tourism marketing and consumption blurs the public-private boundary and merges Red heritage sites with other product consumption (Habermas, 1989; Hung, 2018; Lin, 2015). Official production and private consumption intersect when commodified consciousness of heritage sites morphs into political consciousness and socialist ideology advocacy that invigorates the governing regime's political legitimacy.

### **Red Tourism Backlashes**

Although Red Tourism has attracted many Chinese visitors and boosted the governing regime's political legitimacy, it created backlashes associated with environmental, political, and social problems, such as traffic congestion, physical and cultural destruction of historical legacies, and degradation of local ecosystems (Franklin, 2013). Because beneficiaries and cost bearers may mismatch, nearby site residents' and tourists' perceptions of Red Tourism may diverge (Becker, 1985; Lazear, 2015).

Despite generally higher local incomes afforded by Red Tourism, its benefits may accrue unevenly among community members. Local businesspeople with capital and close government ties often receive contracts to offer tourism-related goods and services. They become Red Tourism's primary beneficiaries by evading social and legal responsibilities. In contrast, other local residents

may incur negative externalities such as environmental degradation and higher inflation (e.g., Red Tourism drives up prices by requiring local residents to compete with tourists for water, transportation, lodging, medical service, and food). As one nearby resident of a Red heritage site reported, "tourists came here enjoyed themselves but left a bunch of messes for us." Another nearby resident complained, "[tourists'] happiness was based on our bitterness." Due to this relative deprivation mentality (Gurr, 1970), some local residents are unhappy with Red Tourism due to a seemingly unjust benefit allocation.

Red Tourism's politicized connotations and interpretations work as a double-edged sword. Some Chinese tourists pursue Red Tourism ironically to signal their civil disobedience to the governing regime by (re)consuming or (re)imagining a perceived righteous past (Yan, 2009). Chinese dissenters often reject Red Tourism as state-encouraged, invested, or controlled. Radical intellectuals have criticized Red Tourism as expensive brainwashing that suppresses alternative or opposing political ideologies.

Using public monies to fund government officials' Red Tourism has elicited public criticism (Hua, 2018). Moreover, idealized images of past party leaders offer a benchmark for gauging the (mis)behaviors of current government officials and CCP members. Tourists symbolically exit the governing regime's ideological sphere by consuming items perceived as representing alternative political ideologies (Hirschman, 1970). Hence, Red Tourism allows many Chinese to show their discontent with the current governing regime via symbolic and expressive consumption.

Two couriers mentioned that many nearby

residents of Red heritage sites eagerly catered to tourists' preferences. The current authors' direct observations of these residents and these couriers' assertions concur. However, such catering can undermine local values and dissolve local identities because tourists' values can distort the local culture (Urry, 1990). Red Tourism can create hybridity by deconstructing site naturalness and old-values authenticity while constructing new but amalgamated values (Yan & Hyman, 2019). Red heritage site over-ratification by local governments induces a race-to-the-bottom competition among these sites to attract tourists, investments, and other inputs, exacerbating regional rivalries and economic fragmentation (Huang, 2005; Wedeman, 2004).

## Conclusion

By applying theoretical frameworks from political science, philosophy, sociology, tourism, and marketing, the analysis summarized here contributes to understanding the links between tourism marketing, consumption, and political legitimacy building. Drawing on multileveled data from government documents, corporate news coverage, and multi-channeled depth interviews, it shows how the post-1979 Chinese government and CCP engaged in Red Tourism to reverse their declining political legitimacy.

Red Tourism boosts political legitimacy by softly and indirectly evoking, reshaping, and meeting the governing regime's and tourists' political, economic, and psychological needs. At the macro level, Red Tourism is a politicized regime-sponsored activity for mitigating the late-1980s and early-1990s legitimacy crises attributable to worsening corruption and layoffs of state-owned-enterprise workers (Baum, 2018; Habermas, 1975). Pressure

to resolve such crises explains why Red Tourism focuses on socialistic (re)education and politicized discourses. At the meso level, Red Tourism is a branding strategy many heritage sites and related companies adopted to improve the local economy, secure employment, and grow corporate profits. At the micro level, Red Tourism helps local officials build their careers and tourists enjoy a nostalgic recreational experience or show their consent to or discontent with the governing regime.

Red Tourism's mass consumption sustains social coherence, consolidates socialist identity, and boosts inter-tourist trust by creating collective memories and framing nationalist consciousness. Thus, Red Tourism is a device for reinterpreting, reinventing, renovating, and rebranding political values that sustain the governing regime's political legitimacy. These subtly instilled values influence tourists and other societal members (via word-of-mouth, news stories, (non)consumption, and advertising) without relying on explicit indoctrination (e.g., the education system or state-sponsored propaganda).

Red Tourism nurtures political discourse for contrasting a *bad past* under the pre-1949 governing regime with a *good present* under CCP leadership. In constructing and advancing regime-preferred meanings, Red Tourism avoids social resistance to hard strategies for achieving political legitimacy because it subtly influences tourists' perceptions and political affinities. It also espouses traditional Chinese cultural values like loyalty to senior leaders, fidelity to the social order, and nationalistic resistance to foreign aggressors.

