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Tourism Diplomacy Co-creates and Reshapes Perceptions in Tourist-Host Relationship

Abstract

This study examines the role of tourism diplomacy in promoting regional peace from the perspective of the tourist-host relationship. The aim is to assess whether tourism improves or erodes links between two geopolitically connected countries that have been involved in conflicts. Based on interpretive paradigms, the findings confirm that tourism constitutes a form of soft diplomacy promoting mutual understanding. Determining factors of current and future tourism diplomacy are identified: (i) economic dependence, (ii) an open atmosphere, and (iii) physical and psychological distance. Furthermore, the proposed frameworks highlight that the tourist-host relationship extends to a broader social sphere. Additionally, it is suggested that the tourist-host relationship should be expanded to include both parties; the previous host becomes the traveller, and vice versa.

Keywords: economic dependence, open atmosphere, rebranding images, physical and psychological distance, geopolitical

1. Introduction

Tourism diplomacy (TD) is underpinned by tourism research, which aims to resolve geopolitical conflicts or provide an alternative method to traditional military conflict (Carbone, 2023). Existing research has been limited to nations that were previously united, such as the two Koreas, India and Pakistan, and Mainland China and Taiwan (e.g., Yousaf, 2021). Nations that have been involved in geopolitical conflicts and their actions towards the preservation of peace, however, have received sparse research attention (e.g. China and Laos during the Vietnam War; Zhang, 2002). At the same time, however, prior studies have mainly explored the relationships between tourism and peace in a piecemeal fashion (e.g., Alamineh, 2022), which suggests a lack of a holistic understanding of the topic. Furthermore, TD is often mixed with cultural diplomacy (e.g. Guo et al., 2006), which has led to confusion in TD studies and impeded its implications for academia and policymakers (e.g. central and local governments and tourism stakeholders). Existing studies also yield inconsistent findings, raising questions about whether tourism can bring peace or not. For instance, the debate over the tourism and peace nexus raises questions about whether peace is the foundation of tourism or whether tourism serves as a peacemaker (e.g., Khalilzadeh, 2018). Regardless of the debates, factors influencing tourism and peace have received inadequate devotion but are overly focused on “peace” (e.g. Mika & Scheyvens, 2021). From a theoretical perspective, few theories or models have been applied in this context, and even fewer studies employed the contact hypothesis (Yousaf, 2021). Thus, this study is based on the principle of contact hypothesis: intergroup contact reduces prejudice (Fan, 2020) and further uses the tourist-host approach (Fong et al., 2023; Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2014) to specify the research subjects (individual-level; tourist and host).

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Additionally, previous studies are mostly conceptual, with little empirical research (e.g. Yousaf, 2021). To address the above gaps, the overarching aim of this research is to investigate whether tourism deepens or deteriorates relationships between two nations with existing geopolitical relations, China and Laos, through their tourist-host ties and whether it brings about changes in locals' perceptions of the other country. Specific research questions (RQs) are:

RQ1: Are there any changes in Laotians' perceptions of Chinese tourists?

RQ2: Did travel to Laos shift Chinese tourists' perceptions towards Laos?

Three contributions were derived from this study. First, this research is one of the few empirical studies examining TD and addresses an under-researched context (nations that once had conflicts and remain peaceful now). Second, this study is the first to comprehensively explore the attitudes and perceptions of both groups within the tourist-host relationship in the context of TD. Third, grounded in the findings, this study proposes frameworks for further TD studies to consider (Figs. 1 and 2) and reveals the determining factors other than political elements in this context: (i) economic dependence; (ii) an open atmosphere; and (iii) physical and psychological distance. These three factors are outcomes of TD and determine the further development of TD. Within the proposed frameworks, communication or contact moderates the relationships.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural diplomacy and tourism diplomacy

TD and cultural diplomacy (CD) have been mixed and not clearly distinguished in the TD literature. CD refers to Nation A's increasing knowledge of Nation B through B's culture, such as art, which builds a better understanding between the two nations (Carbone, 2023). Hollywood movies are examples of such a practice. Even based on the principles of CD (Grincheva, 2024), information and cultural exchange are ideally based on mutual action. However, American movies have a "one-way impact" and are successful cases for CD.

