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A Realist Investigation of Mechanisms in Tourist Experience:  
A Case of Outbound Chinese Tourists to the UK

Guanhao Tong

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Bath Spa University  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Jan 2026

Bath Business School  
Bath Spa University

## **Ethics Statement**

This study was approved by the Bath Spa University Ethics Panel on 30/09/2021. Should you have any concerns regarding ethical matters relating to this study, please contact the Research Support Office at Bath Spa University ([researchsupportoffice@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:researchsupportoffice@bathspa.ac.uk)).

## **Data Statement**

All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrolment in the study and for any associated datasets to be utilised as presented within this thesis. This thesis is supported by multiple datasets, which are openly available at locations cited in the reference section. The full range of data set is available from the author on request.

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## **Abstract**

Research on tourist experience, as a social phenomenon, has not had a consensus to explain the process of its generation. The existing literature has mostly focused on the influential factors on the tourist experience, whilst rarely explained how these factors operate the process/mechanism of its manifestation. This study aims to provide an explanatory account on how the leisure tourist experience emerges from tourists and their surroundings through a critical realist lens. It was achieved by applying Archer's Realist Social Theory (RST) as the underlying theory-laden to unpack the interplays between the external (tourism system or structure) and the internal (tourists or agency) factors. This theory argues that social phenomena, i.e. the tourist experience, can be analysed in three domains - structure, agency, and culture (SAC), and along three phases – structural conditioning, sociocultural interactions, and structure elaboration. From a realist perspective, the world is an open system; events and discourses are irreducible to present individuals and collectives. Thus, identifying the processes or mechanisms is key to help researchers understand how social reality is brought about.

Based on the contextual nature of the tourist experience, the research focuses on Chinese tourists (from mainland China) to the United Kingdom as a destination and British culture conveyed through the concept of the destination image. Thirty individual interviews were conducted to reveal the underlying causes of lived experiences of the tourists. Secondary data was also collected to understand how British destinations are portrayed to Chinese tourists. It used an intensive approach along with abduction, retrodiction and retrodiction inferences to discover the mechanisms/processes of the emergence of the tourist experience. The findings indicated several properties from three domains, i.e. economical structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors in the structural domain; cultural differences and sociocultural patterns in the cultural domain; cognition, emotions, reflexivity and identity in the agency domain. Structural and cultural properties allow/prohibit agents' actions, while agents/tourists act back and update their cognitions based on reflexivity, emotions and identity, that reshape social structures through sharing activities after the trip. Within the agency properties, emotions and identity/ties are attached to agents' reflexivity, which altogether generate the tourist experience. Furthermore, it elicited that how properties at three domains interplay with each other.

Theoretically, this study contributed new insight from Critical Realism (CR) to unpack some of the causes of the tourist experience. Archer's realist social theory and the morphogenesis approach (M/M) offered a new feasible time frame to investigate the process of the tourist experience at different stages, i.e. before, during and post trip. Moreover, the methodological contribution applied new methods by bridging two fields of study, i.e. tourism and CR. It introduces the intensive approach from CR to the tourism sector, along with the retrodiction and retrodiction inferences to investigate the social reality. Therefore, this study has enhanced the understanding of the emergence of tourist experience.

**Keywords:** tourist experience emergence, critical realism, Realist Social Theory, Morphogenesis/morphogenetic approach, structure-agency-culture (SAC) framework, reflexivity, identity.

## Acknowledgements

I would describe myself as a ‘tourist’ with different cultural and academic backgrounds, visiting ‘Critical Realism’ and ‘tourism’ fields for the last five years. This has been a long and meaningful journey, where I have experienced excitement, overwhelm, upset, encouragement and appreciation. I started this project as a newcomer to both tourism and CR fields. It was not an easy path especially as part of the research time was during the pandemic. I firstly want to appreciate to myself that I never gave up and I finally reached this momentous point. I might have been an individual tourist on this whole journey, but I never felt alone. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people who have helped me. Dr Li Li, Dr Ben Davis, Toby James, my family and all the participants.

Dr Li Li, I really appreciate all your intellectual care and support. Thank you for not only providing professional guidance on my academic study, but also for considering my future career, daily life and mental support. You introduced me to CR and tourism studies and provided professional advice on academic areas. You also referred me as an Associate Lecturer, which built on my career experience. Most importantly, your support helped me get through all the darkest moments. You are like a lighthouse guiding the way of my journey. Thank You, Li!

Dr Ben Davis, I thank you for all the support on my activities and competitions at university, 3 Minute Presentation and PhD Showcase Competition. Thank you for your professional feedback that helped me to win double awards. Thank you for your kind care and attention throughout my study time.

Toby James, I thank you for your generous support for the last three years! Thank you for encouraging me to keep going and keep writing. I wouldn’t have got where I am now without your support, and I really appreciate your unconditional friendship. Best wishes for your book writing and I am sure your books will be best-sellers once published!

I want to send my deepest love and appreciation to my family. A huge thank you to my parents for all the mental and financial support, especially as an international student away from home. Thank you for always supporting my decisions unconditionally, understanding my situation and trying to help me at any point. You make me feel secure and safe that I always have support.

I thank my sister Huiting Wang. Thank you for your long-distance care all the way from Australia and sharing our daily life news. Thank you for always offering help in difficult times and for helping me find participants for interviews. Now I pass the baton on to you and wish that your PhD journey goes smooth, and you enjoy your best life!

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to all the participants for taking the time to join this project. Furthermore, thank you to all the people who have helped me along the way, there are too many to mention. You are all stars in my life!

# Table of Content

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Table of Content</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>1.1 Research Background</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>1.2 Research Focus</b> .....	<b>14</b>
1.2.1 UK Inbound Market .....	15
1.2.2 Chinese Outbound Tourists.....	16
<b>1.3 Research Aims and Objectives</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>1.4 Thesis Structure</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>1.5 Chapter Summary</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>2.1 Understanding ‘Tourism’ and its Significance</b> .....	<b>24</b>
2.1.1 Defining Tourism.....	24
2.1.2 Forms of Tourism .....	27
2.1.3 Impacts of Tourism.....	28
<b>2.2 Tourist &amp; Leisure Tourist</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>2.3 Destination Essentials</b> .....	<b>31</b>
2.3.1 Defining the Destination.....	32
2.3.2 Types and Features of the Destination.....	32
2.3.3 Definition and Components of Destination Image .....	33
2.3.4 Influential Factors of the Destination Image .....	35
<b>2.4 Tourist Experience</b> .....	<b>36</b>
2.4.1 Theoretical Development of the Tourist Experience .....	36
2.4.2 Subjectivity of the Tourist Experience.....	38
2.4.3 Multi Dimensions of the Tourist Experience .....	39
2.4.4 Multifaceted (multi-fields) of the tourist experience.....	41
<b>2.5 Influential Factors on Outbound Chinese Tourist Experience</b> .....	<b>42</b>
2.5.1 External Factors on Outbound Chinese Tourist Experience .....	43
2.5.1.1 <i>Economic and Political Constraints</i> .....	43
2.5.1.2 <i>Destination Image</i> .....	45
2.5.1.3 <i>Confucianism and Taoism</i> .....	48
2.5.2 Internal Factors on Outbound Chinese Tourist Experience .....	48
2.5.2.1 <i>Embodied Chinese Traditional Culture</i> .....	48
2.5.2.2 <i>Emotions</i> .....	49
<b>2.6 Knowledge Gap</b> .....	<b>51</b>

<b>2.7 Chapter Summary</b> .....	<b>51</b>
<b>Chapter 3 CR-Led Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>3.1 A Review of Critical Realism (CR)</b> .....	<b>53</b>
3.1.1 Three Domains .....	54
3.1.1.1 <i>Ontological Realism</i> .....	54
3.1.1.2 <i>Epistemological Relativity</i> .....	56
3.1.1.3 <i>Judgmental rationality</i> .....	57
3.1.1.4 <i>Connection Among ‘Three Pillars’</i> .....	57
3.1.2 Causal Powers and Emergence.....	59
3.1.3 Open System.....	60
3.1.4 Generative Mechanisms .....	63
<b>3.2 Realist Social Theory (RST)</b> .....	<b>64</b>
3.2.1 Social Structures .....	65
3.2.2 Analytical Dualism: Structure, Agency and Culture (SAC) .....	66
<b>3.3 The Morphogenetic Approach (M/M)</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>3.4 A Realist Conceptualisation of Tourist Experience</b> .....	<b>71</b>
3.4.1 Redefine the Tourist Experience from a Realist Perspective.....	71
<b>3.4.2 Theory-laden (How?)</b> .....	<b>72</b>
3.4.3 Structural Properties (Rights and Obligations).....	74
3.4.4 Cultural Properties.....	75
3.4.4.1 <i>Destination Image</i> .....	76
3.4.4.2 <i>Sociocultural Patterns</i> .....	78
3.4.5 Agential Properties .....	80
3.4.5.1 <i>Cognition</i> .....	80
3.4.5.2 <i>Reflexivity</i> .....	81
3.4.5.3 <i>Emotions</i> .....	84
3.4.5.4 <i>Identity</i> .....	86
<b>3.5 Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>87</b>
<b>3.6 Chapter Summary</b> .....	<b>90</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Research Design</b> .....	<b>91</b>
<b>4.1 Research Aims and Objectives</b> .....	<b>91</b>
<b>4.2 Research Strategy</b> .....	<b>92</b>
4.2.1 Intensive vs. Extensive procedures.....	92
4.2.2 Strategy of the Inquiry: Case Study.....	97
4.2.3 Secondary Data & Interview .....	99
4.2.4 Selecting Settings and Participants (Sampling Strategy).....	103
<b>4.3 Data Collection</b> .....	<b>106</b>
4.3.1 Research Sites for Destination Images .....	106
4.3.2 Interview.....	107
4.3.3 Justifications and Saturation.....	110
<b>4.4 Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>111</b>
4.4.1 Narrative Analysis & Thematic Analysis (Stage 1-2).....	112

4.4.1.1 Narrative Analysis.....	112
4.4.1.2 Thematic Analysis.....	113
4.4.2 Abduction, Retroduction & Retrodiction (Stage 3-5).....	114
4.4.3 Analytical Process.....	119
<b>4.5 Ethical Considerations.....</b>	<b>120</b>
4.5.1 Consent.....	121
4.5.2 Anonymity.....	121
4.5.3 Power.....	122
<b>4.6 Validity.....</b>	<b>123</b>
4.6.1 Descriptive Validity.....	124
4.6.2 Interpretive Validity.....	124
4.6.3 Theoretical Validity.....	126
4.6.4 Transferability and Reliability.....	127
<b>4.7 Chapter Summary.....</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Chapter 5 Findings.....</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>5.1 Coding Analysis – Secondary Data.....</b>	<b>130</b>
5.1.1 Attributes of the Destination (Culture Features).....	133
5.1.2 Elements of the Destination (‘Amalgams’).....	136
<b>5.2 Coding Analysis – Interviews.....</b>	<b>142</b>
5.2.1 Cognition.....	142
5.2.1.1 Cognition 1 – Motivation.....	142
5.2.1.2 Cognition 2 – Interacting and Observing.....	143
5.2.1.3 Cognition 3 – Future Planning.....	146
5.2.2 Reflexivity.....	146
5.2.3 Emotions.....	148
5.2.4 Identity.....	152
<b>5.3 Retroduction.....</b>	<b>155</b>
5.3.1 Structural Properties.....	155
5.3.1.1 Economical Structural Enablers.....	155
5.3.1.2 Socio-political Prohibitors.....	156
5.3.2 Cultural Properties.....	157
5.3.2.1 Cultural Differences.....	157
5.3.2.2 Sociocultural Patterns.....	158
5.3.3 Agential Properties.....	162
5.3.3.1 Cognition.....	162
5.3.3.2 Reflexivity.....	164
5.3.3.3 Emotions.....	165
5.3.3.4 Identity/ties.....	166
<b>5.4 Retrodiction: Providing an Explanatory Account at the Real Domain.....</b>	<b>169</b>
5.4.1 Structural Mechanisms.....	171
5.4.2 Cultural Mechanisms.....	171
5.4.3 Agential Mechanisms.....	173
5.4.3.1 Link between Cognition and Reflexivity.....	173
5.4.3.2 Link between Emotions and Reflexivity.....	174

5.4.3.3 Identity Formation .....	175
<b>5.5 Chapter Summary.....</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Chapter 6 Discussion .....</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>6.1 Tourist Experience as a Self-evaluative Social Phenomenon.....</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>6.2 Key Properties .....</b>	<b>183</b>
6.2.1 Enablers and Prohibitors.....	183
6.2.2 ‘Contradiction’ and ‘Complementarity’ .....	184
6.2.3 Key Agential Properties.....	185
<b>6.3 Realist Mechanisms.....</b>	<b>188</b>
6.3.1 ‘Sayings’ and ‘Meanings’ ( <i>Relationships a and b</i> ).....	188
6.3.2 Agential Mechanisms ( <i>Relationship b</i> ).....	190
<b>6.4 Chapter Summary.....</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Chapter 7 Conclusion and Future Steps .....</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>7.1 Summary of the Study .....</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>7.2 Contributions and Implications .....</b>	<b>199</b>
7.2.1 Theoretical Contributions .....	199
7.2.2 Methodological Contributions.....	200
7.2.3 Practical Implications .....	201
<b>7.3 Limitations and Future Studies .....</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>7.4 Chapter Summary.....</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>Reference List.....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>Appendix 1 Overview of Experience Definitions.....</b>	<b>241</b>
<b>Appendix 2 Interview Schedule .....</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>Appendix 3 The stages in explanatory research based on Critical Realism .....</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>Appendix 4 Codebook of the Destination Image.....</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>Appendix 5 Coding References for Attributes of the Destination (Examples).....</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>Appendix 6 Codebook of Interviews .....</b>	<b>260</b>
<b>Appendix 7 Coding References for Cognition .....</b>	<b>264</b>
Cognition 1 .....	264
Cognition 2 .....	267
Cognition 3 .....	273
<b>Appendix 8 Relevant Publication &amp; Awards .....</b>	<b>274</b>
Publication.....	274
Awards.....	274

## List of Figures

Figure 1 Spending on Different Purposes to the UK in 2019 .....	16
Figure 2 China's International Tourism Expenditure (USD billion) .....	17
Figure 3 Historic and Potential Chinese Visitors to the UK (000s).....	18
Figure 4 Journey Purpose Trends of Chinese Tourists Visiting the UK (visits 000s)..	19
Figure 5 The Geographical Tourism System .....	26
Figure 6 Iceberg Metaphor for Social Reality .....	56
Figure 7 The Shadow of Cylinder.....	58
Figure 8 Comparison Between the Closed System and Open System.....	62
Figure 9 Archer's Morphogenetic Approach .....	69
Figure 10 Three Orders of Natural Reality .....	82
Figure 11 A Critical Realist Framework for Tourist Experience .....	89
Figure 12: Coding Process of Destination Image (Secondary Data) .....	132
Figure 13 Food Snaps on Ctrip .....	138
Figure 14 Coding Process of Interview Data (Primary Data).....	141
Figure 15 Framework on the Manifestation of the Tourist Experience .....	181
Figure 16 The Morphogenetic Cycle at the Structural Cultural Domain.....	189
Figure 17 The Morphogenetic Cycle at the Agency Domain .....	191

## **List of Tables**

Table 1 External Destination Image Factors on Outbound Chinese Tourists .....	46
Table 2 Differences Among Three Domains.....	55
Table 3 Intensive vs. Extensive procedures .....	94
Table 4 Relevant Situations for Different Research Strategies.....	98
Table 5 Variations in Interviewing .....	101
Table 6 Chinese OTA's Percentage of Users .....	107
Table 7 Interviewees' Demographics.....	109
Table 8 Emotion at different stages of the trip.....	149
Table 9 Identity .....	153

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Research Background

As a field of study, tourism has a relatively short history while travelling has been a widespread human behaviour for centuries. The earliest tourism dates to 4000 BCE because of the development of trading networks the Silk Roads being a prime example. From the late fifteenth century, tours abroad were primarily for completing education and only the sons of the upper class could have these chances (Walton, 2015). Owing to the Industrial Revolution's effects on technology, a great number of people started travelling for leisure in the nineteenth century. Since then, the term 'tourism industry' from 1960s has been developed and investigated about its influences, including economical, socio-cultural and environmental influences. For example, Leiper (1979) sees tourism industry as one of the forces for economic growth. Cohen and Kennedy (2000, p. 214) state as "tourism is, without a doubt, one of the most important forces shaping our world." Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) argues tourism is more than an industry, it is a social force. Harrison (2007) supports that tourism have been studied as a social phenomenon for more than three decades because of its significantly effects from social and cultural aspects. Therefore, tourism has been studied not only as an industry, but also a social phenomenon.

Tourist experience, as one of the aspects within tourism studies, can be dated back to the 1960s, and it has become a popular research topic for over 50 years. Uriely (2005) highlights tourist experience is a fruitful research field as it can be seen as a production of both tourism and psychological research. Tourist experience has been defined from different branches, i.e. tourism, marketing, psychology, sociology (see Appendix 1). The existing literature have examined the tourist experience related to several factors from internal (Kim, 2010; Larsen, 2007; Zare, 2019), such as memories and perceptions and cultural patterns, from internal side; and external influences (Cetin and Bilgihan, 2016; Ramesh and Jaunky, 2021; Shpak et al., 2021), such as destination, social interactions etc. However, tourist experience still lacks a theoretical explanation to unpack it, due to its three characteristics, namely subjectivity, multi-dimensions, multifaceted. In other words, the existing theories make an attempt to identify the influential factors on tourist experience, but the process that 'makes things happen' is overlooked. In addition, it can be revealed that there is no clear boundary to distinguish

external and internal factors, apart from the general concept ones. In fact, there are (always will be) some overlaps among external and internal factors which may not need to be separated clearly because they intertwine with each other to generate the phenomenon. Therefore, there is a knowledge gap that how these influential factors interact with each other to generate tourist experience, i.e. what the whole process is, how tourist experience manifests along the journey.

In order to address this gap considering the complexity of the tourist experience, a critical realist perspective is adopted in this study, as it sees social reality as open, stratified, which can provide a framework to divide the observable events and the reality beneath these events. Critical Realism (CR) is a philosophy that guide human knowledge to understand better about the social world. Bhaskar (1989) firstly proposes the stratified world has three domains, empirical, actual and real domain. Within it, Archer's (1995; 2003; 2007) Realist Social Theory (RST) reveals the structure, agency and culture domains (SAC) along with the concept of analytical dualism, which allows to analyse each domain separately, as well as the interplays among them.

Furthermore, Archer offers an analytical tool, namely the Morphogenetic Approach (M/M), which provides a framework to investigate each domain at different levels. Following Archer's M/M and RST, structure and agents are irreducible to each other because they operate over different periods, specifically, structure predates the actions and its own causal powers influence before, during and after actions. Likewise with structure, agents react to structure, but it has own causal powers that can reshape/reinforce structure or reproduce/transform structure. Thus, agents and structure both have their own causal powers to influence each other, but that does not mean they can be reduced (Archer, 2003; 2007; Bhaskar, 2008; Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2011). Therefore, the reasons for applying CR as underpinned philosophy: a) ontological framework provides a chance to update human knowledge and keep attempting to explore the reality; b) its ontological stratification offers a guidance to capture the complexity of social reality, and allow this research to identify the underlying mechanisms behind the generation of tourist experience, at least, making an attempt to explain the manifestations of it.

There are two key advantages of adopting Archer's RST and M/M approach. Firstly, it provides a theoretical guidance in unpacking the tourist experience from three domains (SAC). Specifically, the properties/factors that influence on the tourist experience,

regardless the overlaps among these factors, which avoid the conflicts and problems stated in tourist experience literature. Secondly, it offers a methodological guidance (M/M approach) based on the time frame, which can be well-applied on investigating the tourist experience through different period, i.e. before, during and after the trip, so it can show how those influential properties/factors activate the tourist experience. Therefore, Archer's RST and M/M approach can illustrate what properties influence the tourist experience, most importantly, they can demonstrate the mechanisms/processes on how these properties interplay with each other to manifest the tourist experience.

In addition, CR has not been widely applied in business and management projects (Bhaskar, 2014). Although Li (2022; 2023a; 2023b) has adopted CR on tourism studies, her work mostly focuses on moral tourism along with the influential factors. While this study develops from her work to investigate the mechanisms on how the tourist experience generates as a social phenomenon. Thus, it is not only a contribution to tourism studies but also enlarges the application of CR on more fields, i.e. Archer's realist social theory and M/M approach.

## **1.2 Research Focus**

This research adopted outbound Chinese tourists to the UK (2017-2019) because this case study combined a stable status of travelling, high-value tourism market with pronounced structural and cultural distance. Prior to Covid-19, China was one of the fastest-growing long-haul source markets for the UK (VisitBritain, 2024), and Chinese tourists were frequently framed in policy and industry discourses as economically important, culturally 'different' (Ji et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2019). The period 2017–2019 was selected because it represents the last stable phase of 'normal' Chinese outbound tourism to the UK prior to the profound disruption of Covid-19; travel between China and the UK was effectively suspended from 2019–2022 (VisitBritain, 2024), while this research commenced in 2020. Focusing on trips undertaken in 2017–2019 thus allowed the study to reconstruct pre-pandemic experiences without contamination by the exceptional conditions of global travel restrictions, while still enabling participants interviewed in 2022 to reflect on those experiences considering subsequent events. Attraction types may nuance how mechanisms are expressed in particular moments (for example, pride or nostalgia in heritage sites, status and modernity in luxury shopping streets), but they do not fundamentally alter the core processes through which structural,

cultural and agential properties interact to generate the tourist experience in this case (proved later in interview findings). This section discussed from UK inbound market and Chinese outbound market to explain in detail why they were chosen as the research focal case.