Like nationalism, Red Tourism meets its educational, political, and ethical goals by creating *imagined communities* that spur citizens to

(co)produce political meanings, rituals, processes, and identities (Anderson, 2016). Each politically imbued heritage site contributes to an ideologically sustained political community. Red Tourism helps the governing regime avoid Gramscian *power-over* while highlighting Foucauldian *power-to*, fundamental socialist *power-for*, Weberian instrumental-rationality-centered *power-through*, and Dahlian *power-with* (Baum, 2018; Dahl, 1985, 1992; Guo, 2019; Hollinshead, 1999; Hollinshead & Suleman, 2017; Weber, 1956). Red tourists are co-creators (with the state, tourism companies, couriers, and others) of regime-preferred meanings and ideologies, acknowledging their consent to the governing regime's political legitimacy. In essence, Red Tourism continually (re)establishes, disseminates, and enhances, via tourists' politicized (re)experience of a reinvented past, the governing regime's political legitimacy by blatantly and subtly indoctrinating, reconfirming, and reinventing preferred socialistic or nationalistic values, meanings, and ideologies.

Red Tourism helps multiple stakeholders realize instrumental interests (e.g., local economic development, hedonic consumption, nostalgic (re)experience indirectly fostering political legitimacy) and expressive interests (e.g., advocacy, preference, and support manifestly or symbolically boosting political legitimacy) (Brennan & Lomasky, 1993; Clark & Lee, 2018). For contemporary tourism marketers, Red Tourism shows that heritage site creation, branding, interpretation, and institutionalization can (re)generate meanings beyond hedonic experience.

For tourism practitioners and tourists, this analysis indicates that the marketing and consumption of specific heritage sites can be value-laden. Hence, responsive strategies should advance or avoid

specific values meant to extend tourism consumption. Heritage site marketers can attract tourists by espousing specific meanings and building niche tourism based on visitors' socio-political, cultural, economic, or nostalgic preferences (Bunghez, 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). Furthermore, extending marketing efforts to politicized domains can attract multilevel sponsorships and heritage tourists, strengthening some political affiliations.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research is limited in two ways. Due to limited access and the reluctance of Chinese officials and their families to comment on Red Tourism policies, it includes no feedback from either residents near Western China's less famous rural Red sites or Red Tourism decision makers. Furthermore, this descriptive and history-based study could not assess Red tourists' psychological or ideological changes after a Red heritage site visit.

Red Tourism's marketing, consumption, and interpretation represent a context-laden social phenomenon and value-laden strategy characterized by social, political, cultural, and economic forces. The analysis summarized here suggests future studies for vetting politicized tourism as a marketing and political strategy in non-socialistic socio-political contexts. Such studies should focus on underlying meanings and deeper intentions associated with heritage site tourism rather than more indirect citizen control by governing regimes.

Red Tourism is managed as a top-down (i.e., dictated by central government) and bottom-up (i.e., dictated by market-oriented information that shapes public policymaking) hybrid. Tourists, political parties, the government, the public, and businesspeople co-create the evolving connota-



tions and interpretations of the governing regime's political legitimacy. Hence, Red tourists' multilateral, emergent, non-linear, and asymmetric interactions, triggered by their different socio-political standings, strategy preferences, interests, and social issue focus, require additional study.

Concern about greening Red Tourism grows as environmental protection and sustainable economic development increasingly drive public policies (Holden & Fennell, 2013; Meng, Pham, & Dwyer, 2021). Although some studies have separately explored Red Tourism or Green Tourism in China, studying the contextualized mechanisms and shifting policy foci linking them can elucidate the interdependencies among politics, markets, the environment, society, and tourism. Notably, studies about preventive and corrective measures to mitigate Red Tourism's negative externalities are needed.

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## Appendix

### Depth Interview Questions about Red Heritage Sites Consumption and Management

#### Part 1. Questions for Red heritage tourists

- Q1. Have you ever visited any Chinese Red heritage sites? If so, which sites did you visit, and when did you visit them?
- Q2. If not, why? Are you planning to visit such a site?
- Q3. Why did you choose to visit any of these sites? What were the main features of these sites that attracted you?
- Q4. How did you fund your Red heritage site visits?
- Q5. What makes you most and least comfortable about your experience of these sites?
- Q6. Do you believe your Red heritage visit was a pure consumer experience? Why?
- Q7. Do you believe Red Tourism is designed to teach pro-government values? Why?
- Q8. What is your opinion about the services provided at Red heritage sites? Were you ever overcharged for such services? Was it convenient to visit these sites?
- Q9. Do you like sharing your Red tourist site experiences? If so, do you prefer to share that experience in-person, online, or another way?

#### Part 2. Additional questions for (ex)Couriers or operators

- Q10. When did you start your courier/operator job? Are you still working as a courier for Red Tourism? If so, part-time or full-time? If not, why?
- Q11. What motivated you to become a courier/operator? Does the job provide decent income, social status, and career-building opportunities? Why?
- Q12. Have you received any formal training in Red Tourism management? If so, what were the main courses/training programs? Does your job require a license?
- Q13. Are you familiar with the political meanings associated with Red heritage sites? Do you believe couriers/operators should know them?