Another example is South Korean pop music and its global impact. On the other hand, TD refers to the countries and their people's behaviour in the worldwide tourism business (Zhu et al., 2022). Three levels exist in TD: macro, meso, and micro. The macro-level involves government decision-making, such as international travel lists that discourage travel to specific destinations. Travel stakeholders, at a lower level compared to the government, are the meso-level representatives. At the micro-level, the subject is the individual, which encompasses both travellers themselves and the hosts or local people at the destinations (Zhu et al., 2022). In short, TD and CD are both forms of soft power. Soft power originated in the field of political studies (Nye, 2023), contrasting with the hard power of war and armed conflict. Soft power refers to the use of intangible factors (e.g., lifestyle, culture, and values) to resolve an issue or conflict or enhance one's influence (Nye, 2023). The subjects of CD and TD are, however, different; TD emphasises tourism activities, and at the micro level, people (tourists) are means to achieve aims (e.g. to eliminate distrust). By contrast, within CD, cultural products have a wider range (including movies, songs, lifestyle, and values) to influence another nation.

2.2. Tourism diplomacy studies

Peace is the fundamental pursuit and the goal of previous studies. A unification of the two Koreas was one of the pioneer studies in this context (Kim & Crompton, 1990). Here, the researchers conceptually treated tourism as a form of soft power or diplomacy to foster reconciliation and understanding between the two nations. However, actual travel behaviour and its consequences did not appear in their study. Indeed, TD offers peaceful methods for resolving unsettled issues in geopolitical regions, and from a humanitarian perspective, this approach is preferable to violence. Following a similar approach, Guo et al. (2006) studied mainland China and Taiwan based on existing documents and identified travel obstacles in this region.

Limited transportation (e.g., scheduled flights) between mainland China and Taiwan, as well as unbalanced tourist flows (with more tourists from Taiwan), are the main challenges identified in Guo et al.'s findings. In their study, the “contemporary” socioeconomic status of the two sides was not considered. Because Taiwan was more economically powerful than the mainland (e.g. in terms of GDP per capita). Thus, the tourist flow was imbalanced. Additionally, the political history of the two sides explains the transportation situation.

A more comprehensive paradigm was proposed by Farmaki (2017), encompassing economic, social, political, and environmental factors that influence or determine trade dynamics (TD) between two nations. Among the four elements, economics is the most “dominant” and is less politically sensitive, and this is in line with the purpose of TD. Economics has two primary meanings: economic development (tourists or host countries) and economic benefits to the destination (for the host community). The tourist-host relationship is fundamentally based on profit-generating activities (Sujood, et al., 2023; Litvin, 2020). In other words, the source country's economy can be construed as an “economic weapon” (Lim et al., 2020), influencing host nations and adopting local resources to meet the demands of the tourist countries. Secondly, many theories explain the social and environmental factors in tourism contexts (e.g. social identity theory, normative behaviour theory; Wang et al., 2023). For example, social norms are the typical factors impacting the tourist-host relationship. To illustrate, Thai people perceived Chinese tourists as “rude” because they did not conform to local social norms (e.g., queueing; Li et al., 2021). The substantial studies concerning the “face” culture of Chinese tourists are also included within social norms (e.g. Wang et al., 2023). Thirdly, politics may be the primary reason for conflict (e.g., armed conflict, the Cold War) and is often linked to a series of other actors (e.g., through socioeconomics) and events. Thus, the relationship between peace and tourism has been questioned in the literature, suggesting that tourism may not necessarily bring peace (e.g., Pratt & Liu, 2016). Several empirical studies have demonstrated the role of tourism in promoting regional peace (Yousaf, 2021). Yousaf (2021) found that tourism has improved mutual understanding between Pakistanis and Indians and is one of the few studies that utilised a theory in TD research, specifically the contact hypothesis (Fan, 2020). Moreover, most TD research is conceptual (e.g. Carbone, 2023; Guo et al., 2006). Thus, the link between peace and tourism needs more concrete empirical support.