### **1.2.1 UK Inbound Market**

The United Kingdom, as a destination for outbound tourists, has several compelling factors that draw visitors including rich history, diverse culture, iconic landmarks and world-famous education. Firstly, the UK's history has produced a vast amount of heritage culture, for example, it is well known for its buildings and architecture from different eras such as Westminster Abbey, Roman Baths, St Pauls Cathedral as well as iconic Georgian and Victorian architecture. Richards (2018) highlights that cultural tourism contributes as a key role in the UK's tourism sector, which attracts many tourists around the world to visit and learn, and this could be linked with Chinese tourists' behaviours. The UK is a diverse culture country which embeds different nationalities and ethnic groups, as well as being open to different cultures. The reason for that could refer to the nations the United Kingdom, specifically, the UK has four nations, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and each nation has its own traditions and cultures. This leads to the diversity of the UK.

Secondly, Fletcher (2018) points out that London represents an 'iconic' global destination, specifically, there are many world-class attractions which are world-wide famous, including the London Eye, Tower Bridge, Big Ben etc., as well as one of the most famous museums, the British museum. Roberts et al. (2017) add that the UK's tourism sector provides diverse offerings, not only for city views, but also promoting rural tourism. For example, the Cotswolds and Lake District have been increasingly popular in the last ten years for international tourists because some tourists want a peaceful environment and feel close to nature. Lastly, the UK has been classified as providing high-quality education. It is the home to some of the world's most prestigious universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, so it attracts many parents and students to visit for their future plans.

Moreover, VisitBritain (2024) shows that the UK had 40.9 million international visitors in 2019, and 38 million visits in 2023, with the overall spending in the UK reaching £28.4 billion and £31.1 billion respectively. Despite a sharp drop in 2020 due to COVID-19, the UK's inbound tourism market rebounded strongly. By 2024, overseas

visits surged to 42.5 million, the highest ever recorded, surpassing pre-pandemic levels (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024). It also reveals the importance of the tourism sector to the UK's economy. Specifically, the UK's tourism economy benefits from overseas visitors spent £32.5 billion in 2024, up from £31.1 billion in 2023 (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024). In addition, Figure 1 also demonstrates that there is 67% of spending on leisure travelling and the rest of that (33%) is paying for business. It reveals that most tourists visit the UK for leisure activities, so it would be a potential inbound market to promote more tourists for traveling to the UK.

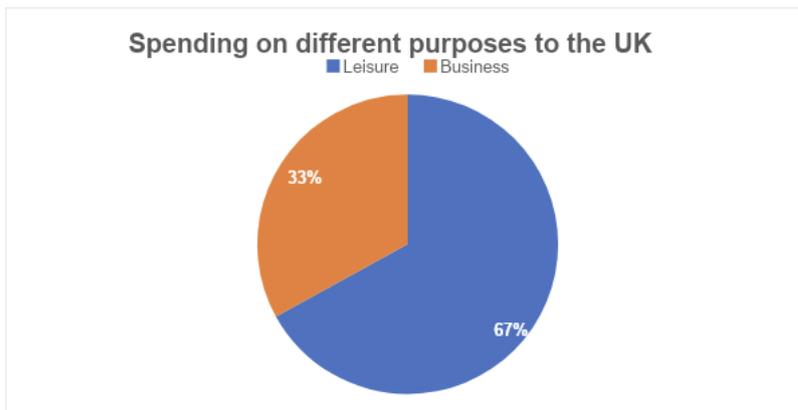


Figure 1 Spending on Different Purposes to the UK in 2019

Source: Created by author, data from World Travel and Tourism Council (2020)

### 1.2.2 Chinese Outbound Tourists

In contemporary tourism, global travel movements have increased in the last twenty years, and this movement shift has changed from North America and Europe regions to Asia-Pacific (Cooper, 2023). In particular, the major global market share of international arrivals has illustrated a decrease from North America and Europe, while an increase to the Asia-Pacific region, especially with the significant emerging economies of China and India. Cooper (2023) adds that the fast-developing economic growth has stimulated more middle-class people to travel and take holidays outbound as a new lifestyle, especially for younger tourists. UNWTO (2024) shows that China's international tourism expenditure started to increase from 2014 until the COVID-19 (2019), and it illustrates that 2017-2019 was the peak period for Chinese tourists (see Figure 2). Furthermore, UNWTO (2024) reports that the expenditure and departures of China's outbound tourism have always been ranked as the top 1 (\$277.3 billion and \$149.7 million respectively) from 2014 to 2021 even during the pandemic period, followed by the United States and Germany. In addition, from a demographic aspect,

China has the biggest population among the countries. Thus, it will be fruitful to research Chinese outbound tourism, as it has an evidenced market for the tourism sector from an economic aspect.

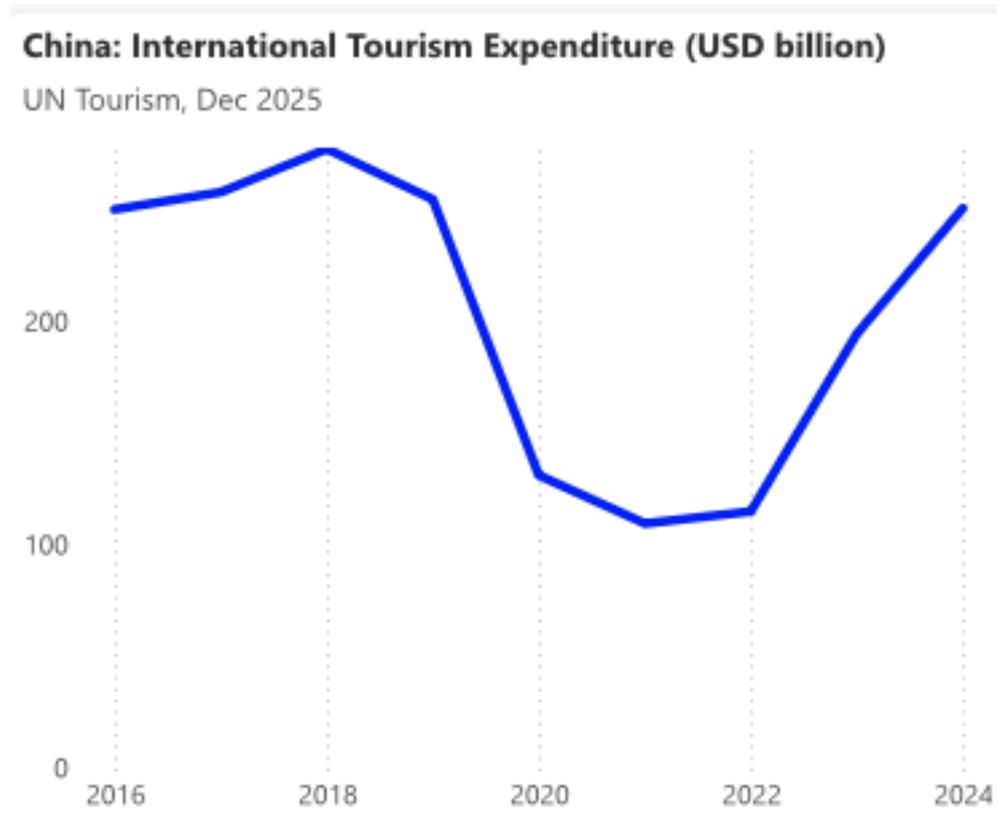


Figure 2 China's International Tourism Expenditure (USD billion)

Source: (WTO, 2026, © World Tourism Organization, 92844/02/26)

Moreover, the Chinese outbound tourism market can be noted as unique because of the cultural differences. China, as a country, has a long history and its culture is significantly distinct from western countries, which leads to different tourists' behaviours and preferences. For example, Chinese tourists used to travel in groups and show a strong interest in luxury shopping (Arlt, 2013), while most young Chinese tourists nowadays prefer to travel individually or in small groups and take photos and videos to post on social media. This reveals that Chinese tourists' behaviours have changed rapidly due to various factors such as technology (Gretzel et al., 2015), education, regulations etc. Thus, when Chinese tourists visit outbound to western countries, it leads to a clash between different cultures, which provides worthwhile research to understand tourists from a socio-cultural perspective because it offers more

possibility to look at the phenomenon.

As the subjects of this research, China was the most valuable outbound market globally and second most valuable inbound market for the UK (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024) in 2019. VisitBritain (2024) shows that the UK had 800.6 thousand Chinese visitors in 2019, and 368,000 in 2023, with the overall spending in the UK reaching £1.5 billion and £798.1 million respectively. Over half of Chinese travellers (69%) planned to have an international leisure trip before the pandemic and it is noted that Britain is the second most popular destination within Europe for these travellers. Figure 3 shows the significant increase of Chinese tourists visiting the UK from 2015 to 2019. The main reason for the decrease from 2019 to 2021 is the pandemic (Covid-19), and all the restrictions for travel and social distance it caused. But it illustrates that the visits return back to normal post-pandemic, with an expectation to break the records and achieve a new highest ever level in 2030 with 1257m visits. Therefore, Chinese tourists are expected to potentially make an effective contribution to the UK inbound market in the future.

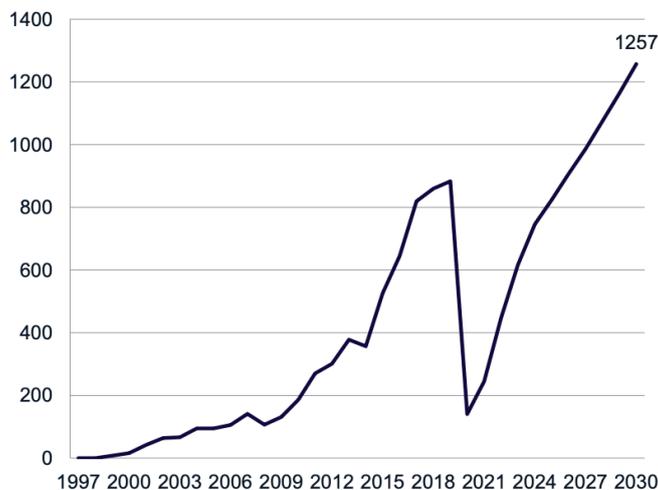


Figure 3 Historic and Potential Chinese Visitors to the UK (000s)

Source: (VisitBritain, 2024, © British Tourist Authority)

Chinese tourists could be defined as Chinese visitors who travel to the UK for over one night, for leisure, education, or business, but excluding immigration. In fact, as it is a long journey to travel from China to the UK, Chinese tourists will inevitably stay for more than one night regardless of their different objectives, so it could be unnecessary to distinguish Chinese visitors and Chinese tourists because their length of stay would often be overnight. Furthermore, China Tourism Academy (2014) defines Chinese

outbound tourism as the outbound travel made from Mainland China only, so the geographical range of the research's participants are only from Mainland China. When it comes to Chinese students who are studying in the UK, it may be hard to distinguish whether they are tourists or immigrants. According to the policy for the length of studying in the UK for international students, undergraduate students will have a three-year stay while postgraduate students stay one or two years. However, Chinese students who are studying in the UK may travel as well, for example, some students may travel individually or as a group in the Easter holidays, and these could be identified as Chinese tourists. Thus, this research will only focus on the Chinese students who are travelling for leisure and recreation regardless of the education purposes.

Moreover, Figure 4 illustrates that the purposes for Chinese tourists visiting the UK were mostly (58%) for holiday and VFR, which classified as leisure tourism before the pandemic, and above the all-market average of 41%. Thus, leisure tourism for Chinese tourists visiting the UK has become the major purpose. Furthermore, Chinese tourists tend to travel on their own (31%) or with a spouse/partner (30%), while 10% of them went with a tour group, but it is still higher than the average of all markets (4%). Apart from that, VisitBritain (2024) also reports the top reasons for Chinese tourists visiting the UK are because of the cultural attractions, local food and natural beauty. This evidences the culture clash difference between China and Western countries and how that could attract more tourists, as well as the UK being well known for its rich cultural history. However, China was reported as the 13<sup>th</sup> largest inbound market for the UK before the pandemic, though it is ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> for spending, and it is still not a top 10 market for the UK yet. Nevertheless, at the same time, it means there is a potential to expand the UK inbound market more by understanding the influential factors of how to improve the Chinese tourist experience. For these reasons, it reinforces how the research subjects could be a typical case study to investigate.

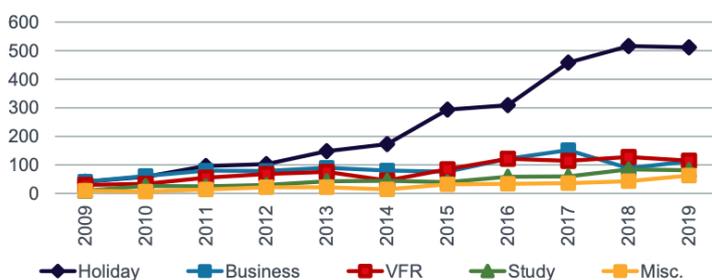


Figure 4 Journey Purpose Trends of Chinese Tourists Visiting the UK (visits 000s)

### **1.3 Research Aims and Objectives**

The overall aim of the study is to provide an explanatory account on the generation process of the tourist experience, through a case study of Chinese tourists visiting the UK. This study not only aims to identify the influential factors on the tourist experience, but most importantly, to investigate at a deeper level how these factors operate/interact with each other to generate the tourist experience, that is, the mechanism/process of the tourist experience. With the application of realist social theory (RST) (Archer, 1995) based on a critical realist framework, this study is able to unpack the tourist experience at structural, cultural and agency domain at different times, i.e. before, during and after the trip. Rather than relying on the observable stories from tourists at the empirical domain, the focus of this study is to investigate the mechanisms at the real domain and explain how tourist experience generates as a social phenomenon. From a critical realist perspective, this study aims to explain a social phenomenon through navigating the social reality from the structural, cultural and agency domain (SAC), including the properties within each domain and the interactions among them, vis-à-vis the emergent properties. Hereby, the logic of this study is to abduct and retrodict the mechanisms at the real domain from the empirical domain, then retrodict and contextualise the tourist experience from the real domain back to the empirical domain. Furthermore, time is another mechanism from a critical realist perspective (Li et al., 2023a; Porpora, 1989; Sayer, 2000; Seal, 2016), agents/tourists can transform/reproduce structures along the time periods, so it is essential to separate them to investigate structure and agency domain. Based on the nature of the research, travelling can be seen from three time periods, i.e. before, during and after, which justify the phases that being adopted in this research.

However, social phenomenon cannot be simply contextualised by dogmatic claims due to the nature of complexity in the field of social research. Thus, the consensus method is to adopt an undeliberated case, which might help to interpretate the lens of the phenomenon. To achieve the research, aim and avoid being dogmatic, the research adopts a case study of Chinese tourists visiting the UK between 2017 to 2019 to explain their tourist experience, and this study has outlined two major research questions:

1. What are the structural-cultural factors and the personal (agential cultural) factors that affect tourist experience before, during and after the trip?
2. How these factors operate to generate (i.e. processes) the form of tourist experience?

According to CR along with Archer's RST, structural-cultural factors refer to the external factors, i.e. social context, travel restrictions, destination attributes etc., while agential and cultural factors refer to internal factors, such as individual perceptions, evaluations, cultural norms and beliefs. In other words, the tourist experience is seen as an output with several external and internal factors as inputs, and the study aims to analyse the interactions about the process, and how they work together for the emergence of the tourist experience. Thus, the research aims and objectives which generate from research questions as follows:

1. To understand the self-evaluation of the experiences of Chinese tourists visited/visiting the UK.
2. To identify structural, cultural and agential factors that influence tourist experience.
3. To analyse the processes through which identified factors generate the emerging tourist experience.

## **1.4 Thesis Structure**

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, each contributing to the development of a critical realist explanation of the tourist experience and to address the two guiding research questions.

### **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

This chapter clarifies the key concepts underpinning the study, including tourist, destination, destination image and tourist experience. It reviews existing literature on Chinese outbound tourism and synthesises the collective themes that influence Chinese tourists. These insights establish the empirical and conceptual foundation for the study.

### **Chapter 3 CR-led Theoretical Framework**

Chapter 3 introduces critical realism as the underpinning research philosophy and explains its relevance for investigating the underlying mechanisms of tourist experience.

It highlights Archer's Realist Social Theory (RST) and the Morphogenetic Approach (M/M), which together form the analytical framework used to examine structural, cultural and agential properties and guide the study's explanatory strategy.

#### Chapter 4 Research Design

This chapter outlines the methodological choices informed by critical realist ontology and epistemology, including the use of the intensive research design, abduction, retrodution and retrodiction. It details the data collection procedures, the integration of interview and website data, and the application of narrative and thematic analysis. Considerations relating to ethics, reliability, validity and reflexivity are also discussed.

#### Chapter 5 Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the Chinese travel websites (secondary data) and the semi-structured interviews (primary data). Through thematic and narrative analysis, it identifies key structural, cultural and agential properties and demonstrates how these properties interact as mechanisms to generate the tourist experience. This chapter directly addresses both research questions.

#### Chapter 6 Discussion

The discussion evaluates the findings in relation to the existing literature from both tourism and critical realism fields. It positions tourist experience as a social phenomenon shaped by structural-cultural conditions and agential reflexivity, then it further evaluates the conceptual framework on mechanisms offered by this thesis.

#### Chapter 7 Conclusion

The final chapter synthesises the overall argument and provides the study's major contributions, particularly the development of a critical realist framework for analysing tourist experience. It outlines practical, theoretical and methodological implications; acknowledges the study's limitations; and proposes future research directions arising from the mechanisms identified.

### **1.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter started with research background, discussed the general existing literature around tourism and tourist experience. It provided a brief overview about this study and the philosophy underpins, i.e. Critical Realism. It then reviewed the UK market and

Chinese tourist as the study's focus. Following that, the study explained reasons for selecting Chinese tourists visiting/visited the UK: a) Chinese tourists contributes a significant economic growth to international tourism industry, based on the nature of the condition, that is, the second biggest population in the world; b) China has been recognised as one of the richest history in the world, which brings an unique culture background to western countries. c) It is evidenced that the UK has been one of the most popular countries for Chinese tourists. After selected the case study, research questions and research objectives were presented to explain the significance of this study, i.e. providing an explanatory account on the emergence of the tourist experience.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

This chapter discusses the essentials of tourism, around the general tourism system. According to existing literature (Fletcher, 2018; Inkson and Minnaert, 2018; Leiper, 1979), Cooper (2016, 2021, 2023) concludes that there are three main elements within the tourism system, which are the tourism sector, tourists and destination (geographical elements). Firstly, it reviews the history of tourism and define tourism as a sector from both demand and supply sides (2.1). Within the tourism sector, it classifies the forms of tourism based on the technical measurements (2.1.2), and discusses the impacts of tourism from economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects (2.1.3). The second element, tourists, is followed by the definition of tourists, and their decision-making process from ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors (2.2). The third section (2.3) covers the essentials of destination, i.e. its definition, nature of role, types and features. Furthermore, it explores the destination image (2.3.2), because it is an idealisation for tourists, which links physical destinations and tourists within the tourism system, also, it is closely related to the tourist experience (2.4). As the main research subject, tourist experience is explored from its theoretical development (2.4.1), three characteristics, i.e. subjectivity (2.4.2), multi dimensions (2.4.3) and multifaceted (2.4.4). It then explores influential factors on Chinese tourists as they are selected as a case in this study (2.5). Lastly, it identifies the knowledge gap (2.6) and wraps up with a summary covering the key points at the end of this chapter (2.7).

### **2.1 Understanding ‘Tourism’ and its Significance**

#### **2.1.1 Defining Tourism**

Fidgeon (2010) states that tourism is a relatively new field because it has only recently been identified as a serious business indicator and subject of academic study. Specifically, while ‘tourism’ as a concept has previously been evident, it lacks theoretical understanding or the recognition of its importance. There are numerous similar conceptual definitions of tourism over several decades. ‘Tourism’ is “a study of man away from his usual habitat, of the industry which responds to his needs, and of the impacts that both he and the industry have on the host socio-cultural, economic, and physical environments” (Jafari, 1977, n.p.). Tribe (1997) states that tourism is the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the interaction, in generating and host regions, of tourists [visitors], business suppliers, government, communities and

environments. Mathieson and Wall's view (1982) on tourism is the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater to their needs. However, Gilbert (1990) argues that the broad nature of both the concepts and the need for so many service inputs make it hard to define. There is no doubt that tourism is a multidimensional, multifaceted activity which involves a number of lives, as well as many economic activities.