Furthermore, the existing studies are mostly fragmented. This includes COVID's impacts on tourism and peace (Alamineh, 2022); a peace park (region) between India–and Pakistan proposed to reduce conflicts (Wani et al., 2023); the positive role of tourism organizations during the interwar and post-war periods (Bechmann Pedersen, 2020); Khalilzadeh's (2018) claim that tourism is a peacekeeper rather than a peacemaker; Indigenous tourism's contribution to peace in local (New Zealand; Mika & Scheyvens, 2021); in Middle East and North Africa, the underdevelopment of policies between tourism and peace (Anouti et al., 2023); the theory that tourism promotes peace (Carbone, 2023); tourism's bringing peaceful interactions to India and Bangladesh (Wani et al., 2023); peace tourism education's restoration of broken social relations in Indonesia (Mirzachaerulsyah et al., 2023); and Turkey's potential use of tourism to solve diplomatic problems, such as those with Greece (Dağkılıç, 2023). Meanwhile, the tourist-host relationship is often neglected in most tourism development (TD) studies. Focus on more tourist-host relationships, as they are prevalent in global tourism research; India and Pakistan employ China and Taiwan as examples. A balanced study examining the tourist-host relationship from the TD perspective is needed to comprehend better the effect or role of the contact hypothesis with empirical support.

In summary, most studies focus on a once-united nation that has since separated (e.g., the two Koreas, India and Pakistan, mainland China and Taiwan; Yousaf, 2021). These nations have shared a common identity (e.g. Chinese for mainland Chinese or Taiwan). Two countries with distinct identities have received relatively little research attention. Furthermore, the four-element framework (Farmaki, 2017) provides a broader scope for examining TD. Thus, this exploratory study, based on the contact hypothesis, investigates the perceptions of both tourists and hosts that examine the TD from a holistic perspective.

3. Method

The interpretive paradigm applied in this research uses a social constructivist approach (Bogna et al., 2020). Snowball and purposive sampling were thus carried out (Obilor, 2023). Both sides' perceptions were collected. Group 1 (Chinese tourists) consisted of 15 tourists who had visited Laos within the past 12 months. Ten Laotians who have had service or social interactions (e.g. service contacts, hotels, restaurants) with Chinese formed Group 2. All the informants were then labelled with a combination of a letter and numbers for anonymity. For example, L1 is for the first Laotian informant, and C1 represents the first Chinese informant. Semi-structured interviews, employing open-ended questions, were conducted in both groups. This comprised demographic information and four themes guiding the interviews. These themes are (i) traditional attitudes towards the other group, (ii) any changes in the above attitude, (iii) personal reflections about the other group/self, and (iv) challenges or willingness to learn from or accept the other group. Each interview lasted from 15 to 30 minutes. Two research assistants conducted the interview process, which included both online and in-person sessions, using either Lao or Mandarin. The sample size in this study reached theoretical saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2023), indicating that no significant or new themes were identified by adding additional informants. Data analysis did not apply any pre-existing theory; thus, a grounded theory approach guided the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The themes are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Themes of two groups

Groups	Laotians (hosts)	Chinese (tourists)
Themes	1. Change perception	1. Change perception
	2. Learning Chinese	2. Risk perception
	3. Negative perception still exists	3. Admire locals

4. Findings and discussion

The findings indicate that both groups have altered their stereotypical thinking towards the other group. Their current perceptions have not entirely changed, but TD has indeed opened doors to mutual understanding and embraced different cultures and lifestyles.

4.1. Changes in both groups

Changes in attitude and perception have partially supported the contact hypothesis. Interactions bring first-hand cognition and knowledge, thus laying the foundation for both sides to exchange information and understand different perspectives. As illustrated by the below local informants, they have changed their deep-rooted thinking: *“I thought Chinese were rich, but not all are rich people... I dislike that they do not pay tips after service”*; *“It was in my early career that I saw a group of Chinese customers come to our restaurant... I was very disappointed; they did not leave me any tips”*; *“some are very generous with tips”* (L1, F, early 20s). *“They just speak so loudly that the whole restaurant can hear”* (L5, M, mid-30s). *“Every time I heard a noise in the street, I knew it was the Chinese people. For me when they talked to each other, I thought they were arguing about something”* (L3, F, the early 20s). A few of them realised Chinese speaking loudly was just the way they talked. *“To be honest, I don't like the way they talk to each other... I understand that is the way they talk”* (L8, F, mid-30s). *“Only a few Chinese people I met speak normally...Normally, I mean like us rather than being very loud”* (L5, M, mid-30s).