Leiper's (1979) tourism system was an early adoption of a system approach to understand tourism, which identifies five elements within the system, i.e. tourists, generating regions, transit routes, destination regions and a tourist industry. This approach underlines Leiper's tourism concepts and reveals potential issues attached from management perspectives. Leiper (1979, 1981) was not the only scholar that adopts a system approach in tourism research (Hall, 2005, 2008; Hall and Page, 2010; King, 1987; Netto, 2009), but his approach has been one of the most influential in thinking and understanding about tourism research, as well as the disciplinarity of tourism (Coles et al., 2006; Tribe, 2009). Cooper (2023) developed the geographical tourism system (see Figure 5) from Leiper's (1979) basic tourism system. Four basic elements are identified in this system: namely a generating region or source region, a transit route, a destination region and the environment. A generating region is the permanent place where individual begins and ends their journeys; a transit route refers to the path between the residence place to the destination, while the destination region is the place that individuals choose to visit. Lastly, the environment is the context that surrounds the other three regions (Cooper, 2023). These four elements are connected as a flow by individuals' behaviours. However, it could be argued that individuals could visit more than one destination, and it could be complicated because there is more than one transit route and destination region. Nevertheless, Cooper (2023) develops the tourism system from Leiper (1979) and contributes a significant understanding in tourism, that is, a) showing the essential dimensions within tourism in a sufficient way; b) illustrating these dimensions' relationships and explaining them in a system.

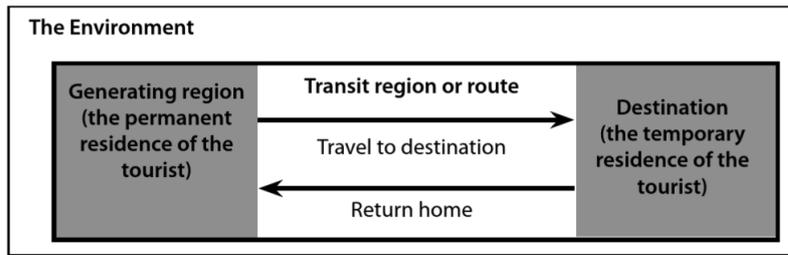


Figure 5 The Geographical Tourism System

Source: cited in Cooper (2023, p. 4)

According to tourism systems (Leiper, 1979; Fletcher, 2018; Cooper, 2023), the tourism sector has been recognised, and the tourism satellite account became an agreed approach, a consensus opinion on ‘tourism’ has been considered the latest research, which could be defined by demand-side perspectives and the supply-side perspectives.

- Demand-side perspectives focus on tourism consumption and identify the property of tourists along with their behaviour and expenditure of destinations (Inkson and Minnaert, 2018; Cooper, 2021).
- Supply-side perspectives examine the firms, organisations and businesses which could supply products for tourists (Inkson and Minnaert, 2018). Cooper (2021) adds that these organisations serve not only tourists, but also the local markets and residents.

Specifically, two elements are noted within demand-side which are “‘the journey to the destination’ and ‘the stay (including activities) at the destination’” (Cooper, 2016, p.16). Both elements occur based on the condition outside the ‘usual environment’. Apart from that, ‘usual environment’ was used in the UNWTO’s (2024, n.p.) technical definition as well: “tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes.” It is a technical term used to provide a particular distinction from tourism to other sectors. ‘Usual environment’ can be defined as “the geographical area (though not necessarily a continuous one) within which an individual conducts his/her regular life” (Fletcher, 2018, p.3). The purpose of this concept is to exclude those individuals that commute in a regular routine from their residential places to the places for work, study or other purposes, for instance, shopping centres, health clinics or visiting relatives. Cooper (2016) adds that the movement to destinations should be temporary or short term and destinations are visited for purposes,

which exclude employment and other permanent staying purposes. Therefore, the consensus definition is concluded as: individuals leave their 'usual environment', have a temporary stay in non-residential places, simultaneously allowing themselves to escape daily routines and seek encounters of change.

### **2.1.2 Forms of Tourism**

There are three forms which are domestic tourism, outbound tourism and inbound tourism. This category aims not only to identify economic indicators, but also tourists. According to UNWTO (2024, n.p.), domestic tourism refers to “the activities of a resident visitor within the country of reference, either as part of a domestic tourism trip or part of an outbound tourism trip”. It is considered as the predominant tourism activity that occupies about 80% of whole tourism activities (Fletcher, 2018). Outbound tourism comprises ‘the activities of a resident visitor outside the country of reference’ whereas inbound tourism is defined as “the activities of a non-resident visitor within a country on an inward trip” (UNWTO, 2024, n.p.). It is noted that domestic tourism might include visits outside the country of residence, at the same time, the outbound tourism could include visits within the country of residence. Fletcher (2018) highlights the main destination is the key point that distinguishes domestic tourism and outbound tourism. This can also be explained from the definition of tourism, that is, visits are supposed to have a stop, also known as the visit place, so it is not qualified as a visit if individuals only enter a geographical area without stopping there. The United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD, 2008) combined these three forms and set a new tourism category of internal tourism, national tourism and international tourism. Internal tourism, including domestic tourism and inbound tourism, refers to the activities of resident and non-resident visitors within a country as part of domestic or international trips. National tourism, as the sum of domestic tourism and outbound tourism, encompasses the visits within and outside the country and it can be seen as part of domestic or outbound trips. International tourism, including both inbound and outbound tourism, is defined as resident visits outside the country as domestic or outbound trips, and non-resident visits within the country as inbound trips (Fletcher, 2018, p. 4).

As a result, tourism can have various forms based on the different categories and disciplines, but these are only the technical methods and terms to give a definition and distinguish. It is more important to focus on the purpose of making these terms, that is, a) to identify the contributions of the tourism sector and specifically managing each

form of tourism; b) to identify visitors, specifically, visitors' behaviours and decision-making processes. The reason for that is the basic concept implies that tourism is a human activity, so it is beneficial to put visitors into the different categories then formulate collective knowledge about each category.

### **2.1.3 Impacts of Tourism**

Based on the tourism system and the definition of tourism, tourism can be considered as a business, a phenomenon, a sector or an industry. But all these descriptive words imply that tourism can impact on destinations from economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects. It implies that the tourism system includes not only the tourism industry, but also other aspects such as the economy and socio-cultural changes because they have impacts on each other. Cooper (2023) also highlights that tourism can be considered as an agent that contributes changes locally and globally, at economic and socio-cultural levels simultaneously.

From economic perspective, the positive economic impacts can be concluded from three aspects, which are income, employment and regional development (Comerio and Strozzi, 2019). Specifically, tourism increases expenditure in accommodation, food and retail shops, as well as imports and exports of goods. Furthermore, it can generate more jobs and help local businesses etc., which improves the local economy and regional development. For example, some rural areas in China could get benefits from tourism if they identify their culture characteristics to attract tourists. However, this can also lead to a negative impact, that is, overdependence/lack of diversity (Fletcher, 2018), which means a country, or a region relies too much on tourism, so they may suffer a difficult time during unpredictable situations, such as a pandemic, political regulations, or even seasonal travel. In addition, some impacts such as opportunity costs, inflation and externalities could have a negative effect on the economy from tourism.

Moreover, tourism can lead to some social-cultural changes to the destinations, which may be positive or negative depending on the country. It can be explained from two sides, which are host and tourist. Firstly, tourism could improve residents' life patterns through positive economic effects (Andereck et al., 2005). For example, tourism contributes a positive effect when it increases infrastructures, amenities and community services (Andereck and Nyaupane, 2011), which not only benefit tourists, but also residents. Secondly, tourism provides opportunities for cultural interactions, which allows both tourists and residents to learn about other lifestyles and traditions (Richards,

2016), especially for international tourism among different countries and regions. These cultural interactions can have three additional positive effects: a) enable exchange of perspectives and values, which can help with the awareness of culture diversity (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Castro et al., 2023), also, this can help with communication between different cultures, countries and regions; b) local festivals, heritage sites and attractions can be seen as a platform to showcase specialties to tourists and improves the awareness of cultural heritage preservation and sustainability (Richards, 2018); c) it could foster local's pride and identity, which achieves a harmonious relationship between tourists and locals.

However, social-cultural interactions may bring negative impacts at the same time. The existing research (Litka, 2013; Burns and Novelli, 2006) suggest that tourists can change the local culture through their visit, and residents' life patterns. Values can also be changed through the interactions (Castro et al., 2023), and even affect local's normal life in extreme situations, such as noise pollution, overcrowding and social disruption (Sharpley, 2014), while tourists, in turn, can be affected by an unsatisfied experience. This also leads to a situation where some locals hold a resistant opinion about tourists, which creates a conflict between them. Furthermore, tourism can have a negative impact on local social structures and norms (Cooper, 2021). Specifically, the tourism sector stimulates employment, but it can cause inequality in gender and social structures, also, the issue of crime (robbers and burglars), drugs, alcoholism etc. were reported as a negative impact of tourism (Sroyetch, 2016).

Cooper (2021) lists four social-cultural changes from tourism through the intermingling of hosts and guests, employment of expatriates at destinations, undesirable activities such as gambling, erosion of regional culture and languages. Tourism could lead to a standard language, such as English, at destinations; this may threaten minority languages such as Spanish or Italian, which could be a negative effect, but it could also attract more expatriate workers, leading to a positive effect for the local economy. Therefore, the tourism sector has a significant effect from a socio-cultural aspect on both tourists and host communities, encompassing both positive and negative consequences. Though it has some positive impacts which can be related to the economic effects, it still needs to be managed and develop a long-term strategy for avoiding negative effects while protecting local's life patterns and culture values.

## 2.2 Tourist & Leisure Tourist

Tourism is a human action and activity, so individuals are the key actor in this system. Tourist and visitor have been used widely in common perspectives, but they are different. UNWTO (2024, n.p.) states as “a visitor (domestic, inbound or outbound) is classified as a tourist (or overnight visitor), if his/her trip includes an overnight stay, or as a same-day visitor (or excursionist) otherwise.” This offers a clear distinction between ‘tourist’ and ‘visitor’, where a visitor could be a same-day trip or overnight stay, a tourist can only refer to an overnight visitor. Hence, they are distinguished upon the staying period in the place they visit. The reason for that is the innovations in transport. Travel used to take more than one day before the Industrial Revolution, but with the invention of the aeroplane, more international tourists emerged, and it became more accessible to visit another country and return on the same day (Fletcher, 2018). The existing literature (Cooper, 2016; Inkson and Minnaert, 2018) emphasizes that visitors are different from tourists. They state that the minimum length of stay at destinations over one night would classify the people as tourists or excursionists. In addition, Cooper (2016) highlights that the maximum length of stay would be one year, but it is not strict, aiming to exclude the immigration people. As a result, a tourist could be defined as an individual, as the actor of the tourism system, who stays far from their usual inhabited places over one night with different purposes of visit including leisure, business and common interest.

Based on the definition, tourists can be categorised and be understood from their motivation to travel and their decision-making process. It is essential to understand their needs and how they can be fulfilled to appreciate their motivation. Dann (1977) applied two decision factors in travelling, i.e. push and pull factors. Specifically, the push factors are the elements that make individuals want to travel while the pull factors are those that affect where they travel. Hanqin and Lam (1999) point out that people are pushed by internal forces and pulled by the external factors of destination attributes. Lam and Hsu (2004) also state that push factors are based on socio-psychological motivations relating to internal factors or personal values, whereas pull factors are the elements which attract tourists to a specific destination when the decision to travel has been made. However, Cooper (2005) admits that the initial needs relate to the push factors, while sociological and psychological aspects of culture, perceptions, etc. refer to the pull factors. He argues that although the motivation literature is still in its infancy

in tourism research, there is no doubt that motivation has an essential part in explaining the tourist demand. In addition, he highlights that it is crucial to distinguish the type of motivation such as the intended one or if it has been influenced by society.

After applying the push and pull factors for the general motivation of visitors, Leiper (1979) points out two purposes of travel for tourism which is recreation (holiday, health, study, religion and sport) and business (family, mission or meeting) and this recognition has been generally agreed. Inkson and Minnaert (2018) specifies six purposes, which are leisure, visiting friends and relatives, business and professional, health treatment, religion and other. Cooper and Hall (2018) note that military and diplomatic travel could not be classified for tourism purposes, whereas health and education can be. Cooper (2016) concludes with three main purposes which may be more feasible and understandable:

- 1) Leisure and recreation – including holidays, cultural and sports tourism and visiting friends and relatives (VFR)
- 2) Other purposes – including study and health tourism.
- 3) Business and professional – including meetings, conferences, missions, incentive and business tourism.

It is noted that study tourism cannot be included in leisure and recreation purpose, but students can be leisure tourists on their summer/winter holidays. Therefore, in this research, leisure tourists refer to any Chinese tourists who visited the UK from 2017 to 2019 for holidays, i.e. cultural tourism, visiting friends and relatives, students in the UK but traveling around beyond term dates.

### **2.3 Destination Essentials**

Destination is the third key element within Leiper's tourism system, following the tourism sector and tourists. The destination has been recognised as the most important aspect that delivers the tourist experience (Cooper, 2021; Fletcher, 2018), because it provides not only physical aspects from demand, transportations, marketing etc., but also the image for tourists, which can be a key message to tourists. Fletcher (2018) states that for many tourists, especially in leisure tourism, the destination is a key motivating factor besides their decisions and expectations. It is worth to note that expectations can be related to destination images. Thus, the destination including

destination image contributes to the success of the tourism sector.

### **2.3.1 Defining the Destination**

Fletcher (2018) highlights that the destination can be defined from supply and demand perspectives, which follows the definition of the tourism. From a supply-side, the destination is defined as “a well-defined geographical area which is understood by its visitors as a unique entity, with a political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning” (Buhalis, 2000, p. 98 in Fletcher, 2018, p. 123). While demand-side definitions refer to “places towards which people travel and where they choose to stay for a while in order to experience certain features or characteristics” (Leiper, 1995, p. 87 in Fletcher, 2018, p.123). Furthermore, the UNWTO (2024, n.p.) gives the technical definition for the destination as: “the place visited that is central to the decision to take the trip”. However, these definitions mostly state in a physical level, even though a few mentions tourist experience, they still failed to make a logical link between destination and tourists/tourist experience, hence, the link between each element is lacking within the tourism system. Until Cooper (2021) points out that the destination has been recognised as ‘loosely bounded networks of organisations’ that conveys the tourism experience. Fletcher (2018) adds that the destination can be seen as a ‘tourist place’, a ‘tourism product’ or a ‘system of products’, but all of these depend on: a) the purpose of when making these definitions; b) the perceptions of the stakeholders who get involved with its management directly or indirectly. Consequently, it builds up a relationship between the destination and other elements, i.e. stakeholders and their governance, which reveals the fact that the destination plays the same role as the other two elements (tourism sector, tourists) and can embed within each other.

### **2.3.2 Types and Features of the Destination**

There are many types of destination that depend upon the physical places where tourists travel to, and they can, in turn, facilitate different types of tourism. Fletcher (2018) categorises three most basic classifications of the destination: coastal destinations, urban destinations and rural destinations. Coastal destinations refer to seaside places such as beach resorts, islands, as well as inland spas and bathing for health which emerged from the mid-eighteenth century (Fletcher, 2018). Urban destinations encompass towns and cities, which have cultural attractions or historic heritage, such as museums, art galleries, exhibitions and even festivals. These towns and cities can keep their commercial functions, while being tourist destinations at the same time.

Rural destinations consist of countryside, national parks, and natural areas, such as mountains, forests and lakes. Destinations can be varied, so the particular combination and features of them can generate various types of tourism, which explains the reasons for several types of tourism emerging in contemporary tourism studies (Cooper, 2021), such as dark tourism, adventure tourism etc.

Regarding the features of the destination, even though there are no consensus opinions because the destination can be varied, defined from several dimensions, it still can be summarised from two common points. Firstly, physical features including landscape, natural resources (Mak, 2017), attractions and access (Fletcher, 2018), infrastructure such as accommodations, transports etc (Dwyer et al., 2013). Cooper (2021) concludes as ‘amalgams’, which includes attractions, amenities, access and ancillary services. Attractions refer to the landscape from natural and manmade attractions, and include events, markets etc. Amenities encompass food, accommodation, entertainment etc. Access covers local transports, and transports around destinations, i.e. tourists travelling to and from the destination. It can also refer to the access to public attractions, for example, access to museums or art galleries. Ancillary services are the form of local organisations, such as local business, promotion of the destination, provision for the trade and the public etc. Secondly, cultural features have been commonly discussed (Cooper, 2021; Hall, 2008; Richards and Munsters, 2010). The cultural features of the destination could be the identity for it, and it could be related to destination image (see 2.3.3). Specifically, each destination has its own identity and authenticity from their character, which could be contributed from culture heritage, traditions, or residents’ customs (Richards and Munsters, 2010). Hall (2008) adds that cultural features might be intangible, but it could be shown in a tangible way such as festivals, museums etc. Cooper (2021) states an example that people’s perceptions could change the destination, where mountains used to be a fearsome place, while it changes to an attractive landscape after the nineteenth century. Therefore, destination could have both physical and cultural features, which are the pull factors to attract tourists for visiting. This also means a good destination may need to have both features, but most importantly, differentiation is the key to distinguish popular destinations from others, as well as enrich tourist experience.

### **2.3.3 Definition and Components of Destination Image**

Destination image studies could be dated back to the early 1970s after Hunt’s (1975)

influential work examined its importance to tourism research and development. Since then, destination image has been an essential topic in tourism studies because it is not only the physical including the historical buildings, but also the connections between the general tourism industry and the tourist experience.

According to the existing literature, destination image has been defined in different fields including marketing and psychology, thus, there is no consensus definition of it. But there are some attempts which could provide inspiring ideas for researchers. “Destination image is a sum of ideas, beliefs and impressions that a tourist holds of a destination” (Crompton, 1979, p. 410). This original definition has been used in the earlier studies, and it was generally supported by scholars in the early stage, then some researchers have defined the destination image into different dimensions to make it more understandable and helpful. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) hold that the destination image consists of two components - the attributes of the destination such as attractions, facilities and attitudes of the residents, as well as the holistic impressions, i.e. tourists’ general feelings and perceptions. These components have their own identity with tangible elements in a functional way, and the abstract elements in psychology, which then achieve functional and psychological dimensions.

A three-dimensional model has been developed and used in subsequent studies, which refers to attributes/holistic, functional/psychological and common/unique (Choi et al., 1999; Baloglu and Mangalolu, 2001). Within this model, common/unique means the destination can be rated with a functional/psychological characteristic through transportations and residential accommodation, while the particular image of the destination such as the natural features and the local environment are unique. Most recent researchers support the view that the destination image consists of two key components: cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations. Cognitive image refers to the tourists’ beliefs, perceptions and knowledge about a destination, whereas affective image is the feelings of the tourists towards the destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Frias et al., 2007; Beerli and Martin, 2004a; Song et al., 2013; Styliadis et al., 2017). Jenkins (1999) points out that destination image is hard to define or get the exact meaning because it has been applied to various or different contexts, including the images presented by tourism promoters, word-of-mouth for the destination (by the public), and feelings emerged by individuals, so it also explains that Crompton’s (1979) definition has been mostly cited in the previous studies. However, White (2004) argues

that scholars have attempted to acknowledge image as a construct which differs from other identities in tourism research, and it is recommended to use a tri-components model to observe it in depth. Furthermore, scholars have agreed that destination contains more than the sum of individual components, but the overall image including the cognitive, affective and conative (Phelps, 1986; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Kim, 2018).

#### **2.3.4 Influential Factors of the Destination Image**

As stated, destination image is consensus considered as a concept formed by the two interrelated components which are cognitive and affective, referring to the consumers reasoned and emotional interpretation. From a theoretical view, the consensus opinion points to the cognitive component as an antecedent of the affective component that consumers' evaluations stem from their individual knowledge (Anand et al., 1988; Holbrook 1978; Russel and Pratt 1980; Stern and Krakover 1993). When it comes to the context of tourism, these two components have influence on destination image directly and indirectly (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). According to previous studies, the various factors can be concluded as two fields from the tourists' level of knowledge about the destination and the tourists' experience.

The level of knowledge refers to the cognitive side which includes the motivations and the perceptions that differ from individuals, as well as the secondary information sources for the first-time visitors. To be more specific, tourists could have their own perception or expectation about the destination based on the information sources formed by the social media and the travel agents (the external factors influence the internal knowledge). Furthermore, many researchers (Mayo and Jarvis, 1981; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989) highlight that it is a positive relationship between the perception of destinations and the purchase decisions, which indicates that the tourists' expectations have impacts on their decisions of destination and the general trips.

On the other hand, tourist experience from the affective perspective has a positive link with the destination image (Schreyer et al., 1984; Beerli and Martin, 2004). Morgan et al. (2011) highlights that satisfaction with the tourist experience contributes more to the reputation of the destination in terms of word-of-mouth and repeat visits, rather than how the destination is represented, because image formation is delivered by agents but selected by individuals (Tasci and Gartner, 2007). As for the repeat visitors, past experience could affect them more than the information gained from the external (Mazursky, 1989) because these tourists already have the criteria for decisions whilst

the need from external information turns out to be weak. In addition, destination image is not only geographical, but also social and cultural, as it affects the tourist experience as well. Moon and Han (2019) state that the particular context can influence tourists' experience significantly, especially on their perceptions of value and satisfaction. Thus, it can be described that destination image and tourist experience are interacting and affecting each other, and tourist experience is one of the most important factors on destination images.

## **2.4 Tourist Experience**

Tourist experience, as the main focus of this research, can be dated back to the 1960s. It has been a popular research topic and been a part of tourism research and production of both tourism and psychological research for over 50 years (Uriely, 2005). Maslow (1943) describes the experience as “moments of highest happiness and fulfilment”, after that, many researchers contributed to the theoretical understanding of the tourist experience in different fields, including psychology, philosophy, geography. This section firstly demonstrates theoretical development of the tourist experience. It then explores three characteristics of the tourist experience, i.e. subjectivity, multi-dimensions and multifaceted, which explains the complexity and multi-dimensions of the tourist experience.