Furthermore, the finding is consistent with existing studies, which show that Chinese people exhibit some undesirable behaviours that locals dislike (e.g., Li et al., 2021). In addition, this study revealed a new perspective: a single impression or reputation has evolved into various types. The locals began to realise that there are different types of Chinese tourists; they are not all the same (homogeneous). Some are generous, polite, and follow local rules (e.g., temple manners), while others exhibit bad behaviour.

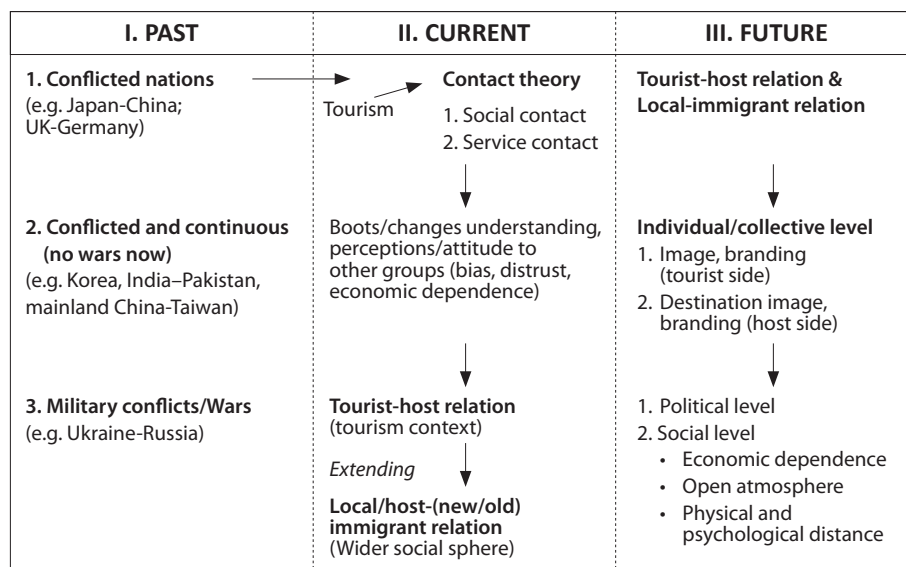
Likewise, more changes in the tourist group contain the locals and themselves. The biggest shock to the Chinese informant was their understanding that the world (or worldview) is deeply connected to money; thus, the Chinese work all the time. The local shops and lifestyle were the first shocks. The informant said: *“I thought Laos was poor, less developed, and primitive... The locals are polite; they (shops) close early on Fridays and don’t open on Sundays”* (C2, M, early 30s). More shocks (e.g., locals all drive very politely; “poisonous” food in China) led the Chinese to ask themselves: What is the meaning of life? The tourists mentioned: *“The locals all drive very politely... They all just follow the traffic rules, and no one drives crazy; you cannot imagine this in China”* (C2, M, the early 30s).

“I always worried about food safety in China; lots of food had too much chemical fertiliser, pesticides, and things you didn’t even know... No wonder we all got sick a lot, and nowadays the busiest business is hospitals” (C14, M, early 30s). *“Only certain levels of people in China have the right to access ‘safe food’; the average person buys food in the market. No one can guarantee whether the food is safe or not, but you don’t have a choice, do you?”* (C3, F, late 20s). Some of the tourists are also concerned about genetically modified food in China. Compared with extant studies (e.g. Yousaf, 2021), the role of TD has extended to tourists themselves in terms of gaining new understanding from local people/environment and further led to reflections (e.g. questioning Chinese lifestyle). The “lazy” local lifestyle inspired some Chinese to question their lives or work in China. The informant said: *“Work is meaningless; what is the point of life? I prefer the local life; you need to enjoy life, not suffer... In China, it is common that there are no work and life boundaries, and employees lose their jobs at the age of 35 without any reason”* (C3, F, late 20s).

4.2. Challenges in relationships and extending to the broader social sphere

Challenges identified in this study persist and are likely to continue in the tourist-host relationship (Fig. 1). Fig. 1 illustrates tourism’s role and factors, as well as their impact on diplomatic relations, using three indicators: past, present, and future. Furthermore, the tourist-host relationship extends beyond its immediate impact and encompasses a broader social sphere.