### **2.4.1 Theoretical Development of the Tourist Experience**

The conceptual tourist experience is suggested to differentiate it from the mundane and everyday life experiences in the early literature. Pioneering work by MacCannell (1973) introduces the concept of the ‘tourist gaze’, that tourists take trips to seek authenticity in their experiences, and their observations during the visit often decide their perceptions on authentic local life. Although it has some limitations, it has been the foundation concept that shifted the focal point from a collection of tourism services and attractions to the tourists'/individuals' perceptions and expectations. After that, the 1970s and 1980s had a growing interest in the sociological and psychological dimensions of the tourist experience.

Cohen (1979), one of the first scholars that argues with the previous ‘tourist gaze’, puts forward ‘a phenomenology of tourist experiences.’ He argues that tourist experience may have many types because individuals desire different results from their trips, and suggests five modes namely recognising recreational, diversionary, experiential,

experimental and existential modes. He introduces 'existential tourist' as a new concept that contrasts with the 'recreational tourist'. The former refers to the tourists who seek a meaningful experience that resonates with their personal identity, while the latter refers to hedonism and relaxation in familiar settings. On the other hand, psychological researchers have started to explore the emotional and cognitive dimensions of the tourist experience. Pearce (2012), inspired by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, creates his 'travel career ladder' model, which posits that tourists' motivations and experience evolve along the journey because of different psychological needs. This model emphasises the dynamic nature of the tourist experience, that is, it is complicated because the tourist experience and their expectations are not static, therefore meanings can be more complex.

Following the view of different understandings on tourist experience, Mannell and Iso-Ahola (1987) advocate the classification of studies including three principal realms, the 'Definitional', the 'Post-Hoc Satisfaction' and the 'Immediate Conscious' approach. The definition approach focuses on describing the underlying factors which shape or reshape the tourist experience. This approach was popular in the 1990s and was then developed by identifying elements, factors and typologies of the tourist experience contributed by some modern literature, such as the service tourist experience (Otto and Ritchie, 1996), satisfactory experience (Ryan, 1995) and quality tourist experience (Jennings and Nickerson, 2006). Furthermore, the 'Post-Hoc Satisfaction' approach is concerned with the motivation of the tourist experience, for example, people prefer to take a trip aiming to escape from daily routines and seek for recreation. While the 'Immediate Conscious' approach recognizes the on-site physical tourist experience itself (Mannell and Iso-Ahola, 1987). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduce the 'experience economy' paradigm, which underscores that the value of tourism lies with the meanings that tourists can remember and share instead of the consumption of goods and services. This idea has seen a new constructive approach in tourist experience studies, and has emphasised the subjective nature of the tourists, which further highlighted tourists' participations in this research field. For example, Wang (1999) advances the work on "experiential authenticity", which argues the importance of tourists' interactions rather than focusing on destination quality.

Modern tourists experience literature in recent years has expanded to different disciplines such as psychology, sociology and cultural studies. Kim et al. (2012) argue

that memorability needs to be considered as an essential characteristic in emergence of the tourist experience, as “positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim et al., 2012, p.13). Tung and Ritchie’s (2011) memorable tourism experience (MTEs) framework agree with Kim et al. (2012) that memorability is a key factor contributing to the tourist experience, such as hedonism, novelty, interactions etc., their work has highlighted that emotional responses and interpersonal relationships can shape the tourist experience. Following that, several studies (Filep and Pearce, 2013; Hosany, 2012; Morgan and Xu, 2009) have identified how emotions affect the tourist experience, such as joy, nostalgia etc., especially Hosany (2012) develops a scale to measure tourists’ emotional responses, known as the Destination Emotion Scale, which offers a tool to understand how emotions affect the tourist experience.

Larsen (2007) argues that multisensory experiences can bond the connections between tourists and destinations, which further shape the tourist experience. They claim that sensory experiences such as taste, sound, smell and touch etc. can enhance the tourist experience. But their work also points out those sensory experiences can evoke strong emotions which result in a good experience for tourists; thus, emotions are still the intermediate and play an important role to shape the tourist experience. Furthermore, some research (Gretzel et al., 2015; Tussyadiah, 2014) have focused on smart tourism because of the development of the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Their work has identified how smart technologies such as virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI) etc. can significantly enhance the tourist experience through encouraging tourists to actively participate and co-create their experiences.

#### **2.4.2 Subjectivity of the Tourist Experience**

With the development of the tourist experience, its complex concept has been integrated as an inherently subjective phenomenon. Many scholars have focused on the individual differences such as the subjective nature, meaning and interpretation of the experience generated by individuals (Uriely, 2005). As mentioned earlier, tourism literature has recently concentrated on more specific destinations aiming to examine the depth of tourist experience from tourists with a variety of thoughts and cultural backgrounds. Several researchers (Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009; Prebensen et al., 2013; Sfandla and Björk, 2013) also highlight that experiences are generated from tourists and their interactions with surroundings, as such, tourists play a key role in the trips coupled with the social, cultural, economic, political encounters from the very starting point of the

experience.

Furthermore, destinations may provide identical products and services to satisfy tourists, but these same creations might be experienced totally differently because these experiences are co-generated within and by individuals (Volo, 2009). This also demonstrates that tourists are not passively consuming destinations but actively and consequently interpret and construct their experiences in a subjective and possibly unique way. Larsen (2007) states that individuals shape their tourist experiences through their prior knowledge, memories and stories they tell themselves and others, known as a 'narrative construction'. Tung and Ritchie (2011) also state that the emergence of tourists' experiences or tourists' emotions cannot be simply controlled by destination providers because tourists' interpretative process are varied individually, and the response could be entirely different for different tourists from the same destinations. Kirillova et al. (2014) add that tourists tend to be more satisfied if they can extract personal meaning through their interactions with destination images, rather than being provided the facilitation of experience, which indirectly evidences the subjectivity of the tourist experience.

Moreover, the existing literature (Filep and Pearce, 2014; Hosany and Gilber, 2010) has identified emotions and the affective dimension on the tourist experience, which proves the tourist experience is a subjective process. The concept of identity and the "self" further illustrates the subjectivity of the tourist experience. Wang (1999) firstly discusses the concept of 'experiential authenticity' which relates to tourists' self-identity. Desforges (2000) agrees that tourists construct/reconstruct their identities by engaging with destinations, cultures and new natural and social environments. Cohen and Cohen (2012) add that cultural differences can also lead to different outcomes of the tourist experience, for example, tourists from a collectivist culture can enjoy group activities more than individualists. Poria et al. (2006) also identify that heritage culture tourism is often influenced by both cultural backgrounds and tourist' identity.

### **2.4.3 Multi Dimensions of the Tourist Experience**

Apart from subjectivity, experience can be described in different dimensions, which makes it more complicated to investigate. As revealed in 2.4.1, tourist experience has been identified from different dimensions, i.e. emotional, social and physical elements. Scholars have adopted various approaches to understand the tourist experience holistically, which allows rich understandings of tourism. Clawson and Knetsch (1978)

identify five distinctions through leisure tourist experience studies, namely anticipation, travel to site, on-site activity, return travel and recollection. Then, Pine and Gilmore (1998) create the concept of the 'experience economy', including four key dimensions which are entertainment, education, aesthetics and escapism. Although these models have limitations, for example, neglecting the phase on time and location (Morgan et al., 2010), they both agree the concepts of experience are not only emerging in the main consumption and service encounter on-site, but including ranges of activities that occur before and after the trips. Thus, tourist experience should have multiple dimensions, and this has been supported has been a consensus perspective supported by much research (Aho, 2001; Cohen and Ben-Nun, 2008; Jennings and Nickerson, 2006; Larsen, 2007; Wang et al., 2012) after the 1990s.

A more recent framework by Kim et al., (2012) identify seven dimensions of the tourist experience, i.e. hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge. Furthermore, some authors such as Nickerson (2006) frames tourist experience by evaluating the influential factors including shaping the outcome. From Nickerson's (2006) perspective, there are three influencing factors related to the phenomenon, the traveller, the destination and the local population, which echoes Cooper's (2021) key elements of tourism studies. However, Mossberg (2007) argues that the primary influences are the physical environment, local products and personal culture. Despite the fact these conceptual frameworks and models illustrate different dimensions of a tourist experience, they all prove the complex nature of tourist experience.

Moreover, these concepts have contributed to the multi-dimensional character of the tourist experience, i.e. cognitive and emotional dimensions, physical and sensory dimensions and social dimensions. Firstly, based on 2.4.2, the tourist experience is a definite cognitive and emotional thought process, which related to travellers' perceptions, and past experience/memories (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). For example, hedonism and novelty can link to tourists' emotions and their tourist experience (Kim et al., 2012). Peace and Lee (2005) point out the positive link between emotions and tourists' motivations.

Secondly, as Mossberg (2007) argues, physical environment and sensory dimensions cannot be neglected. Travelling involves the interactions between tourists and the destinations, so it includes the physical engagement with landscapes, buildings, and

even activities (Pomfret, 2006). Furthermore, food has a positive relationship with the tourist experience (Stone and Sthapit, 2024), that is, sensory experience plays a significant role in the whole tourist experience. For example, Quan and Wang (2004) explain that food consumption can be the peak touristic experience because it makes tourists ontologically comfort of home.

Lastly, social dimensions refer to the interactions between individuals, such as tourists with tourists, tourists with residents etc. This can bring both positive and negative effects, for example, Woosnam et al. (2024) advocate that quality interactions can not only provide a satisfied experience to tourists but also encourage residents to engage with tourists. However, this research cannot cover all the aspects as it is not the main task of this study. The only purpose of this section is to reveal the multi-dimensional characteristics of the tourist experience. As a result, previous literature concludes that the tourist experience contains numerous elements, but few of them consider these elements as a whole.

#### **2.4.4 Multifaceted (multi-fields) of the tourist experience**

After acknowledging the subjectivity and multidimensionality of tourist experience, multi-fields are the other characteristics. There are many fields for exploring the tourist experience, which gives it a high level of complexity (Neuhofer-Rainoldi, 2014). It is hard to define and measure the tourist experience because there is no single consensus conceptualisation from existing literature. These existing literatures have attempted to address the issue of the complexity of the phenomenon which contributed to characteristics, phases and components of the tourist experience.

However, Moscardo (2009) claims that the majority of studies have turned to a single path of the tourist experience, for example, a single element, typologies and chronological orders. Based on existing literature and the origins of experience, it is considered as a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses various fields such as science, psychology, geography and marketing (see Appendix 1). In the science field, experience in general differs from scientific experience because of the acknowledgement. The former refers to people accepting the knowledge universally, while the latter describes it with specific knowledge to the individuals. From a psychological viewpoint, experience is amalgamated into emotions, motivations, and perceptions that shape individual satisfactions and memories (Cohen, 1979; Larsen, 2007; Pearce, 2005; Volo, 2009). De Felice et al. (2023) conclude that behaviour

acquires knowledge and skills through exposure to a specific activity and the emotions during the occurrence. From a sociological perspective, it focuses on the interplay of culture, identity and social interactions (Selstad, 2007; Larsen and Urry, 2011). Geographically, it emphasises the spatial dimensions including landscape and infrastructure which can significantly affect the quality of the experience (Williams and Lew, 2014).

Furthermore, it may be totally different from the marketing domain because consumption is a keyword throughout existing literature, and it was first published in Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) seminal work 'The experiential aspects of consumption'. Morgan et al. (2011) add that marketing and branding strategies can influence tourists' perceptions by creating narrative meanings on specific destination attributes. Therefore, tourist experience can be explored and investigated from various fields. Coupled with two other characteristics, i.e. subjectivity and multi-dimensions, the three characteristics altogether illustrate the complexity of the tourist experience, which acquires more focus on its manifestation.

## **2.5 Influential Factors on Outbound Chinese Tourist Experience**

As stated in Chapter 1, this research adopts Chinese tourists as a case study from specific to provide a general scope to all the tourists. Case study can provide in-depth knowledge and understanding on a particular social phenomenon, which can further provide a theoretical framework as a paradigm for general situations. The reasons for selecting Chinese tourists are a) China is the second largest population in the whole world, and its outbound tourists have increased significantly, specifically, almost three times than 2010, reaching 155 million outbound tourists in 2019 (VisitBritain, 2021). Cooper (2023) also highlights that China is one of the countries with the highest increase in outbound tourists' numbers for last decades; b) It is important to consider extreme situations when selecting a case study because it aims to cover as many elements as can to explain the general social phenomenon. Specifically, outbound tourism more or less involves different cultures, because of multiple countries. China has over 5000 years of history, which generates an unique and typical Eastern culture. Thus, it is fruitful to select a case that involves cultural clashes, i.e. Western and Eastern culture clashes.

There are several influential factors on the outbound Chinese tourist experience from

the external and internal sphere, such as Chinese culture (Shao and Perkins, 2017; Wang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2019), and destination images (Cheng and Zhang, 2019; Wang et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2021). Due to the characteristics of outbound tourism, the influential factors were revealed differently from inbound tourism. The literature showed that structural constraints including economic drivers (Jin and Wang, 2016; Lin et al., 2015; Tse and Hobson, 2008), and political constraints (Li et al., 2011; Sparks and Pan, 2009) can affect Chinese tourist experience. Apart from the normal internal cultural background as an important factor for Chinese tourists, national identity (Chen et al., 2021; Hwang, 2012; Yang et al., 2020) emerges as another essential factor for Chinese tourists. Therefore, this part will not only investigate those normal factors that affect Chinese tourist experience, but also some special elements that emerge from outbound tourists' behaviours.

## **2.5.1 External Factors on Outbound Chinese Tourist Experience**

### **2.5.1.1 Economic and Political Constraints**

Outbound tourism is different from inbound tourism. The major problem is the constraints or restrictions between two countries, as well as the economic conditions, as outbound tourism often takes more expenditure including flights, visa fees and currency. Outbound tourism in China could be dated back to the early 1990s, when the Chinese government established the Approval Destination Status (ADS) system to allow Chinese citizens to travel overseas for leisure purposes. Earlier studies have identified political liberalisation (Cai et al., 2008) and visa-issuing procedure significantly increased the quantity of Chinese tourists to travel outbound (Wang and Davidson, 2010).

For economic factors, the existing literature (Jin and Wang, 2016; Lin et al., 2015; Tse and Hobson, 2008) highlights that increased income is a fundamental factor that improves Chinese outbound tourism, as it stimulates more Chinese tourists to travel abroad. In more depth, Dwyer et al. (2000) remark price competitiveness is a key determinant factor that affect Chinese outbound tourism because tourists are sensitive to destinations' cost of living, while these real costs are influenced by currency rate fluctuations. Xie and Tveterås (2020) conclude three economic factors within price competitiveness which can significantly impact outbound Chinese tourists: a) high price sensitivity. Chinese tourists are more sensitive than Japanese and German tourists, as Chinese income per capita is still lower than many developed countries, although it

is the second-largest economy in the world. This has been evidenced by Lin et al. (2015), where the income elasticity for China is high, which means Chinese tourists respond strongly to income fluctuations; b) exchange rate fluctuations, their studies analyse cases of Chinese tourists who visited Norway. They report that the depreciation of the Norway currency (NOK) against Chinese currency (CNY) has stimulated more Chinese visiting Norway, thus, the exchange rate can affect Chinese tourists' destinations choices and their tourist experience; c) the living costs in China, due to the income per capita is still relatively low in China, it is a luxury to travel outbound and it has distinguished Chinese tourists into two groups that can or cannot afford to travel outbound.

As for political constrains, visa regulation has been identified as the direct factor that affects outbound tourists (Li et al., 2011; Sparks and Pan, 2009). Wang and Davidson (2010) point out visa restrictions affect outbound Chinese tourists mostly on their destination choices. Chinese tourists prefer to choose visa-free destinations to circumvent complicated applications involving visiting a visa office and providing all the documents such as income, work information, criminal records etc. It is time consuming to get approved by the visa centre, as well as the fee costs. Hence, Sparks and Pan (2009) note that the outbound Chinese tourism market is still niche to some extent even though it has improved in issuing speed. Tse and Hobson (2008) add that Chinese tourists tend to be more satisfied with their travel experience if they do not need a visa for visiting a destination. Thus, visa restrictions including time consuming applications and could be one of the political constraints for Chinese tourists.

Restrictions on media has been identified as one of the major constraints that influence Chinese tourist experience. Due to the largest population in the world, the Chinese government is always cautious with any factors that can cause social instability. Large-scale mobility can be one of the factors that affect uneducated residents in rural areas, who can easily be manipulated by various information on media (Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011). Thus, it is restricted for Chinese tourists to gain information from external websites, such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook etc. Furthermore, Chinese Citizen Outbound Travel Regulations (CNTA, 2006) restrict travel agencies from handling outbound travel issues, specifically, travel agencies must achieve particular conditions to start an outbound travel business, otherwise, they can only deal with inbound business. In other words, there is a restriction for the quantity of citizens

travelling outbound, and it is exercised through travel agencies and the tourism administration network (Tse and Hobson, 2008). The strategies have achieved the purpose to manage Chinese citizens in an easier way for the Chinese government.

However, it limits Chinese tourists' knowledge about destinations. Li et al. (2011) argue that information constraint is identified as a unique factor for Chinese outbound tourists. In other words, Chinese tourists failed to get enough information to know in depth about other countries, apart from relying on the pictures and videos on travel agencies or Chinese media, while these media are also restricted by the government. Therefore, restricted media helps China from social instability, but limits Chinese tourists' information about outbound travel, as well as their tourist experience. In addition, Hall (1994) states that a positive political relationship can encourage travel flow between two countries. Tse and Hobson (2008) also illustrate that with examples of Hong Kong, Macau and Southeast Asia, that diplomatic power can have a positive effect on Chinese tourists' choices. However, most studies focused on destination choices, motivations, industry overviews, while little of them focused on the depth of tourist experience. Nevertheless, all the factors above regarding economic regarding economic and political aspects more or less affect Chinese tourist experience, as they are all elements in this phenomenon regardless of destination choices, motivations or market overviews.

#### 2.5.1.2 Destination Image

According to Chapter 3, destination image is a fundamental sector in the whole tourism industry, it has also been identified as one of the primary factors for Chinese tourists (Cheng and Zhang, 2019; Wang et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2021). Table 1 collects the existing literature that can affect tourists' experience, especially outbound Chinese tourists from a destination image aspect externally, while internal factors related to destination image can be explained with cultural factors in 2.5.1.3 and 2.5.2. It has been summarised by Echtner and Richie's (1993) framework of tourism destination image. They proposed three overlapping continuums: a) attribute-holistic continuum, which encompasses individual perceptions on destination attributes and the whole impression; b) functional-psychological continuum, which refers to a destination's observable and abstract characteristics, that can be related to both amenities and attributes; c) common-unique continuum, that is, a destination could contain the common features of all other destinations, but also is unique to most of them.

Table 1 External Destination Image Factors on Outbound Chinese Tourists

Identified factors	References
Accommodation	Guo et al. (2007); Lee et al. (2010); Li et al. (2011); Li et al. (2023); Lin et al. (2019); Sparks and Pan (2009); Yu and Weiler (2001); Zhu et al. (2021)
Culture & History	Anderson (2006); Chhabra (2015); Lau and McKercher (2004); Pretes (2003); Timothy and Teye (2009); Xie and Shi (2020); Yabanci (2022).
Entertainment	Huang (2008).
Films/Literary/Music	Ingram et al. (2021); Beeton (2005).
Food/Restaurants	Yu and Weiler (2001); Aybek and Özdemir (2022)
Local Attitude	Guo et al. (2007); Zhang et al. (2021)
Natural Environment	Andereck and Nyaupane (2011); Beeton (2005); Hu et al. (2020); Wang et al. (2018);
Scenery/Iconic Attraction	Adgate et al. (2014); Gao et al. (2022); Lau and McKercher (2004); Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2002); Sparks and Pan (2009); Vespestad and Lindberg (2011); Yu and Weiler (2001); Zhang and Xu (2020).
Transport	Sparks and Pan (2009).

Source: Adapted from existed literature

Yu and Weiler's (2001) analysis on Mainland Chinese tourists highlight beautiful scenery, safety, service in hotels and restaurants can affect their satisfaction on the trip. Guo et al. (2007) agrees with the comments on the effect of destination accommodation but also points out locals' attitudes can be one of the factors. Huang (2008) adds entertainment is another essential factor for Chinese tourists. Sparks and Pan (2009) later summarise five destination attributes as the most important factors on outbound Chinese tourist experience, 'the natural beauty and icons of a destination' 'quality infrastructure' 'autonomy' 'inspirational motives' and 'social self-enhancement'. These factors have been agreed but some research identified the most important ones within these factors, for example, food and accommodation have been identified as the main

considerations for Chinese outbound tourists (Aybek and Özdemir, 2022; Lee et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2021). Li et al. (2023) reveals that accommodation, i.e. hotel facilities, do not necessarily satisfy tourists, but it is one of the reasons that cause dissatisfactions for Chinese outbound tourists.