Figure 1
The role and impact of tourism in diplomatic relations



The study confirms that peace is a prerequisite for tourism and tourism development (e.g., Farmaki, 2017). Thus, tourism cannot bring peace, but it does increase understanding between two parties or nations. In

this vein, TD is unlikely to soften the relationship between Ukraine and Russia (currently at war), NATO nations and Russia, or further complicate the situation between mainland China and Taiwan, China and Japan, and Western countries.

This study suggests that political factors may determine the tourism situation/TD. Second, in line with the contact hypothesis, even TD has increased mutual understanding; however, stereotype thinking and challenges/negative images do not modify overnight. As found in this study and across several disciplines (e.g., Chen et al., 2018), Chinese tourists are somehow perceived as having an unfavourable image, behaviour, or customer experience. Another example is “face” studies of Chinese tourists overseas (e.g., Zhang et al., 2019). Even the tourist-host relationship is fundamentally based on economic benefit to locals (Litvin, 2020). However, economic factors in this context have a “minimal” effect on TD. A stereotype in the minds of locals may be confirmed or changed due to multiple factors, but it can harm tourists and the national image. The locals tend to have to accept Chinese tourists only due to economic factors; while disgusting or disgraceful perceptions of the tourists remain under their acting. Hence, the TD has weakened its role. On the tourist side, challenges include risk perception, language barriers, and other local rules (e.g. visas and payments). For instance, the Chinese social media and many of the informants have been told Southeast Asia is not safe to travel to, including Thailand (one of the most visited destinations before for Chinese) and Laos. Some Chinese informants changed their risk perception of Laos, but some negative images and perceptions still coexist with the destination. Previous studies of TD have overemphasised the increasing mutual understanding. However, the challenges after the TD have rarely been mentioned. Thus, the findings of this study call for further research to advance the knowledge.

Third, the current TD has an impact now and extends to future TD development. Spillover effects are the advanced outcome of TD (e.g. wider social sphere; local immigrant). As mentioned earlier, national image (e.g., bad behaviour of Chinese tourists) and destination image (e.g., Laos is a high-risk destination) both require TD to exchange understanding and information between the two sides. Based on the findings, and in line with the contact hypothesis and the tourist-host relationship, both tourists and locals engage in both passive and active interactions (e.g., service interactions, such as those in hotels or restaurants or non-service interactions). During service interactions, the economic benefits to destinations bring income to locals (e.g., quality of life; Carneiro et al., 2018) and reduce the physical and psychological distance between tourists (Joo et al., 2018). While observations (e.g., gaze theory; Urry & Larsen, 2011) may also occur, they can collectively lead to reflection on the self or other groups. The new understanding (of self and others) serves as guidelines for the latter behaviour. Conversely, China needs to use TD to continue to influence other nations as one of the soft powers, such as through economic power (while maintaining or increasing income levels in China). Tourist-host relations also extend to a broader social sphere. This indicates that the increase in Chinese tourists to Laos has led the locals to become aware of the Chinese community among them. The locals gained understanding from the Chinese tourists and extended the knowledge to the Chinese community or immigrants, or vice versa. The influence could be at the individual or collective level. For instance, many male Chinese tourists visiting Laos in search of a wife led the locals to think the Chinese are stealing our women (individual level) or China has a worse social issue (marriage; national image).

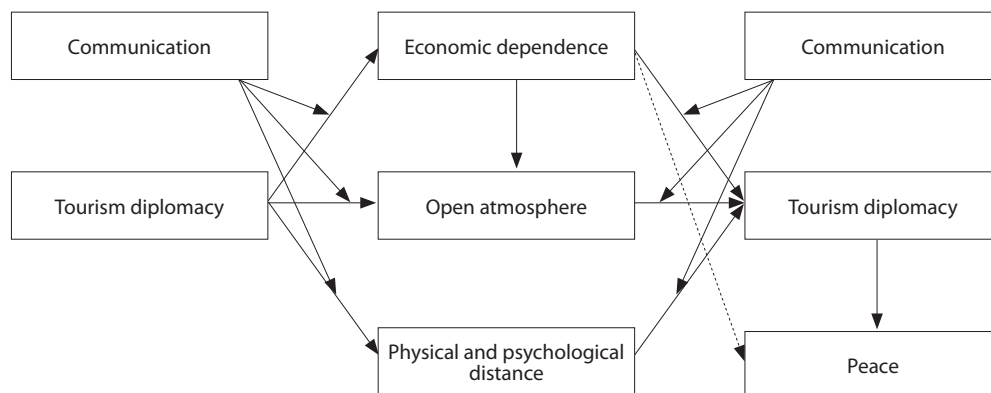
Founded on the impact of TD, Fig. 2 is proposed to address the non-political and critical factors that influence both current and future TD and regional peace. Taking “open atmosphere/OA” as an illustration is also one of the foundations or outcomes of TD. To exemplify, celebrating Christmas was once permitted in China after the open-door policy, but most, if not all, cities now prohibit it. One informant said: *“I felt the OA in China went backwards... Many things are prohibited, but they were used to be okay”* (C8, M, the late 30s). The disappearance of Christmas may be due to political reasons (e.g., deadlocked Sino-US relations) and other factors.

Meanwhile, most Chinese people treat Christmas as a “normal holiday” or a time to rest and enjoy different lifestyles and city vibes without religious purposes. This has again proven perhaps political factors determine

society and individuals in most nations or contexts seem “important” but powerless to change the direction of a society. The lack of open access can stimulate closed-mindedness in people and societies. Furthermore, arrogance and ignorance commonly result from a closed-minded society that fosters or exacerbates more conflicts. Difference (e.g., ethnic identity) is one of the main reasons for conflict (Farmaki, 2017), and OA is promoted in society due to TD. In return, OA softens conflicts. The absence of OA disrupts interactions with foreign nations and different groups at all levels (e.g., tourists, commerce, scheduled flights) and increases ideological control. Consequently, an endless loop of closed-minded society is in progress.

In short, TD cannot control the OA or the physical and psychological distance between two parties (tourist and host) or nations, but it does impact these variables. In return, these factors influence the future development of TD and advance or sustain regional peace.

Figure 2
Proposed tourism diplomacy and influential factors



5. Conclusion

5.1. Theoretical implication

The research identified three crucial factors in tourism and peace: (i) economic dependence, (ii) OA, and (iii) physical and psychological distance. Firstly, previous studies have not aimed at the factors influencing TD or its impact on the further development of TD. Thus, this paper proposed frameworks (Figs. 1, 2) and enriched the literature.

Secondly, the identified three factors provided a holistic understanding of TD from and to both sides. This study fills the gaps in existing research that are primarily focused on one-way impacts, either from tourists to locals or vice versa (e.g., Wani et al., 2023). Further, this highlights that the relationship/TD is never one-way but reciprocal. Source nations (tourists) provide economic benefits to host nations, trying to reduce psychological distance and increase OA and TD. The host nations are inclined to maintain peace with the source nations for benefits (e.g. monetary). Thus, this study suggests that an impactful and valid TD only exists between one “strong” nation and another “weak” nation. The three factors (e.g., OA) that were found required further research. Furthermore, OA aligns with the principle of TD (e.g., Grincheva, 2024) and affects both nations and parties at both individual and collective levels.

Lastly, this study highlights the role of physical distance (PD). PD spotlights the core of the contact hypothesis, which has been largely overlooked in previous studies (e.g., Yousaf, 2021). The COVID lockdown is an example of this; online and offline teaching, as well as long-distance relationships, further illustrate the importance of professional development (PD). This research also proposed a hierarchy of the three factors, with economics being the first step, followed by an OA that led to later contacts. During the contact in the

tourist-host relationship, physical and psychological distance started to reduce. As a result, a mutual understanding between the two nations from bottom to top emerged (i.e. from the individual level to higher levels such as the government level). The emphasis on professional development (PD) is also consistent with teacher development (TD). Otherwise, without physical contact (e.g. tourists visiting host nations), the psychological distance tends to align with the expectations of cultural diplomacy (CD).