Lau and McKercher (2004) argue that first time visitors tend to spend more time on iconic attractions and experience foreign culture. It has been proved that nature-based tourism and natural aesthetic experience including air quality and cleanness have a direct effect on Chinese tourists (Adgate et al., 2014; Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter, 2002; Vespestad and Lindberg, 2011; Wang et al., 2018; Zhang and Xu, 2020). Gao et al. (2022) emphasise the aesthetic experience is more important for young middle-class Chinese outbound tourists, while their focal point on cultural attributes were superficial even though they have a well-educated background. In other words, Chinese outbound tourists prefer to have a visual landscape and a 'relax atmosphere' when they travel in different countries.

However, even though Chinese tourists may be superficial concerning cultural attributes, these attributes are still intangible features that cannot be neglected because they can contain different meanings to tourists. Specifically, museums, memorials, monuments and historical sites could raise more interests to tourists, because tourists see them as a testament to physical existence (Anderson, 2006; Pretes, 2003). Some researchers agree that historical buildings and unique architecture have been popular venues in recent tourism for introducing cultural and historical backgrounds (Chhabra, 2015; Timothy and Teye, 2009; Xie and Shi, 2020; Yabanci, 2022). Apart from historical sites and architecture, cultural attributes contain other forms of context which give meanings to the destination, such as literary, music and films etc. Ingram et al. (2021) remark that tourists can be associated with literary works and places, for example, Harry Potter and Jane Austen are popular and attract many tourists to visit the UK. Zhang et al. (2021) also identify that Chinese tourists are interested in cultural sites from famous films. Beeton (2005) agrees that film-induced tourism, including movies and TV series, can be the most powerful image-creators rather than marketing because visual-media has a subtler and long-lasting effect. Therefore, Chinese tourists internalise images that are associated with a destination and can be affected by a number of factors, i.e. beautiful scenery and natural environment; quality infrastructures including food, accommodations and transportation; cultural

attributes including literary, films, historical and architecture meanings.

### 2.5.1.3 Confucianism and Taoism

Taoism and Confucianism have been seen as the primary guidance for Chinese people for thousands of years. Taoism, known as a harmonious approach to life, focuses on inner spiritual matters with yin (阴) and yang (阳), instead of the external benefits, such as power, money and fame (Ivanhoe, 2000; Wang and Stringer, 2000). Lao Tzu, who created Taoism, encouraged people to embrace and communicate with nature, follow the flow and diminish self-interest and selfish desire (Low, 2011). Taoism has been identified as an inherent value for Chinese tourists, which encourages them to retreat and enjoy nature regularly to develop inner spirituality and achieve a peaceful and harmonious life (Fu et al., 2010; Li, 2009; Shao and Perkins, 2017; Wang and Stringer, 2000).

Confucianism originated from Kung Fu Tzu (Confucius) and the central tenet is the notion of moral self-cultivation (Ivanhoe, 2000). It emphasises five moral virtues which are love (仁), righteousness (义), propriety (礼), wisdom (智) and faithfulness (信). From the Confucian's viewpoint, self-cultivation is the way to develop oneself and be a virtuous person, to build up a proper human relationship within a harmonious society (Ivanhoe, 2000; Low, 2011). Confucianism and Taoism are two schools of thought that hold different viewpoints about the process of creating a harmonious society. Confucianism advocates the behaviours of people, i.e. how to fit oneself into society, by continuously bettering oneself and therefore contributing to a harmonious society. This differs from Taoism which encourages people to pay more attention to their inner development through communicating with nature. That is, it emphasises inner peace and individual development to create a harmonious society automatically if everyone is not seeking worldly pursuits. Nonetheless, both sets of philosophical thinking encourage a positive whole through the betterment of individuals. Thus, both schools affect Chinese people externally in equal measure, but Chinese tourists can have different embodied understanding individually, which refers to one of the internal factors in the next section (2.5.2.1).

## 2.5.2 Internal Factors on Outbound Chinese Tourist Experience

### 2.5.2.1 Embodied Chinese Traditional Culture

Human values are essential because they do not only outline personal attitudes and

behaviours but also shape the collective meanings for everyday practices (Shao and Perkins, 2017). Cultural value is a type of value held by certain groups of people. Hofstede (1984, p. 25) defines it as “the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another”, so they are ‘collectively held values’. Chinese culture represents one of the longest-lasting human civilisations, and Huang and Wen (2021) comment that it is a dominant Eastern culture in the world.

As stated in 2.5.1.3, Confucianism and Taoism have influenced on Chinese tourists, from their motivations before the trip, to their behaviours during the trip, and even their whole tourist experience. Liu et al. (2022) points out that a Chinese saying “读万卷书不如行万里路” influences Chinese tourists to travel outbound as the saying means “Ten thousand miles of journey are better than reading ten thousand books”, so it encourages people to go travelling to experience it for themselves, instead of only gaining information from books. The existing literature have also revealed that Chinese tourists’ travel motivations can be related to Confucianism and Taoism, i.e. ‘hedonic pleasure’ (Jiang et al., 2015); ‘escape and relaxation’ (Chen et al., 2014; Luo and Deng, 2008; Wu and Pearce, 2014); ‘knowledge and experience’ (Jiang et al., 2015; Luo and Deng, 2008).

Furthermore, Chinese cultural values have been identified to influence Chinese tourists’ behaviour (Huang and Wen, 2021; Kwek and Lee, 2015). Specifically, Hofstede (1984) proposes four cultural dimensions, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity. Hsu and Huang (2016) categorise 40 cultural values into three main columns: instrumental values, terminal values and interpersonal values. They have proved that the instrumental values and terminal values are both influenced by Chinese traditional values. Therefore, Chinese cultural values have influenced the mindset of Chinese people over thousands of years, and they have become the ‘root’ for Chinese traditional culture.

#### 2.5.2.2 Emotions

Tourist experience has both subjective and objective elements and they can interact and influence each other. Emotions are individuals’ cognitive processes that can react psychophysiological to environment/surroundings (Bhandari et al., 2019; Izard, 2010; Li and Chan, 2017). Pestana et al. (2020) also reveal that emotions are the bridge

between people and environment which can help to see investigations clearly with individuals' positive or negative meanings. Most studies have highlighted that emotions are the essential indicator for the tourist experience (Hosany and Gilber, 2010; Hu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2020; Zou et al., 2021). For example, Hosany and Gilber (2010) point out three dimensions related to destination emotions, which are joy, love and positive surprise. Chen and Huang (2021) reveal the concepts of the tourist experience with two dimensions related to emotions: hedonic experience and uniqueness. Previous studies (Han et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2017; Tung and Ritchi, 2011) have demonstrated that with these two dimensions hedonic experience can influence tourists' post-visit evaluations and revisit intentions, whilst destination uniqueness encourages tourists to experience different things from their daily routines.

Moreover, safety is another factor that can affect tourist experience within emotions, especially between two countries with cultural differences. Zhu et al. (2020) discuss that 'stress' can emerge at any point of the journey and affect tourist experience. They highlight that tourists can have increased emotional reactions such as fear and anxiety towards cultural experiences and personal safety. Indeed, it is found that risk judgements and travel preferences have a positive relation as tourists worry mostly about crimes and accidents (Larsen et al., 2009). This can also be linked to different cultural backgrounds. A Chinese cultural background with Confucianism and Taoism instructs people to have a harmonious society, and as Hu et al. (2020) points out, tranquillity is a part of cultural background. Because Chinese tourists aim to have a peaceful inner journey, anything that can cause disturbance internally would affect their tourist experience, such as traffic delays, crowds and security. Thus, it relates to external factors, i.e. destination image.

However, Ruiz et al. (2021) argue that crowds do not have a significant influence on tourist experience, whereas physical settings do, i.e. characteristics, personal tendencies and social attitudes. In other words, physical crowding would not affect Chinese tourists' satisfaction significantly in regard to their experience, but social crowding and their thinking and evaluations affect much of their tourist experience. Therefore, emotions are related to both internal and external factors, which not only affected by physical destinations, but their own inner feelings, further shaping the Chinese tourist experience.

## **2.6 Knowledge Gap**

As stated, tourist experience has been discussed for over 50 years and more research has been interested in this topic, which highlights the key characteristics and relevance for theory and practice (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010; Gopalan and Narayan, 2010; Huang and Hsu, 2010; Wang et al., 2010b; Kim et al., 2011; Prebensen and Foss, 2011; Ritchie et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012; Matteucci, 2013; Sfantla and Björk, 2013; Wang et al., 2013). However, several knowledge gaps still need to be explored as tourist experience still lacks theoretical understanding (Morgan et al., 2010), a consensus definition (Caru and Cova, 2003) and the design of experience on both a theoretical and managerial level (Zehere, 2009; Murray et al., 2010). Due to the characteristics of the tourist experience, i.e. subjectivity, multi-dimensions and being multifaceted, it is not an easy task to define tourist experience. Instead, if the research could provide an explanatory account on how the tourist experience generates as a social phenomenon, it can contribute to theoretical understanding that can be applied in each field, which further guides the managerial level. It can be argued that the existing literature contributes to identify the influential factors discussed above as ‘input’ and ‘output’, but the generative process of tourist experience on how these factors interact to bring about the experience remains underexplained. The primary knowledge gap addressed in this thesis is therefore a general theoretical gap: to explain the generative process of tourist experience and to re-categorise influential factors within such an explanatory framework. This gap is not specific to Chinese tourists, while it concerns tourist experience more broadly. Chinese outbound tourists visiting the UK between 2017 and 2019 are adopted as a theoretically relevant case through which this general explanatory framework is developed and illustrated from a critical realist perspective.

## **2.7 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, three key elements have been investigated based on the tourism system (Leiper, 1979; Cooper, 2023), i.e. tourism, tourist, destination and its images. Each term has been defined based on existing literature for this study: a) Tourism is defined as individuals leave their ‘usual environment’, have a temporary stay in non-residential places, simultaneously allowing themselves to escape daily routines and seek encounters of change; b) A tourist is defined as an individual who stays far from their usual inhabited places over one night with different purposes of visit including leisure,

business and common interest; c) A destination is defined as a physical/geographical area that the main purpose is for visit. Destination image, as revealed more important in this study, is defined as an psychological entity that generates a sum of ideas, beliefs and perceptions from a tourist's cognitive, affective and conative evaluations on a destination. It then has introduced tourist experience as this study's focus, including theoretical development and its three characteristics, i.e. subjectivity, multi dimensions and multifaceted. The review from existing literature has mostly focused on those influential factors on Chinese tourists because they have been selected as a case study. The discussion has revealed several influential factors on tourist experience from external and internal aspects, i.e. economic and political constrains, destination image, Confucianism and Taoism from external, embodied Chinese traditional culture and emotions from internal. Lastly, it has revealed knowledge gap from existing literature, that is, the tourist experience has yet been defined and explained in a consensus way because of its complexity relating to three characteristics.

## **Chapter 3 CR-Led Theoretical Framework**

The previous chapter has identified that tourist experience lacks a consensus definition or explanation. In other words, there is something missing to understand the process/mechanism of how tourist experience emerges, that is, poorly conceptualised. To address this knowledge gap and achieve the depth of investigation, this chapter introduces Critical Realism (CR) as philosophical underpinnings (3.1) and Archer's Realist Social Theory (RST) (3.2) first. Archer also proffers an approach that can be applied to investigating each step of the social phenomenon generation process, named the morphogenesis approach (M/M) (3.3), which suits this research adequately based on the time frame of Chinese tourists' travelling, i.e. before, during and after the trip. It lastly provides a realist conceptualising of the tourist experience (3.4), including defining the tourist experience through a critical realist lens, and adopts a theoretical framework based on the theory-laden approach.

### **3.1 A Review of Critical Realism (CR)**

Critical Realism (CR) emerged in the 1980s, proposed by Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1989), in collaboration with numbers of British social theorists, including Margaret Archer (2000; 2003; 2007; 2013), Tony Lawson (2019), Alan Norrie (2016) and Andrew Sayer (1992; 2010; 2011). It is hard to define CR because there is no unitary framework or a set of beliefs through these sociologists, it is much more like a philosophical pool drawn from which Marxism, Bourdieusians, Habermasians, Latourian, and even poststructuralists have drawn (Archer et al., 1998). The reason for this is that CR is a meta-theoretical position rather than an empirical programme or a methodology. It is a reflexive philosophical stance concerned with providing a philosophically informed account of science and social sciences which can in turn inform our empirical investigations (Norrie, 2016).

However, there are still some consensus statements which could guide realist researchers' thinkings. CR is a branch of philosophy which distinguishes the world people can observe and the 'real' world. To be more specific, the 'observable' is defined as the world that can be known and understood by human perceptions and experiences, while the 'real' means that the world is independent from human actions, interactions, constructions or theories (Bhaskar, 1989). Due to the independent characteristics of the 'real' world, events may not be observed/experienced by human, but it still happens,

which refers to the ‘actual’ domain (Archer et al., 1998; Fleetwood and Ackroyd, 2004). Based on CR, the ‘real’ world has the structures and mechanisms which cause the events in the observable world; thus, social ontology (world) could be understood if people get to know the structures and mechanisms that generate the events (Koopmans and Schiller, 2022; Ongaro and Yang, 2024). Social theory helps researchers understand what happens in society, but it requires a multi-causal account, thus, it is necessary to understand the social structures and their relations, as well as the tendencies. Specifically, it is key to examine the social structures because they may have different effects and relations, for example, they may relate to geography or natural events, thus, an explanation provided to the event in social theory could be related to the whole context involving the people working with and in response to these things.

### **3.1.1 Three Domains**

In CR, there are ‘three pillars’ that underly it and provide guidance for thinking and explaining the phenomenon, which are the ontology realism, epistemological relativity, and judgmental rationality (Lawani, 2022). Each of these three pillars is not parallel but related to each other. Ontology realism provides the conditions for the possibility of judgmental rationality because the intransitive world serves as the basis for the exercise of judgment rationality. Epistemological relativity offers the rationale and necessity for judgemental rationality, our transitive knowing results in a plurality of assertions about the same world, mandating the exercise of judgemental rationality (Elder-Vass, 2010; Frederiksen and Kringelum, 2021). Therefore, Reed (2005) states that it is possible for social science to refine and improve its knowledge about the real world over time, and to make claims about reality which are relatively justified, while still being historical, contingent, and changing.

#### **3.1.1.1 Ontological Realism**

Ontology realism is about the inquiry of natural things. It reveals that the reality of the world exists and operates independently from human awareness and knowledge, which means sociology seeks to investigate what and how human know from the natural world, while these mostly are treated as an afterthought, and the reality is intransitive (Archer et al., 1998). In other words, social reality in CR is not flat but stratified, and the real structures that phase/cause actual events independently exist. Thus, Bhaskar (1989) defines three domains which layer within the reality: the empirical, the actual and the real. The empirical domain refers to those events that can be experienced, observed and

perceived, which is a transitive level that consists of social actions, decisions and meanings. However, the world cannot always be observed or perceived by individuals while events still occur, which is defined as the actual domain. The actual domain consists of all the events that happen in the world, regardless of human perceptions or awareness. They may or may not be observed/perceived. The distinction between the empirical and the actual domain is whether these events may be observed by human beings or not (see Table2). The real domain, as the core of the reality, is where the social structures exist, and how causal mechanisms generate the events. It consists of the underlying structures, mechanisms and powers, which generate the events in the actual domain. These underpinning structures and mechanisms may not always be active or observed, but they are essential for human beings to understand why events occur and why things happen.

Jessop and Morgan (2022) add that empirical domain refers to the actual events that can be observed or measured, and underlying structures or mechanisms in some circumstances, while the actual domain means the events resulting from various real tendencies and counter tendencies in specific initial conditions. There is a logical connection between the empirical and the real domain. Generative mechanisms push/make things occur but they are not easily observed, incidentally, they could be identified through the data that is generated from the empirical domain. Thus, CR provides a platform that allows human beings to identify and understand the invisible mechanisms that generate social phenomena from their daily experiences.

Table 2 Differences Among Three Domains

	Empirical Domain	Actual Domain	Real Domain
Experiences	√	√	√
Events		√	√
Causal Mechanisms			√

Source: Adapted from Bhaskar (2008, p.13 & p.56)

Moreover, Fletcher (2017) provides a visual iceberg to explain the three domains in CR (see Figure 6). The figure illustrates that the empirical domain takes about 10% of the whole iceberg, which means the events that been observed or experienced are a minority

of the reality whereas the majority of the mass stays “underneath the surface” (Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2011). From a critical realist’s lens, the actual and the real domain cannot be ignored even though they might be invisible. That is because the mass beneath the surface is actually the support/structure that keep icebergs stable, robust, and unbreakable. In other words, social structures and mechanisms generate the events and where the reality is, while human knowledge can only capture a small portion of it. At the same time, human knowledge is not only limited to perceived phenomenon but includes a broader reality outside of our knowledge, otherwise, the understanding of the world is not accurate (Bhaskar, 1989).

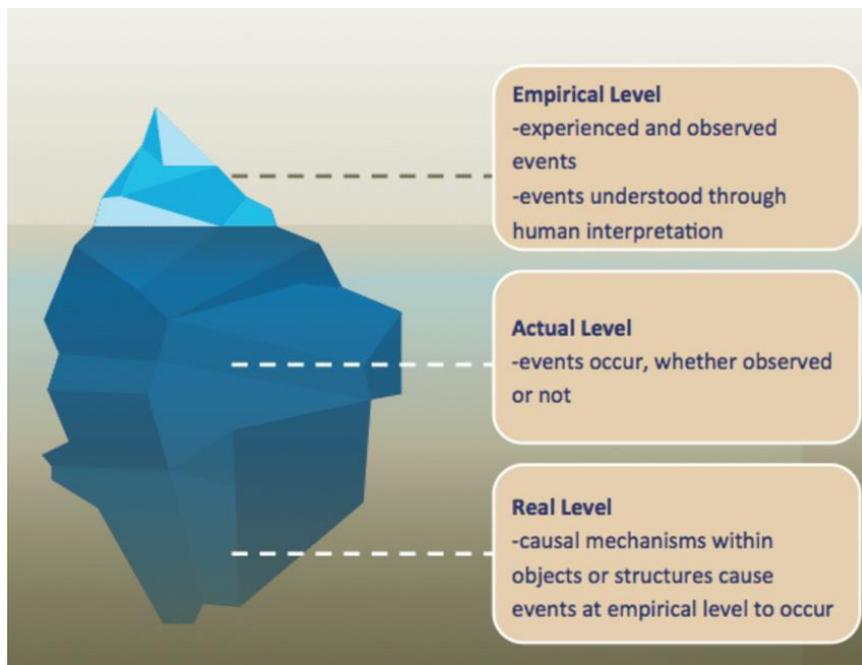


Figure 6 Iceberg Metaphor for Social Reality

Source: Fletcher, ‘Applying critical realism in qualitative research: methodology meets method’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, © copyright 2017. Reprinted by permission of Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Taylor & Francis Group, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401>

### 3.1.1.2 Epistemological Relativity

After the commitment of the autonomous existence of the natural world and the social reality, epistemological relativity is about investigations on reality, that is human knowledge. Critical realists state that human knowledge is historically, socially and culturally situated because it is dependent on the knower, which is created by others,

and thus, changes from knower to knower (Moshman, 2014). Nola (2015) also points out that the only way of knowing the world is to refer to the historical descriptions under particular situations, thus, it is fallible, finite, as well as context-, concept-, activity-dependent. Therefore, human knowledge is transitive while reality is intransitive. It does not mean that our knowledge is hopeless, but its representation could be limited and fallible. Thus, it requires us to think critically and have methodological pluralism.

#### 3.1.1.3 Judgmental rationality

As for the third pillar, judgemental rationality is the notion that there are non-arbitrary, yet non-absolute rational criteria for judgment that temper epistemic pluralism and allow for degrees of meaningful evaluation of knowledge without falling into complete relativism. Judgmental rationality is a central concept in CR, which offers a capability to make reasonable judgements on the current applied statements or theories based on the principles of the reality, i.e. adherence structures and mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1989; Lawson, 2019; Porpora, 1989, 2015; Sayer, 2000). It is opposed to judgemental relativism, which suggests that being realists on ontology while relativists on epistemology. Specifically, there are criteria for judging which accounts about the world are better or worse even if we have already made the relative judgements in our research so that we can ‘improve knowledge about the real world’, despite the fact we recognise the contingent nature of that knowledge (Isaksen, 2024). Thus, for critical realists, knowledge is not fact or opinion but is judgement.

In a practical explanation for researchers, judgemental rationality implies a commitment on attempting to explain the underlying social structures and mechanisms of reality, through testing and developing theories. It is one of three key principles in CR that allows researchers to critically rethink/judge the adequacy of theories and explanations of the stratified reality. Quraishi et al. (2022) note that this approach fosters a more profound explanatory account of social science and the motivations on why it happens, rather just what happened.

#### 3.1.1.4 Connection Among ‘Three Pillars’

Three key principles are not unrelated, in fact, they are connected to each other. Ontology realism provides a context to epistemology relativity, including the full knowledge with theories and explanations, that aims to describe and explain this real world. Epistemology relativity, as human knowledge, though it can be fallible, it still

opens up a space for ongoing dialogue and understanding of the reality. Judgemental rationality can be seen as a bridge that connects ontology realism and epistemology relativity (Bhaskar, 2008; Kirca Demirbaga, 2024; Lawani, 2020; Reed, 2005). It offers a criterion to evaluate the validity of human knowledge, grounded from observed phenomenon, and stimulated with the explanatory power to reveal the underlying structures and mechanism of reality. For example, the shadow of the cylinder (see Figure 7) could help to demonstrate the relationship among these three pillars. If two people (A and B) stand on different sides of the cylinder, A stands on the left while B stands in the front of it, then A would see a circle while B sees a square. This example shows how human knowledge could be finite and limited. However, the reality has not changed because it is still the same cylinder, thereby, the reality is independent to human knowledge (Norrie, 2016). Nevertheless, if there are more people looking at this cylinder from different angles, it could be possible that the final conclusion would be close or even accurate to the reality, that the cylinder shows different shapes with its shadows. In this example, it is evidenced that the reality of the world does not depend on human knowledge. In addition, human knowledge could be fallible, finite, where judgemental rationality is needed because it allows diversity of theories and explanations for the reality (Singh, 2018), and most importantly, it identifies the underlying social structures and mechanisms.

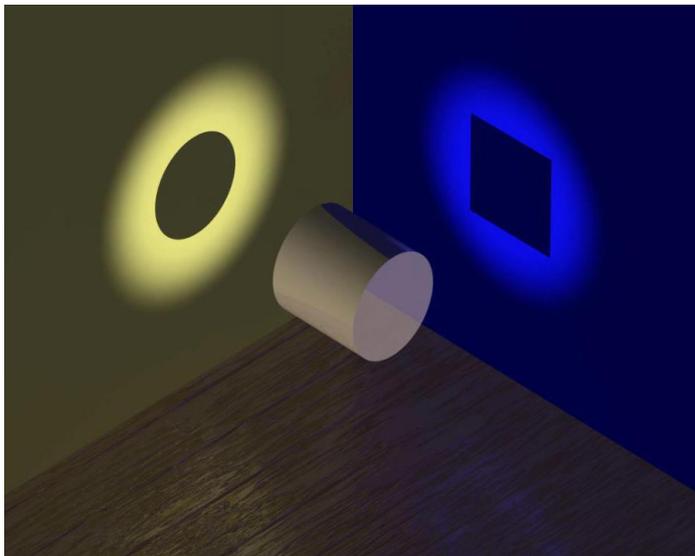


Figure 7 The Shadow of Cylinder

Source: <https://lightnightgreekfire.wordpress.com/2015/09/21/2d-shadows-of-3d-shapes/>

### 3.1.2 Causal Powers and Emergence

Archer et al. (1998) highlight that there are three characteristics of social reality, which are 'pre-existence' 'autonomy' and 'causal powers'. The former two of the characters could refer to ontology realism as mentioned earlier, the reality of the world pre-exists and it is not dependent on human awareness or knowledge, which is autonomy. Furthermore, 'autonomy' also refers to the emergence of properties, that each 'social entity' has its own property and characteristics. Although these social entities are independent from others, it still has the mechanisms or structures which may interact with each other. Bhaskar (1975) notes that causal powers are inherent properties of entities which enable them to act with and have certain outcomes, also, they can transform under particular conditions to produce different effects.

Water, as a generally accepted example, can put out a fire but its properties constituting of oxygen and hydrogen can exacerbate a fire. Similarly, water will be frozen at zero degrees while oxygen and hydrogen would be gas at the same temperature, thus, water has emergent properties (Elder-Vass, 2010). 'Causal power' could be explained as how the entity can have causal impacts on the world in its own right. These causal impacts are not just the sum of impacts but maybe contain emergent properties in specific conditions or situations, the same as the example of water. Sayer (1992) emphasizes that causal powers are entities' properties, and they can be identified/realised within specific contexts, or in interactions with other entities. This indicates that causal powers are not manifested automatically or deterministically, but through/under a set of conditions. Therefore, combined with the ontology realism, critical realists denote that social research should not only focus on the understanding of the certain phenomena, but how and why they can be connected through the causal powers of the entities instead. In other words, causal powers could help researchers or even human beings to identify social structures and mechanisms underlying the reality.

Following the depth of causal powers, it leads to the definition of 'emergent properties' (emergence). Emergence, as one of the key concepts in CR, referring to some properties which 'an entity' has while are not possessed by its parts (Bhaskar, 1975). Elder-Vass (2010, p. 17) points out that "emergence occurs when a whole possesses one or more emergent properties. An emergent property is one that is not possessed by any of the parts individually and that would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of a structuring set of relations between them." Emergence and emergent properties

could link back to the example of ‘water’ which has been discussed, i.e. hydrogen and oxygen do not have the property to extinguish a fire, while under a certain condition (causal powers), when hydrogen and oxygen form the water, it emerges new property (extinguish a fire) which is opposite to its parts. Thus, the entities and their parts’ properties could be similar, connected and even opposite, also, emergent properties do not necessarily happen all the time until there is a certain condition (causal powers lead). Elder-Vass (2010) denotes three clarifications for the emergent properties. Firstly, it should be noted that the concept of emergence is different from the temporal definition in our daily life, it is a relationship connecting the properties of the whole and its parts at a particular moment in time, rather than a temporal sense of appearance at the first time. Secondly, it must be clarified that both the ‘whole’ and ‘part’ are entities, the reason for using two terms is to identify the particular roles in certain cases. Elder-Vass (2010, p. 17) defines entities as “a persistent whole formed from a set of parts that is structured by the relations between these parts.” Thirdly, it should be manifested the meaning of property, referring to an entity’s intrinsic character that could have a causal effect on the world (Ron, 2010).

It could be demonstrated that emergent properties within the definition of ‘causal powers’ can be related to the three domains which have been mentioned earlier. To be more specific, ‘causal powers’ means that there are mechanisms or structures within the entities, which refers to the ‘real’ domain, while humans could acknowledge and observe these properties or not relate to the ‘empirical’ and the ‘actual’ domain (Martins, 2011). Following Bhaskar, actual events can be explained as the outcome of the inherent causal powers with entities, and the interactions among entities cause emergence. These are all independent to human knowledge, which are considered as the ‘real’, while they can be observed in actual events through identifying properties. In addition, Elder-Vass (2010) points out that the ‘cause’ concept does not only exist in the natural world, but also in the human social world, this will be explained in detail with ‘open system’ and ‘mechanisms’ later in this chapter.

### **3.1.3 Open System**

After discussing the reality as stratified and emergent, critical realists also consider social reality as an open system. Open system is defined by how that system impacts the world and in turn how it is affected by external reality (Bhaskar, 1979), which means the social world is not like a laboratory or machines that follow mathematical patterns.

Critical realists see the world as stratified that contains more than one layer, each layer processes its own emergent properties powers, while these are irreducible to the structure (Mingers, 2014). Thus, social reality is not simply caused by a single factor as chemistry processes in a laboratory, instead, it needs a complex understanding to explain the world.

It would be beneficial to combine concepts of open system and causation (related to causal powers and emergence) together to demonstrate them in more depth. The positivists claim that Event A will have effect on/lead to Event X, but critical realists argue that happens in laboratory scenarios which is a closed system, and it should be called 'correlation' rather than causation (Fleetwood, 2017; McAvoy and Butler, 2018). Specifically, in critical realist perspectives, the world is not working as machines, it does not have formulars or particular patterns. It could trigger other causes that activate/intervein/codetermine the Event X (Price, 2023). This could also be explained related to causal powers and emergence (link to 3.1.2), events that occur may include numbers of causal powers, and new ones may emerge when they interact with each other, so it can lead to different results even in the same situation or conditions.

Figure 8 illustrates that Cause 1 leads to Event 1 and 2 in a closed system, but in the real world, it does not occur in that simple way. Cause 1 may lead to Event 1&3, while Event 2 not triggered, because other causal powers emerge between interactions. For example, a ping pong ball drops vertically on the floor because of gravity, but in an open system, it can be caught by someone or even change the direction of falling because of the wind blowing. So, social reality may have various causes that lead to different events, while it is possible that some events may not happen as predicted because of the interactions between causal powers. As Bygstad et al. (2016, p. 83) note: "In open systems these outcomes are not deterministic, but probabilistic and contingent on other mechanisms." Therefore, the open system ontology redefines that causal powers cannot determine events, instead, they can operate tendencies by setting possibilities and constraints, which may or may not be realised in any of the outcomes, thus, they cannot predict events.

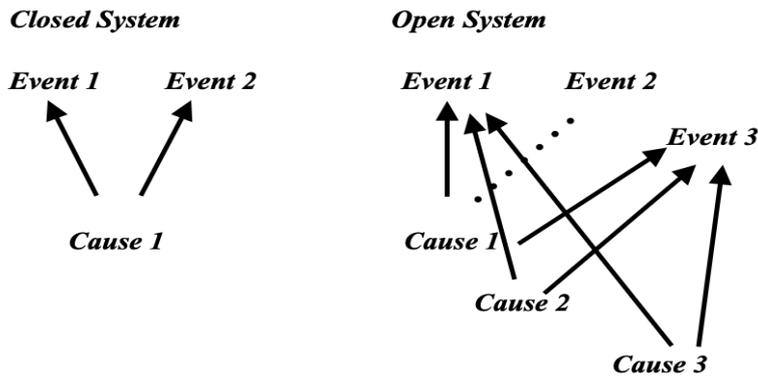


Figure 8 Comparison Between the Closed System and Open System

Source: Adapted from Bhaskar (1989)

However, there is a debate on partially open and closed systems. Fleetwood (2017) advocates that the ‘system’ in CR is about “(ir)regularities in the flux of events and states of affairs”, so it is impossible to have a genuinely open system. The arguments are all around a key word, which is ‘demi-reg’ (Fleetwood, 2016; Lawson, 1998; Næss, 2019). Originally, ‘demi-reg’ refers to such partial regulations, defined as “A demi-reg is precisely a partial event regularity which prima facie indicates the occasional, but less than universal, actualisation of a mechanism or tendency, over a definite region of time-space” (Archer et al., 1998, p. 13). Fleetwood (2017) argues ‘demi-regs’ as ‘whenever event x, then sometimes, but not always event y’. Næss (2019) concludes that Fleetwood (2016) sees ‘demi-regs’ as patterns between events, while Lawson and Bhaskar (1998) understand it as relationships between entities that retain causal power and mechanisms. Fleetwood (2016) has contributed highly valuable critiques on the open system in mainstream economics, but his work denies entirely the open system, which Næss (2019) states “throws some babies out with the bathwater”.

In line with Danermark et al. (2019), Haugaard (2003) and Karlsson (2011), Næss (2019) argues ‘demi-reg’ represents probability distributions existing in the real world. His arguments mainly stand for the social world, that is, social power cannot exist if the social world is entirely contingent. Specifically, Haugaard (2003) highlights the different degree of openness in the social system because social structures and social entities can generate different degrees of ‘predictability’. This kind of predictability is related to the probabilities, that can/will be fallible, but not all predictions are equally

fallible. It means social structures can be activated when actors assume the existence of probabilistic relationships, such as planning and policymaking (Karlsson, 2011). Nevertheless, Archer (2003, 2007) supports Bhaskar's (1989) comments that the social world is fully open, while some social structures may change slowly, which can be seen as an unchanged status, but it is only a temporary status. To explain it, Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach illustrates that social structures are morphogenesis (transformed) or morphostasis (reproduced). Therefore, this study holds the opinion that the social world is fully open.

#### **3.1.4 Generative Mechanisms**

Generative mechanisms are considered as the intermediate to investigate the reality ('real' domain). Bhaskar (1975, p. 50) locates generative mechanisms at the 'real' domain and defines "'powers' or 'potentialities' which may or may not be exercised". Danermark et al. (2019, p. 47) also highlight that "a mechanism is that which can cause something in the world to happen and in this respect the mechanisms can be of many kinds." Generative mechanisms are used to explain why observable events happen, it is described as a 'trans-empirical' but real existing entity (Blom and Morén, 2015). Even though there are some arguments about Bhaskar's definition on generative mechanisms, or claiming it is impossible to identify mechanisms (Ritz, 2023), the consensus statements confirm that generative mechanisms stay in the real domain, and they are essential to explain the process of social reality. Blom and Morén (2015) also point out that generative mechanisms can be identified indirectly by analytical work, i.e. theory-building, whereas these processes are based on empirical observations. It could be explained that generative mechanisms are underpinnings at the real domain that shape the empirical and actual domain within ontology. Specifically, they can be observed from the empirical/actual domain, while they stay at the real domain. Furthermore, Danermark et al. (2019) highlight that stratified structures, emergency and contexts in critical realist ontology are preconditions for a better insight into interactions between mechanisms. Thus, mechanisms can be seen as a 'lighthouse' that provide guidance and directions for human beings to understand insights of the real world.

It is noted about the relationship between mechanisms and causal powers. They both could result in various events in different contexts based on the nature of an open system and emergence, thus, 'tendencies' is one of the key concepts when explaining

phenomena in the real world (Scambler, 2020). The concept of tendencies refers to “the idea of continuing activity as distinct from that of enduring power” and “is designed to capture” (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 50). Danermark et al. (2019) explain that tendencies are ‘transfactual’, the outcomes and events are separated and independent from each other. In other words, powers or mechanisms and their effects may not be realised by human beings, but it is irreducible and cannot be neglected. Sayer (2010) also points out that the relationship between causal powers or mechanisms and their effects is contingent but not fixed. It is not denying these effects are uncaused, but there could be other possibilities, or to say, there is not only one fixed causation between them.

Furthermore, it may contain a set of different mechanisms to generate an event, especially when a process changes, it normally involves several mechanisms while these mechanisms are only contingently related to one another. This means the same mechanisms can produce different events depending on conditions, inversely, different mechanisms may produce the same result (Sayer, 2010; Danermark et al., 2019). Therefore, a scientific explanation shouldn’t only stop at A followed by B, but on how A produces B or in what specific context, and if there are any real causes between A and B (Danermark et al., 2019). Hereby, it concludes the relationship between reality, emergence, causal powers and mechanisms as follows:

*“[...] it is significant that the world is not only differentiated and structured but also stratified. The mechanisms belong in separate hierarchically arranged strata of reality, where each stratum is composed by mechanisms from underlying strata. At the same time, this composition results in the emergence of qualitatively new objects, having their own powers and mechanisms, which cannot be reduced to strata that are more basic. [...] social science is always carried out under more open conditions: Change is a constitutive characteristic of human societies.”* (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 65).

### **3.2 Realist Social Theory (RST)**

Realist Social Theory (RST), as the main sociology theory in this research, has been developed systematically by Margaret Archer who is the main representative of CR over forty years. RST begins from three ontological premises about social reality, namely intransitivity, transfactuality and stratification. Intransitivity refers to the entities that are supposed to be independent of their identifications, specifically, they exist independently and each of them has its own property (properties). This is a

condition of the possibility of social science because the explanation of the social is what it is, regardless of the way human beings view or manipulate it.

Secondly, the core premise is the transfactuality of mechanisms, which means continuous and invariant. Generally, it is implicit in transfactuality that society is a result of history, but this is not the same as viewing society as wholly consequential on history. Finally, the realists insist that reality is stratified with three domains which are the real, the actual and the empirical. This requires human beings to investigate deeply in social reality, i.e. why and how events occur, focusing on mechanisms and processes, whilst RST aids to unpack it in more depth and specific. RST offers an explanatory framework on analysing structure, culture and agency, at the same time, it links these three domains and shows how they interact with each other, to reveal how generative mechanisms operate event occur in each domain.

### **3.2.1 Social Structures**

Before understanding the key concept of RST, it might be better to acknowledge the essential philosophy that underpins it. RST originates from Bhaskar's (1988) CR, which develops from society and social structure concepts. Society is a core condition of human action and influences it, but that human action is in turn a necessary condition of society, which it continually shapes and reshapes. Bhaskar initially saw the work of Anthony Giddens (1979) on duality of structure, but later accepted the critique of Giddens by Margaret Archer, who argued that Giddens conflated structure and agency. Thus, they introduced structures and agency domains in social theory, which have been talked about ambiguously earlier. Bhaskar (1998) sees social structures as having emergent properties which are the same as the structures in the natural world.

However, there are three 'ontological limitations' of social structures, which are different from natural structures. Firstly, social structures do not exist independently of the activities they govern, which implies that they cannot be observed and identified independently of the activities. Secondly, they do not exist entirely of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing in their activity, which reveals that they depend on human beliefs, and it is potential to transform them. Thirdly, they may be only relatively enduring because of their dependence on human beliefs (Bhaskar, 1998). Archer (2000) also states that social structures are reproduced or transformed continually and exist only in virtue and exercised in human agency. Porpora (1989) concludes four views of social structure:

1. Patterns of aggregate behaviour that are stable over time
2. Lawlike regularities that govern the behaviour of social facts
3. Systems of human relationships among social positions
4. Collective rules and resources that structure behaviour

The third conception which is accepted by most of the critical realists, states that “social structure as a causal mechanism constituted by relationships among social positions that accounts for social phenomena in terms of tendencies, strains and forces inherent in the nexus of those relationships” (Porpora, 1989, p.340). This view concerns the causal role of objective relationships which has been lacuna in Giddens’s theory.

As for agents’ domain, Bhaskar (1989) reveals human beings have the capacity of intentional actions as emergent properties, thus, he points out that those powers associated with the mind where emergent from matter are both real, which is causally efficacious and irreducible. Archer et al. (1998) highlights that human agents do not create the social structure but reproduce or transform it. Human activity is seen as ‘consisting in the transformations by efficient (intentional) agency of pre-given material (natural and social) causes’ (Archer et al., 1998). The reason for this explanation refers to a) pre-existent structures as generative mechanisms; b) each domain has its own causal powers and they interplay with each other in this stratified social world, and c) society is non predictable but explicable outcomes arising from interactions between the above. Archer et al. (1998, p. 369) state as follows:

*“Society is the ever-present condition and continually reproduced outcome of human agency: this is the duality of structure. And human agency is both work (generically conceived), that is (normally conscious) production, and (normally unconscious) reproduction of the conditions of production, including society: this is the duality of praxis.”*

### **3.2.2 Analytical Dualism: Structure, Agency and Culture (SAC)**

Following Bhaskar’s (1988) concept of society and social structures, Archer (1995) sees two aspects within social reality, structure and agency. They interact with each other but independently exist, so are analytically distinct. To be more specific, Archer develops her realist social theory to analyse social phenomena from three domains: structure, agency and culture (SAC), and along three phases – structure conditioning, socio-cultural interactions, and structure elaboration. These three domains could be

analysed independently/distinctly while they interact with each other to generate a new social phenomenon, which is known as ‘analytical dualism’ (Archer, 2003). ‘Analytical dualism’ could be understood and explained based on ontological realism, i.e. causation and emergence. Following the example of ‘water’ in 3.1.2, water is consisted of oxygen and hydrogen but three of these entities have their own different properties which can be distinct from each other. When oxygen and hydrogen interact with a chemical spark, a unique property emerges as water. Thus, none of them can be reduced, regardless of the water molecule as a whole, or oxygen, or hydrogen as parts, because they have their own properties which could be considered as an entity themselves.

With the application on social reality, Archer (2003) states that structure and agency are two divided entities. Structure pre-exists agency, which indicates that structure will not change its underlying mechanisms because of the agents (individuals). Specifically, structure has its own norms and rules as its own mechanisms regardless of an agent’s existence. Agents contain their own power including “thinking, deliberating believing, intending, loving and so forth” (Archer, 2003, p. 2), whereas structure does not possess these powers, rather it constrains and enables in ways that are distinct from individuals (Lindsey and Wiltshire, 2021). However, social structures need human beings’ interactions, that is, structures can emerge from people’s actions and interactions, but they cannot be reduced to people.

At the same time, agency emerges from various elements such as individuals, communities, biological factors and culture, but it also cannot be reduced to structure or any other domains. In other words, structures can be considered as a platform that predates agents and provides conditions for agents’ interactions, but it is always a platform no matter there are agents or not. On the other side, agents’ behaviours and interactions do not only rely on this platform, meaning that they can still interact with each other on other platforms. Thus, it is evidenced that structures and agency are conditions to each other, but not the only condition that can change their existence. In addition, Porpora (2013, p. 27) makes a distinction between structure and agency as “structure understood as social relations and the agency of people within any such social structural arrangement.” Therefore, the logic is that different entities intervene and interact but are not reduced to one another because they have different properties or powers which can distinguish themselves to others, and these explanations refer to Archer’s ‘analytical dualism’.

Following Archer's analytical dualism, culture is the third domain which cannot be neglected. The 'cultural system' has significant causal powers alongside social structure and human agency (Newman, 2020). In the traditional definition, culture has been regarded as something like a belief that is shared and coherent, however, realists argue that it fails to explain cultural divisions and cultural contradictions because it does not distinguish 'meanings' and 'sayings' (Li et al., 2023). Culture has subjective and objective moments. Archer (1996) defines that the subjective moment refers to the meanings of things that are perceived by social actors (agents), while the objective moment refers to cultural system (structure) that consists of objective items such as texts, theories etc. Archer's cultural system is composed of items of 'intelligibilia', which is defined as "all items that are capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone" (Archer, 1996, p. 104). Therefore, the subjective moment (meanings) takes place at the agency domain while the objective moment (sayings) is regarded as the structural domain. As a result, culture is another domain that interacts with structural and agency domains, however, the culture domain consists of 'meanings' and 'sayings' which are not directly connected, so they need to be analysed separately as well (Li et al., 2023).