5.2. Industrial implication

Two implications were given for higher levels (macro, meso/authorities) and lower levels (micro/individual), respectively. At the authority level, OA is the most significant determining factor of TD, except the economic factors. Tourists are willing to travel abroad, partly because the society is inclusive and has multiple standards rather than a single, dominant ideology. In this study context, tourists visit nations where they have had conflicts, which takes more courage, and this confidence requires a solid foundation. The OA is one of these bases. In this vein, the tourists are the ambassadors. Secondly, OA has a spillover effect in the broader society, and the society is the source of tourism. For example, in recent years, Hong Kong has been facing an irreversible brain drain as locals and foreigners have left the area. Part of the reason may be that the OA has vanished in Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, the significant decline in the tourism economy in Hong Kong may be correlated with OA, which warrants further study. Additionally, the dominant cultural research approach, such as more collectivist Chinese (Hofstede, 2011; Zhang & Han, 2023), may not adequately explain open access (OA). Thus, this research suggests that OA is a universal culture that affects both the source nations (promoting TD) and the host nations.

Even the traditions and culture of the source nations (tourists) seemed unrelated to OA, but a potential connection is worth further consideration. As mentioned, this study suggests that the source nations possess some outstanding qualities that others admire more than their economic power, which is the ideal of TD. In other words, a country possesses great soft power, such as a commendable culture, lifestyle, and ideals, which make it seem very appealing to other nations. To illustrate, an economically powerful country—Singapore—may have minimal TD influence, as the society appears to have an oppressive atmosphere and culture, and its people suffer anxiety and depression heavily (Zachariah, 2023; Low, 2023). Again, OA may have played a role in shaping the current Singaporean culture. In this case, if Singapore initiates TD, its impact on the host nation might be limited regarding soft power influence (besides the economic benefits to locals). In short, TD is involved in the economy, but it does not determine the effect of TD.

For individuals—that is, from a tourist’s perspective—being open to seeing differences is highlighted in this section. This has two direct effects. Firstly, the Chinese informants changed their stereotyped thinking and biases (e.g., that Laos is full of crime), and this change aligns with the purpose of TD (increasing mutual understanding). Secondly, due to exploring different lifestyles, the slow living (slow-paced lifestyle) in the destination inspired tourists to reflect. Thus, TD has educational value from the tourists’ point of view. This education has also extended to the local community. As the locals also updated their understanding of Chinese, they were no longer seen as a homogeneous bloc. Furthermore, the source nation could utilise economics as a form of soft power to influence the host nation during the transition period (TD). Thus, as mentioned, the willingness to be open to new destinations, lifestyles, cultures, and atmospheres must exist at both individual and organisational levels to influence and sustain tourism development (TD).

In summary, this research found increased mutual understanding in tourist-host relationships via TD. Changes in attitude toward another group (e.g., tourists to hosts or vice versa) did occur due to tourism contact (e.g., communication, contact hypothesis). Meanwhile, self-reflection brought new understanding to tourists, seeing one’s own culture by exploring the different worlds (in this case, Laos). However, bias, distrust, and prejudice still exist, and other types of challenges have coexisted (e.g., perceptions of Laos as a high-risk travel

destination). Additionally, the challenges that arise after the TD have rarely been discussed in the literature. Laotians have a negative opinion of the Chinese in terms of attitude and etiquette (bad behaviour or manners). This study first confirmed that peace is the precondition of TD, and TD has a limited impact and role in regional peace. During TD activities, political factors may play a more determining role than other factors, such as economic ones. Secondly, the tourist-host relationship extends to a broader social impact, influencing people at both individual and collective levels. “OA”, “physical and psychological distance”, and “economic dependence” are proposed as influential factors in TD (now and in the future), regardless of political factors. Thirdly, other soft powers may have a different and more profound impact on host nations, leading to increased tourism activities.

Three main limitations exist in this study. First, the sampling size, method, and location call for future progress. Therefore, the findings require further testing and verification. Second, during the tourist-host relationship, hosts could be divided into two types (service type and other local type, or non-service interactions) in later studies. Third, a future deep combination of the contact hypothesis and tourist-host relationships would benefit the research. Existing TD studies have overemphasised mutual understanding; however, other themes (economic dependence, physical and psychological distance, and OA) are worth exploring. The contact hypothesis has hitherto dominated the field. Various types of models and theories (e.g., social psychology, such as social exchange and social identity) and more empirical research would advance the corpus of knowledge regarding TD. Furthermore, a combination of TD and other soft power concepts is worth investigating.

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