### **3.3 The Morphogenetic Approach (M/M)**

Archer develops her morphogenetic approach (henceforth M/M) which resonates with Roy Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Action (TMSA) (1989). The former highlights time as a critical mechanism in social development. The morphogenetic approach embraces the notions of morphogenesis and morphostasis. In that, morphogenesis refers to the transformation of the existing system whilst morphostasis refers to the reproduction of the existing system (Archer, 1995). M/M approach is an explanatory framework that works from a tripartite meta-theory that allows separated analysis on 'structure' 'culture' and 'agency' (SAC) (Newman, 2020). It has been widely used in different disciplines to explain how a social phenomenon of interest emerges, because it provides a way to break up the process over time so that researchers are able to investigate mechanisms from different domains in a before-during-after scheme. Archer (1998, p. 359) also explains "pre-existence and autonomy denote discontinuities in the structuring/ restructuring process which can only be grasped by making analytical distinctions between the 'before' ( $T^1$ ), the 'during' ( $T^2-T^3$ ) and 'after' ( $T^4$ )". In addition, it offers a framework for social research, elaborating a theoretical

system with CR philosophy underpinned (Newman, 2020).

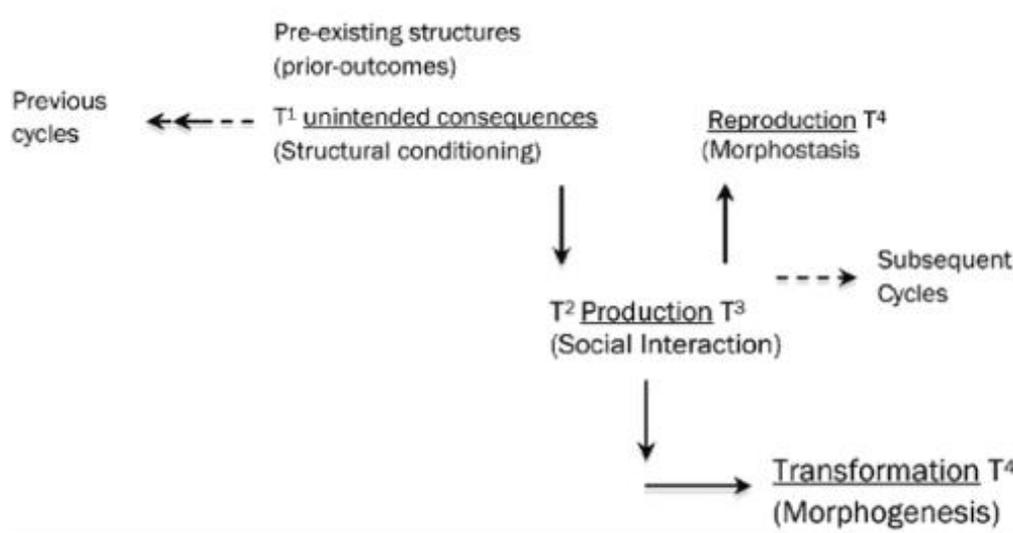


Figure 9 Archer's Morphogenetic Approach

Source: Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenic Approach*, © copyright 1995 Cambridge University Press. Reproduced with permission of The Licensor through PLSclear.

Within this cycle (see Figure 9), Archer (1995) states that the pre-existing structure at T<sup>1</sup> possesses causal powers and liabilities, which conditions agency (i.e. structural conditioning). Seal (2016, p. 271) clearly states that “current social and cultural conditions are a result of past social interaction between agents, which condition the current context within which social agents operate”. This can be related to ontological realism as stated earlier. Structure predates agency, which provides conditions for agency, so it only has structure and culture at T<sup>1</sup> stage. It is notable to clarify that ‘condition’ does not mean force or anything related to the law to obey, rather, it is a ‘reason’ (Horrocks, 2009).

Phase 2 occurs when agents' interactions are involved, which refers to socio-cultural interactions taking place from T<sup>2</sup> to T<sup>3</sup> under this specific condition. It could be explained that structure and culture do not determine agents (individuals). Individuals can explore their own inherited powers regardless of the correctness, because human knowledge could be fallible and finite. However, agents' interactions emerge new properties and powers whether they are correct or not. At this phase, reflexivity is an undeniable factor in terms of agents' internal conversation such as personal concerns, intentions, self-interest at a given time (Archer, 2003).

Phase 3 is defined as transformation (morphogenesis) or reproduction (morphostasis), both situations can be seen as the end of the cycle ( $T^4$ ) and the start of the next new cycle. The link, hereby, is the actions which emerge in Phase 2 which can act back to structure in two ways at  $T^4$ : transformation (morphogenesis) and reproduction (morphostasis). Mirani (2013) points out that actions may have influence on structures, that “reinforce and consolidate its premises”, which respectively refers to the morphogenetic change and continues the existing context. Archer (2020) adds that social theories’ intrinsic character is temporality. This requires human beings to be ready for ontological change which could occur at any time and be prepared to start another morphogenetic cycle if there is a significant one.

According to the morphogenetic approach, critical realists agree that the social world can be distinguished from the natural world and the difference lies in the self-sustaining attributes, that is, the social world cannot be eternal, as well as social theory, because it has reproduction or transformation based on generative mechanism and emergent properties. Archer (2020) notes that only “a myriad of agential ‘doings’ (including thinking, believing and imagining)” make social entities in a higher position to be identified/recognised and keep them relatively enduring. It can be revealed from Archer’s morphogenetic approach that: a) it is not a certain unchanged social world, along with social theories, on the contrary, the awareness of changes are necessary; b) avoid the synchronic claims that structural and agential doings do not necessarily happen at the same time, for example, if a structural property endures, it does not necessarily mean some sustaining agential doings contribute to that. Therefore, Archer (2020, p. 144) puts as: “by issuing in structural elaboration, not only is structure transformed but so is agency, as part and parcel of the same process – as the double morphogenesis.” It is explained that agency can ineluctably reshape itself at any given  $T^4$ , when it reshapes structural and cultural domains.

Specifically, Archer (2020) denotes that the obvious change from social orders can affect ‘people’ (agency) through ‘the systemic, the institutional, the role array and the positional’, thus, double morphogenesis could be seen as agency itself transformed through ‘re-grouping’, while affected by the transformation of structure, this leads to the new  $T^1$  instead of  $T^4$  and starts the next M/M cycle. For example, tourists could change their impressions or interest after visiting a particular destination, the potential reasons can relate to the agential doings such as the interactions with residents during

the trip, or comparison and evaluation with their own country during or after the trip etc. These changes become new tourist experience at  $T^4$  and also can be seen as  $T^1$  for the next cycle. Practically, it means the tourist, as an individual, may have different interest or emotions for the next trip based on their last experience.

### **3.4 A Realist Conceptualisation of Tourist Experience**

#### **3.4.1 Redefine the Tourist Experience from a Realist Perspective**

In order to explore the mechanisms of the emerging tourist experience, it is critical to identify a definition of it. Volo (2009) points out that it is essential to define the tourist experience first before moving to management and creation of experiences. Tourist experience has been the main focus for both academia and industry, but it is still vague and misses a consensus definition (Jennings et al., 2009). Experiences are one of the most difficult concepts to be defined because of their complexity and subjectivity (Ritchie and Hudson, 2009). However, there is still some literature trying to explain it more conceptually to help understand specifically and be more practically to examine in different contexts (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010; Gopalan and Narayan, 2010; Huang and Hsu, 2010; Wang et al., 2010b; Kim et al., 2011; Prebensen and Foss, 2011; Ritchie et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012; Matteucci, 2013; Sfantla and Björk, 2013; Wang et al., 2013). Based on the existing theories, experience definitions have been collected in a structured view. It shows the general definitions from different fields, sorted by date and scientific discipline, which may contribute to a better understanding of the concept for this study (Uriely, 2005; Cutler and Carmichael, 2010; Walls et al., 2011).

Most of the scholars have defined the ‘tourist experience’ from tourism and marketing fields (see Appendix 1), but few of them recognized it from a sociological perspective, especially none of them examines the depth and ‘real’ domain from the CR perspective. According to CR as the underpinning of this research’s philosophy, this research sees tourist experience as a social phenomenon, that encompasses both subjective and objective dimensions. The tourist experience, in this research, is redefined as *a social phenomenon of the interplay between the tourist’s subjective interpretations of the observable events, and the underlying structures that shape these interactions*. Before explaining this definition in detail, it should be emphasised that the tourist’s experience is not plural because it should be an individual’s thinking process. Specifically, this research holds an opinion that tourist experience is an individual’s internal conversation, because individuals can have different thinking

processes that operate their experience outcomes based on their past experiences and demographical conditions; also, the observable events from the structural domain may/may not trigger the power on tourists, thus, researchers should make an attempt to explain this phenomenon, rather than simply summarising into a collective activity.

Referring to the definition, CR emphasises the underlying mechanisms and investigates how they interact with each other to generate the phenomenon, also known as observable events. In the context of tourism, structural settings could influence and constrain tourist experience, such as economic conditions, policies, and social norms etc., for example, Urry (1990) highlights that destinations' promotions often followed the guidance of broader economic and political agendas, which shape tourist experience in a specific way.

However, these structures cannot determine the tourist experience. Tourists, known as the agents from a critical realist perspective, are not passively controlled by structural factors. Archer (2003) proffers the concept of 'internal conversation', that emphasises agents/tourists can reflect upon the observable events and interpret their individual experience based on personal histories and expectations. The reflexivity (see 3.4.5.2) allows agents to construct their own understandings and meanings, which can enhance, resist, and even reshape the structures. One example can prove agents are not fully controlled by structures, that is, tourists can be influenced by different information from various sources, but they can still have their tourist experience even though they did not read or gain any information about the destination. Another example is that tourists might visit a destination where they did not enjoy their trip and they posted on social media or shared by word-of-mouth, stating how unsatisfied they were along the journey, which can be seen as 'sayings'. This sharing behaviour ('sayings') can change other tourists' expectations ('meanings') at the structural domain, so it proves that agents could reproduce/reshape the structure. These two examples justify that structure can influence agents but not fully determine them, and agents can act back to structure which also have their effect on structures in particular ways. Therefore, this research redefines the tourist experience through the lens of CR, as a social phenomenon that emphasises the active role of the tourist and the interplay between agency and structure.

### **3.4.2 Theory-laden (How?)**

Critical realists agree that the theory-laden approach can be better understood and applied in social science research, as it provides more space to get into the depth of

social reality, and further into the mechanisms and explain the phenomenon. It should be noted that theory-laden refers to applying a general theory to help with research objectives, and the rest of the process needs to be explored by researchers. In other words, researchers will not need to restrict themselves to each element in the theory or limit themselves inside a concrete context, but to investigate based on the empirical data and follow the mechanisms' leads, that is, theory-laden is not theory-determined.

Danermark et al. (2019) point out that two traditional theorizing methods, i.e. middle-range theory and grounded theory both have limits on empirical bias, so 'general theory' was highlighted put up as an insight guidance for critical realist research. General theory has been summarised in three different characteristics: a) 'comprehensive processes at a macro level'; b) covers 'all-embracing systems'; c) constitutes 'foundational (tranfactual) social structures and mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 155). However, Danermark et al. (2019) argue that it seems futile to embrace different theories in one system because theories have different ontological levels and structures. Thus, it is suggested to apply theories with general structures and mechanisms instead of trying to find an exact theory at a concrete level (Danermark et al., 2019; Li, 2022; Sayer, 1992). Indeed, critical realists always go beyond empirical and observable levels to a 'deep' level. Ontology, to critical realists, is prioritized more than epistemology, but it allows and stimulates a discursive transcending process from the intransitive to transitive and produces and updates knowledge.

However, one of criticisms is that CR is overly abstract and metaphysical, offering a sophisticated ontology but limited guidance on concrete research procedures, which risks leaving a gap between philosophical claims and empirical practice (Hammersley, 1992; Cruickshank, 2003). Furthermore, CR's emphasis on underlying generative mechanisms may encourage researchers to 'read' theory into data, inferring mechanisms that cannot be directly observed and thus remain speculative (Collier, 1994; Sayer, 2000). Joseph (2000) also argues that CR can slide into a form of structural determinism, privileging deep structures at the expense of lived experience and agency. Porpora (2015) criticises Archer's analytical dualism with artificially separating structure, culture and agency in ways that can underplay their empirical entanglement. Finally, CR's commitment to epistemic relativism and judgemental rationalism has raised concerns about whether it can fully avoid privileging the researcher's own explanatory framework, particularly in cross-cultural contexts (Maxwell, 2012).

This study has engaged with these critiques in both its design and its analytic practice. Firstly, the research explicitly applied CR principles through a clearly analytic strategy that combined narrative and thematic analysis with retroductive and retrodictive reasoning (Bhaskar, 1978; Danermark et al., 2002), to address that CR is too abstract and methodologically vague. Specifically, Chapters 4 to Chapter 6 make transparent on how empirical ‘events’ and ‘sayings’ in interviews and website data were coded, how properties were identified, and how these were linked step-by-step to proposed structural, cultural and agential mechanisms. Thus, the study responded directly to calls for CR research that demonstrated a clear ‘logic of inquiry’ rather than relying on philosophical assertions alone (Sayer, 2000).

Secondly, to mitigate the risk of speculative or theory-driven mechanism claims, the analysis grounded all inferences firmly in participants’ narratives, as well as on Chinese travel websites. Mechanisms such as identity/ties, reflexivity, emotions and cultural difference were not imposed a priori but emerged through repeated engagement with the data, and their formulation remains explicitly provisional and fallible, in line with CR’s own epistemology.

Thirdly, Archer’s SAC principles were used not to reduce tourist experience to structural forces, but to clarify how structural enablers/prohibitors, cultural ‘sayings’ and agential properties interact in open systems. The thesis explicitly acknowledges that these domains intertwined and are analytically, rather than ontologically or separated, thereby responding to critiques of analytical dualism as overly rigid. Finally, the problem of researcher privilege and cultural standpoint was confronted through reflexive practice and the limitations discussion: the study recognises the researcher’s positionality as a Chinese academic, treats mechanism identification as retroductive and contestable rather than definitive, and frames its contribution as an analytically robust but context-bound explanation rather than a universal law. In these ways, the study not only adopts a critical realist stance but also engages critically with its limitations, using the main critiques of CR as prompts to strengthen the transparency, reflexivity and methodological rigour of the research.

### **3.4.3 Structural Properties (Rights and Obligations)**

Society is often constructed in a hierarchy where people have different rights and obligations to fit in (Archer, 1995; Porpora, 1989). The rights and obligations can be seen as emerging properties of the Structural System (Lawson, 2019), which can affect

but not determine individuals' and groups' actions. Specifically, pre-existing structures condition the influences that shape individuals and groups' actions. Simultaneously, they are actualised by providing varying levels of autonomy that allows agents to act upon their own interests to further develop their experience. In other words, the allocation of interest and resources left from the pre-existing structures can have an impact on agents' course of actions, and these influences are the way that structure expresses its incumbent to maintain its social position. But these influences also provide the freedom for agents to maintain their interests (Li et al., 2023a).

According to Chapter 2, economic and political constraints can be seen as rights and obligations. China's government has developed the country's outbound tourism since the 1980s and regulated the whole industry afterwards, including capacity and capability. Furthermore, China's government has built up a strong diplomatic power that maintains a positive political relationship to encourage travel flows between two countries (Hall, 1994). As a result, Chinese tourists can visit other countries and enjoy their leisure holidays outbound through these developments and involvements. However, it should be noted that the government involvement cannot determine tourists' actions. Tourists can have different leisure activities based on their own interests in the destination rather than being fully restricted or limited, for example, they can choose to visit museums instead of being close to nature, travel individually or join travel groups, without getting permission from the government, although travel agencies still need to be approved by the government. Nevertheless, they still need to follow the general rules and regulations which may constrain a part of their activities, that is, they are not completely free from any restrictions. For example, tourists have responsibility to protect local nature while they enjoy leisure time (Zhang and Xu, 2020), and they cannot take the displays from museums because of their personal interests. Thus, rights and obligations can be understood as a 'structural frame', that individuals and groups have freedom to act within this frame but also be restricted at some points not beyond the frame.

#### **3.4.4 Cultural Properties**

Archer (1996) points out that the analytical dualism of the culture, that is, 'sayings' and 'meanings' are two separated parts within the culture, and they need to be analysed separately. 'Sayings' are the objective moment of culture that describe realities that have been codified and identified at the structural domain, while 'meanings' are the

subjective moments that are perceived by social actors at the agency domain (Archer, 1996; Archer, 2012). For example, Chinese websites may portray the UK as a destination with natural scenery, attractions and a rich cultural heritage background, but the information may not be perceived in the same outcome to individual tourists as what these websites intended. Hence, there is consistency and inconsistency between the information delivered by Chinese websites (objective moment) and tourists' perceptions on the information (subjective moment).

Archer (1996) explains the reasons for the dualism situation (consistencies/inconsistencies) are related to power and interests. Firstly, power is defined as “a relational property... not some kind of generalised capability” (Archer, 1996, p. 340). In a realist perspective, each entity has its own power, and it cannot be neglected regardless of whether it influence agencies or not. In this case, VisitBritain has its own power via delivering information and influencing tourists' perceptions about the UK, but it does not have power on Chinese outbound tourists because of the media regulations as they do not have access to visit the website. Yet still, the power is real and existing no matter whether it can have influence on particular groups or not due to the access to available resources.

Secondly, interests refer to “things that matters to individuals and/or groups” (Li et al., 2023b, p. 699), that is, even power can be achieved to social actors, and different receivers' responses can be various in accordance with their capability of human agency. For example, tourists' perceptions can be different even if they receive the same information from Chinese travel websites because of the individual focal points such as the agent's background, education level and hobbies etc. Two situations can emerge in a cultural context: a) if it is driven by a consistency, the power and interests can protect it or even migrate to promotive interests; b) if it leads to an inconsistency situation, the power and interests can get social actors involved to correct it or to exploit the systemic contradictions (Li et al., 2023b). Thus, cultural properties exist in each context, i.e. Cultural System (CS), Socio-cultural interaction (S-C), interact with other properties at the structural and agency domain. These interactions can lead to systemic inconsistency or consistency, and further account for cultural elaboration.

#### 3.4.4.1 Destination Image

According to CR and the nature of the concept, destination image is an entity which has its own properties as intermediates between the cultural system (CS) at the structural

domain and effects on the S-C level at the agency domain. Destination image has both cognitive and affective sides that could attract tourists regardless of the physical characteristics or emotions, the natural scenes or the human made attributions. To be more specific, tourists have the cognitive valuations for the destination before the trip. Chinese tourists can have different perceptions about the UK either after receiving the information from Chinese travel websites or even not receiving the information at all because of the power and interest.

Bringing with them these various perceptions, tourists can interact with the destination during the trip. They evaluate based on their physical interactions and observations and the inconsistency/consistency may emerge compared to their perceptions before the trip. This may/may not emerge new properties based on both the cognitive and affective values, in accordance with their power and interest. In other words, tourists can generate new feelings which are different from their previous knowledge or others' experience based on their own interests and collectivism values, which refers to the 'meanings' to Chinese tourists.

After the trip, Chinese tourists evaluate their whole experience, which may/may not emerge new cultural properties for the destination image, but the process of this protect/correct for consistency/inconsistency is seen as cultural elaborations, so it will become a new entity with emerged properties in the next Cultural System (CS) to affect other Chinese tourists. For example, the destination may have new attributions which are created by tourists' ideas or new marketing strategies for attracting other tourists in further circumstances as a start of the next morphogenetic cycle. Therefore, the destination image, as an entity with its own properties, interacts and influences Chinese outbound tourists at the CS and S-C level which interplays between the structural and agency domains along their journey.

According to literature review on destination image (Table 1), it is argued these factors can be overlapped and not provide a clear-cut guidance (Li and Stepchenkova, 2012). Indeed, most literature (Guo et al., 2007; Jin and Wang, 2016; Li et al., 2005; Sparks and Pan, 2009; Yu and Weiler, 2001) have paid attention on either the general influential factors or the indicator of the most influential factors on outbound tourist experience, but they fail to be clear enough to categorise these factors. As stated in Cooper (2021), amenities and attributes could be two dimensions to investigate the influence on outbound Chinese tourists. Amenities encompass standard infrastructures that provide

physical functions to tourists, i.e. food, accommodation, transportation, entertainment. While attributes refer to features and characteristics of the destination, that is, the 'meanings', i.e. iconic attractions, museums, historical buildings and architecture, films, literary. Thus, this research makes an attempt to distinguish those identified factors on Chinese tourists between amenities and attributes.

#### 3.4.4.2 Sociocultural Patterns

From a realist perspective, the cultural system develops because of the transformation of the knowledge, i.e. improved or impoverished, that is, the present cultural system differs from the last moment of time in the previous morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1996). This is the same logic as the statements in the destination image above, that tourists' perceptions and knowledge about the destination will be different after the trip, which in turn, will have a different power as the new start of another morphogenetic cycle. As revealed, cultural values can be seen as a 'root' that affect Chinese tourists' thinking and evaluation processes. Confucianism and Taoism have become a significant part of China's cultural system and influence Chinese outbound tourists' motivations, behaviours and the whole experience along the journey.

However, Confucianism and Taoism in contemporary Chinese values may elicit different meanings. Li et al. (2023b) argue that some Confucian beliefs have been transformed through social practice to be compatible with the current societal needs by Chinese people, for example, women are encouraged to be educated and able to take key positions at managerial level instead of staying at home and always taking the caring roles in the family. Furthermore, it is noted that Confucianism and Taoism have been adopted to fit in the current political and economic positions in accordance with the internationalised situation, as well as the particular situation with 56 ethnic groups in China.

Chinese tourists have been recognised as a highly collectivist as group orientation and 'Guanxi' are the main impacts on their behaviour (Mok and DeFranco, 2000). Face ('Mianzi') has been seen as a sociological phenomenon in every society context. Earley (1997, p. 42) defines face as "a fundamental part of human interaction, the way individuals present themselves to others determines how they are judged and how want to be perceived by others." Chen et al (2021) point out that face issue can be emphasised when a local culture's characteristic is collectivism. Indeed, face has become a typical influential factor that heavily impacts Chinese people's social interactions and

behaviour (Cheung et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2013). Brown and Levinson (2016) also define 'Mianzi' as a positive self-image in public that people desire to gain and maintain. This links with 'Guanxi' because 'Mianzi' is about obtaining a positive impression with the public, while 'Guanxi' is about the connection with others in society. Chen et al. (2011, p. 569) denote that 'Guanxi' is "a special type of personal relationships or social connections based on mutual interests and benefits that bonds the exchange partners through reciprocal obligations and exchange of favours". Cheng and Zhang (2019) explain that Chinese people maintain 'Guanxi' through ensuring 'Mianzi' to each other, and this is based on the influence of Confucianism. Chinese people are collectivists, so they tend to be in groups rather than individuals, while it needs to maintain the 'Mianzi' for each other when in groups, thus, 'Guanxi' emerges, and it is connected to 'Mianzi'. Developed from Chinese cultural values, face ('Mianzi') and 'Guanxi' have been identified as two connected unique socio-cultural factors that impact the behaviours of Chinese tourists, and thus their tourist experience. Firstly, destination choices and activities can be affected by 'Mianzi' and 'Guanxi'. Chinese tourists tend to visit prestigious destinations and share on their social media to show their social status, that is, keep their face ('Mianzi') (Chen et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2022). They prefer to visit iconic symbols, take photos and have unique leisure activities, not only for their own interests, but gain face ('Mianzi') in society, as well as keeping relationship with others ('Guanxi') (Yang et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Chinese tourists have a tendency to purchase gifts for their friends and families to maintain the 'Mianzi' and 'Guanxi' (Gao et al., 2017), and it has been proved that gift-giving for Chinese tourists is driven by social motives, i.e. to maintain harmonious relationships ('Guanxi'), and show their social and economic status ('Mianzi'). This also explains why shopping is the one of the major activities for outbound Chinese tourists, they are not only buying for themselves, but also for their friends and families to maintain their social relations.

Lastly, face ('Mianzi') obviously happens in package tours as these tours are all gathered with groups of tourists. Kwek et al. (2019) highlight that Chinese tourists would keep a harmonious atmosphere in package tourism groups, to maintain the 'Guanxi'. But this means some tourists within a group may deliberately sacrifice individual desires to agree with group decisions, while it affects their tourist experience. For example, it is stated that Chinese tourists put service delivery as priority because of

the face ('Mianzi'), and it comes from a Chinese saying "one can never be too courteous" (礼多人不怪) (Kwek et al., 2019). Cheng and Zhang (2019) add that Chinese tourists do not feel welcomed if an Airbnb hosts tell them house rules because they feel their face ('Mianzi') has been ruined, it can also negatively affect the 'Guanxi' with hosts.

In addition, Chinese tourists tend to have a hierarchy within a tour group based on the ages. Confucianism regulates people to respect authority, it is often related to elder people in a tourism context. Therefore, Chinese traditional cultural values produce new social norms and 'regulations', i.e. face ('Mianzi') and 'Guanxi'. This philosophical thinking influences Chinese tourists' motivations, behaviours and tourist experience; thus, Chinese traditional cultural values are typical and unique factors at the 'real' level from a critical realist perspective.

### **3.4.5 Agential Properties**

#### **3.4.5.1 Cognition**

Cognition is defined as "ability to comprehend, mental act or process of knowing" (Bayne et al., 2019). Archer's (2000) central point is the primacy of practice instead of language, which insists that human beings have *sui generis* properties and powers which cannot be reducible to structure or culture. Bhaskar (2008, p. 165) explains the components of action in five vectors and they are ordered as 'cognitive – affective – conative – expressive – performative, with a form, content, mood, style and efficacy of its own', so the cognitive and affective are the first two vectors that generate individuals' course of actions. Archer (1995, 2007) highlights all human holds 'internal conversation', that subjective powers can be seen as mediate role on social actions, along with objective structural and cultural powers, thus, it is necessary to contextualize the agency. According to Archer's (1995) realist social theory, cognition can be a dynamic process because it changes with time. To be more specific, it is influenced by pre-existing social structures at the structural and cultural domains, but it may change through reflexivity (see 3.4.5.2) when agents/individuals engage in the social context.

In addition, destination image is one of the most influential factors on tourist experience, while it is affected by cognitive and affective aspects (stated in Chapter 3 and 4). Thus, cognition can be the 'real' reason that operates tourists' perceptions/images on a destination. Therefore, cognition plays a role to transform/reinforce social conditions

that individuals act within.

#### 3.4.5.2 Reflexivity

Archer (2007, p. 4) defines reflexivity as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa.” Individuals, with different characteristics, have autonomy and freedom to hold inner conversations to reflect on the external world. This reflexivity, in turn, can be seen as causal powers that reproduce, transform or reshape the external (structural and cultural domain). It is essential in Archer’s RST because individuals have capacity to reshape the structure that results from their self-transformation, which is the key that led to ‘double morphogenesis’. Human beings are evaluative beings. Sayer (2011) explains that humans have power to transform and develop, but are also vulnerable to loss and harm, so they need to evaluate the process with things they are concerned with. Indeed, human beings reflect upon surroundings, the world and keep progressing their concerns and interests, as well as evaluating their emotions.

Reflexivity is a mental process of evaluating and deliberating about one’s position in the world and deciding how to act within it. It depends upon “conscious deliberations that take place through internal conversation” (Archer, 2007, p. 3), that is, individuals critically reflect upon their circumstances, experiences and social contexts to make guidance for the course of actions. In other words, reflexivity is a human capability that helps individuals to locate themselves in a social system, reflecting and transforming the knowledge of surroundings (Li et al., 2023a). Thus, reflexivity is an agential property that allows individuals to navigate the structures, mediating the interplay between structure and agency.

Subjects have their own constellation of concerns, which can be referred to as an outcome of individual socialisation. Archer (1995) defines ‘subjective’ as associated with the three orders of reality: natural, practical and social orders respectively (see Figure 10). The natural order is related to the environmental context, biologically and physically of individuals. The practical order refers to human beings’ daily activities, routines and practices that shape their behaviour within specific contexts, whilst they can have different experience with various emotions in each role. For example, a female tourist could be a mother, a daughter, a lecturer, etc., and she will, of course, have different interests, emotions, and purposes when she is playing each role in each context. The social order emerges when one interacts with other individuals or social structures,

where individual's self-worth arises. This usually contains the patterns of relationships, norms and regularities that govern social life, specifically, individuals can change their behaviours by reflecting on their own beliefs, actions, even positions within the society. For example, when tourists visit other countries, there is a great possibility that they might change their behaviours, because they see themselves as a distinct identity (being a foreigner), and act differently from themselves at home when they interact with other tourists or residents of another country. Owing to these conscious/unconscious behaviours, individuals can contribute to the transformations or reproductions, which reproduces/reshapes the structures and dynamics of social life.

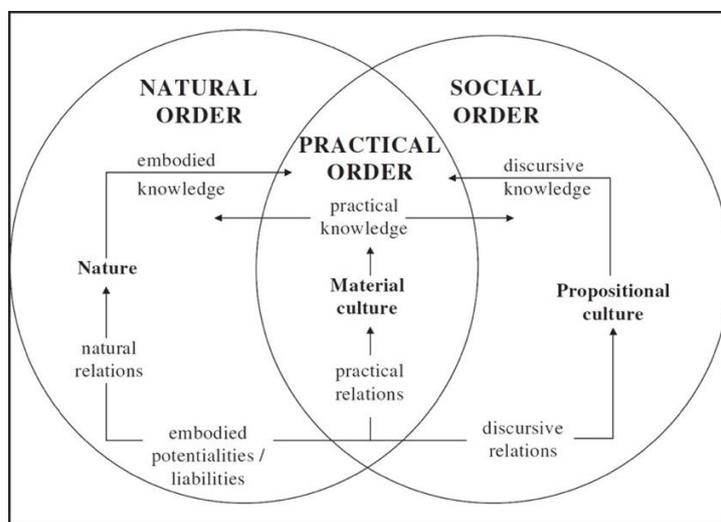


Figure 10 Three Orders of Natural Reality

Source: Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, © copyright 2000 Cambridge University Press. Reproduced with permission of The Licensor through PLSclear.

Reflexivity is a needed condition to activate personal powers from the agency domain to be able to mediate structural and cultural domain. Archer's three orders model reveals that individuals could have personal and social identity in different contexts, and individual and collective agents have autonomy and resources to act creatively in the world (Clegg, 2016). Archer (2000) argues that human beings can evaluate the context, and 'inner conversation' is a key to understand the processes on how human beings make commitments. The 'inner conversation' is defined as 'how our personal emergent powers are exercised on and in the world – natural, practical and social – which is our triune environment.', it shows individual characters but also reality because "the triune world sets us three problems, none of which can be evaded, made as we are. It confronts

us with three inescapable concerns: with our physical well-being, our performative competence and our self-worth.” (Archer, 2000, p. 318). Even though human beings’ knowledge is always fallible (epistemological relativity), they can still make judgements about the conditions to place themselves and deliberately make choices about their actions. This implies individuals can determine themselves and it is likely that they choose things, known as ‘personal project’ in Archer’s notions, that is relevant to them.

Through the reflexive deliberation, individuals can have ideas about the future, how they see themselves and what actions they are going to take to achieve their own goals. This has also been applied to the M/M approach by Archer, that elaborates between the ‘Me’ (past self at  $T^1$ ), the ‘I’ (present self at  $T^2$ - $T^3$ ), and the ‘You’ (future self at  $T^4$ ) (Archer, 2000). The ‘Me’ reflects the past experience, social structure and cultural constraints, such as the roles, norms, values and expectations. The ‘I’ encompasses agents have autonomy and exercise creativity, which allows them to actively reconstruct their identities, values etc. The ‘You’ represents reflexive engagement with others in social interactions and relationships (Archer, 2000; 2012). For example, each tourist has their own expectation before the trip, these expectations could be caused by images and videos they see online, individual’s value such as background, culture, and education level etc. But they can change their opinion or impressions during the trip, for example, they may think the views is much prettier than impressions, which implies that they have autonomy to emerge new thoughts. After the trip, they may evaluate all the social relationships such as the interactions with residents, attractions etc, which could lead to another different experience. Hence, reflexivity and the internal conversations are the processes that provide a context in which human beings could decide their paths about their core concerns.

Archer (2007; 2012) categorizes four types of reflexivity, namely communicative reflexivity, autonomous reflexivity, meta-reflexivity and fractured reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity refers to a type of internal conversation that individuals would act upon after being confirmed by others, that is, “the need to share these thoughts to conclude their deliberations” (Archer, 2007, p. 102). In this mode, individuals tend to seek a trusted and close relationship before making decisions, Clegg (2016) adds it happens when lacking knowledge or experience in particular field. On the contrast, it leads to autonomous reflexivity when individuals prefer to share less

with others, and they are confident to take charge of the current situation. However, Mingers (2014) argues that these individuals might be competitive who prioritise their goals over ethical values. In the meta-reflexivity mode, individuals evaluate from the past inner conversations and reflect on the outcomes before taking actions, so they would consider their actions' worthiness not only from their own projects, also the whole society (or other individuals). Nastar (2023) points out that it is more difficult for individuals to satisfy *modus vivendi* when they are predominated by meta-reflexivity. However, it is possible to change the original structural and cultural conditionings when the process is overcome. Lastly, the fractured reflexivity represents 'disconnected', that individuals are disoriented and stressed so it prevents them from using reflexive powers or taking actions properly in the given circumstances (Archer, 2007). This implies individuals may have no or passive actions in fractured reflexivity mode (Nastar, 2023). Among these four modes of reflexivity, individuals adopt one type at time, but it does not mean that it should be fixed, in fact, individuals can manifest different degrees or situations, which generate different ways of reflexive engagement. It is also argued that different types of reflexivity can lead to various outcomes to social structures, which could link to the morphogenetic approach. Community reflexivity generates the effects of reproduction, while autonomous and meta-reflexivity could contribute to transformations in society (Nastar, 2023). There are several empirical tests on Archer's typology from both quantitative and qualitative research (Caetano, 2017; Golob and Makarovič, 2019), or discussing about conceptualizing the reflexivity (Dyke et al., 2012; Lee, 2021), but neither of them is completely relevant to this research, because it is not helpful to investigate the interactions among structure, culture and agency (SAC), and examine the mechanisms on tourist experience. In other words, Archer's reflexivity provides fundamental concepts and offers a powerful basis for theorising agency in social studies, but researchers may need to be selective in particular fields, in which it should follow the research's main objectives accordingly.

#### 3.4.5.3 Emotions

Emotion in tourism refers to "the affective responses triggered during anticipation, on-site experience and memory formation", which influence tourists' satisfaction, meaning-making and behavioural intentions (Hosany, 2010). Based on Bhaskar's (2008) five components of the action, affective is seen as the second component in order to generate humans' actions. Emotions are the depth of affective modes that allow humans

to be aware of the situation and have feelings about their concerns and values (Archer, 2000). Indeed, human beings are not robots that only reflect upon and evaluate surroundings, instead, they are sentient beings because they are concerned about their well-being, values and they are able to feel these concerns (Sayer, 2011). Emotions are reasons that can help agents (human beings) to define their positions and situations associated with the wants and goals (Taylor, 1985). Archer (2003) also points out that emotions are central to the reflexive process and act as both motivators and indicators, because they motivate individuals to act in certain ways and provide feedback on the outcomes of their actions. Thus, it is important to recognise emotions because they can contribute to agents' motivations on producing/preventing change (Li et al., 2023a).

Furthermore, Craib (1998, p. 174) builds up a connection between identity and emotions, that is, "identity as being implicated and depending upon a profound emotional intersubjectivity", which implies emotions are important to shape agents' identity/ties. Archer (2000) explains emotions are responses when individuals navigate their sense of self in the social environment, as they reflect individual's alignment/divergence from social norms, which further construct their identity/ties. Therefore, emotions are attached to human beings and are imports that shape the identity/ties.

As proved in 2.5.2.2, emotions have been identified in tourism studies that affect tourist experience (Hosany and Gilber, 2010; Hu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2020; Zou et al., 2021). One of the significant concerns that differentiates Chinese tourists between outbound and inbound travel is the safety (Hu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Talwar, 2022; Zhu et al., 2020). Chinese tourists are more stressed and anxious to travel outbound, and the possible reasons for that can be related to the different countries, environment, and cultural background with the language barriers (Lu et al., 2021). From a critical realist perspective, outbound Chinese tourists evaluate the information and surroundings before, during and after the trip with emotions attached, so their wants/perceptions may be consistent or inconsistent with their emotions, which leads to mixed emotions. For example, individual tourists can be excited about their outbound trip to experience new things in the 'outside world', at the same time, they can worry about or be anxious about getting lost because of the language barriers, with no friends or family there to help.

These two opposite emotions might lead to different actions based on their reflexive feedback, such as finding a local translator or limiting their time during the visit before the day gets dark, overcoming their anxiety. Either of the actions they choose to do in the end, all imply that emotions are one of the significant properties that cannot be neglected in the process of tourist experience. Thus, emotions can interact with the structural and cultural domains, but it strongly affects tourists' behaviours, which in turns, influences their individual tourist experience at the agency domain.

#### 3.4.5.4 Identity

In the context of CR, identity is a continuous process of self-construction and reconstruction, instead of a fixed or static entity. It is a dynamic concept that emerges from the interplay between the structure and the agency (Archer, 2000). Archer (2000) also points out that personal identity predates social identity on individuals, but both are modified through the realist sequence, i.e. differentiation, socialisation, personification and commitment. Indeed, Craib (1988) states that “identity emerges from the transitional area of creativity wherein ‘I’ am aware of things that are going on within ‘my’ psycho space and between ‘me’ and the people around ‘me’, as well as those that ‘I’ am not aware of” (cited in Li et al., 2023a). Furthermore, identity is a transformative process that engages with reflexivity (Archer, 1996), which implies that agency of individuals can shape both their identities and the broader social context.

Archer (2003) argues that identity is both a personal and social phenomenon, rooted in the individual's ‘internal conversations’ (reflexivity) and influenced by the external social conditions in which they are embedded. Thus, it is a dynamic and evolving process because agents continuously engage in the reflexive process, reshaping their identity/ties to evaluate new experiences, even changing social structures. Personal identity refers to the essential or intrinsic character of an individual. Social identity refers to how individuals define themselves in relation to groups, that is, how they see themselves in social groups, such as nationality, religious, social class. Identity can be highly relative to the tourist experience, especially for outbound tourists because the interactions between countries may generate meanings for tourists. Archer (2000) highlights personal identity predates social identity on individuals, but both are modified through realist sequence.

Yang et al. (2020) highlights that outbound tourism is a platform that generates symbolic interaction between Chinese people and other countries, where Chinese

citizens can acknowledge the meanings on themselves and their country. Furthermore, previous studies (Hwang et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019) have connected identity with the face ('Mianzi') consciousness, that is, tourists can behave in a distinct way to fit into the social groups for face-related reasons, for example, reputation. This links to social identity, of which the fundamental concept refers to the individuals' needs to belong to social groups. It is stated that individuals' self-concept is strongly linked with their social identity, which can be best defined as the consequences of emotional and evaluative process to attach individuals themselves into a specific labelled group (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1982). As revealed, face ('Mianzi') and 'Guanxi' have played a significant role in Chinese tourists' thinking process, even guiding their behaviours. Hereby, social identity occurs to be powerful to affect Chinese tourist experience.

Indeed, Wang et al. (2023) examine that Chinese tourists have greater face consciousness in outbound travel than domestic travel. Zhang et al. (2019) further point out that face ('Mianzi') can influence Chinese tourists' self-differentiation and rationalisation. In other words, face ('Mianzi') from the Cultural System can influence Chinese tourist's social identity, which leads to the impacts on their tourist experience. Furthermore, 'curiosity' may trigger tourists' personal identity, which has been mentioned in reflexivity above. Specifically, Chinese tourists may have curiosity about different attractions in destinations such as museums, history, film and arts. These 'curiosities' can refer to their wants and motivations for their further ability of learnings, and these wants are a personal, individual and private sphere for each tourist. In the process of achieving these wants (may/may not achieve in the end), tourists may generate different identity/ties regardless of personal identity or social identity, thus, affect tourist's experience. Therefore, identity as a whole entity, cannot be neglected when investigating tourist experience.

### **3.5 Theoretical Framework**

Based on all the tourism literature including tourism organisations, tourists, and tourist experience, several properties have been proposed and discussed above from a critical realist's perspective. Li (2022) pioneers an interdisciplinary approach in tourism, which incorporates CR and several moral theories from philosophy disciplines. It is insightful that she provides a new perspective to investigate tourism, most importantly, explain tourism as a social phenomenon. However, the previous work mostly focused on moral

tourism (Li, 2022; Li et al., 2023a; Li et al., 2023b) instead of explaining tourist experience. Nevertheless, Li's work breaks the boundaries between tourism and CR, as well as providing a conceptual framework to guide further studies.

After embedding and justifying all the work from Archer (1995, 2008) and Li (2022, 2023a, 2023b), Figure 11 presents a critical realist framework for the process of tourism experience manifestation. It has four phases that covers structural, cultural and agency domains. Archer (1995, 2008) highlights social structure (SS), and cultural system (CS) are involved in structural domain, which predates agents and forms social organisations with their own powers, as well as affecting the socio-cultural interaction (S-C) level. Cultural system (CS) level has emergent properties that constrain or stimulate individuals' and collectivises' actions, i.e. beliefs, values, hedonism in leisure traveling, and Confucianism in Chinese cultural roots. Thus, *relationship a* in Figure 11 illustrates structural and cultural processes from the structural domain, but these may or may not be triggered by agents.

At the S-C level, agents find their social positions from the past and acts back to the structure domain. Archer (2000) points out that humans have limited physical and cognitive abilities, which prohibit them from inner desire, as well as external resources. This means that agents will always be constrained by specific contexts. However, agents' abilities such as identity, reflexivity and self-efficacy can help define themselves, most importantly, can maintain and change surroundings, which reinforce and/or reshape the structural domain. Thus, *relationship b* encompasses all three domains, i.e. structural, cultural and agential mechanisms. In short, the conceptual framework provides a possibility to explain the processes of the generation of tourist experience, especially on identifying emergent properties from structural, cultural and agential domains to investigate how they interact and operate to bring about tourist experience.

These properties from three domains (SAC) along with the conceptual framework can be the guiding principle for the data collection and data analysis process later, but it should be noted that the researcher, as a critical realist, should be open to any emergent coding (properties) from empirical data, since the general theories can only provide a framework, but are not supposed to cover all the elements. In short, this research/the researcher not only tests the theories or elements that have already been identified but is also ready to welcome any properties that emerge from empirical data, to explore the 'real' mechanisms.

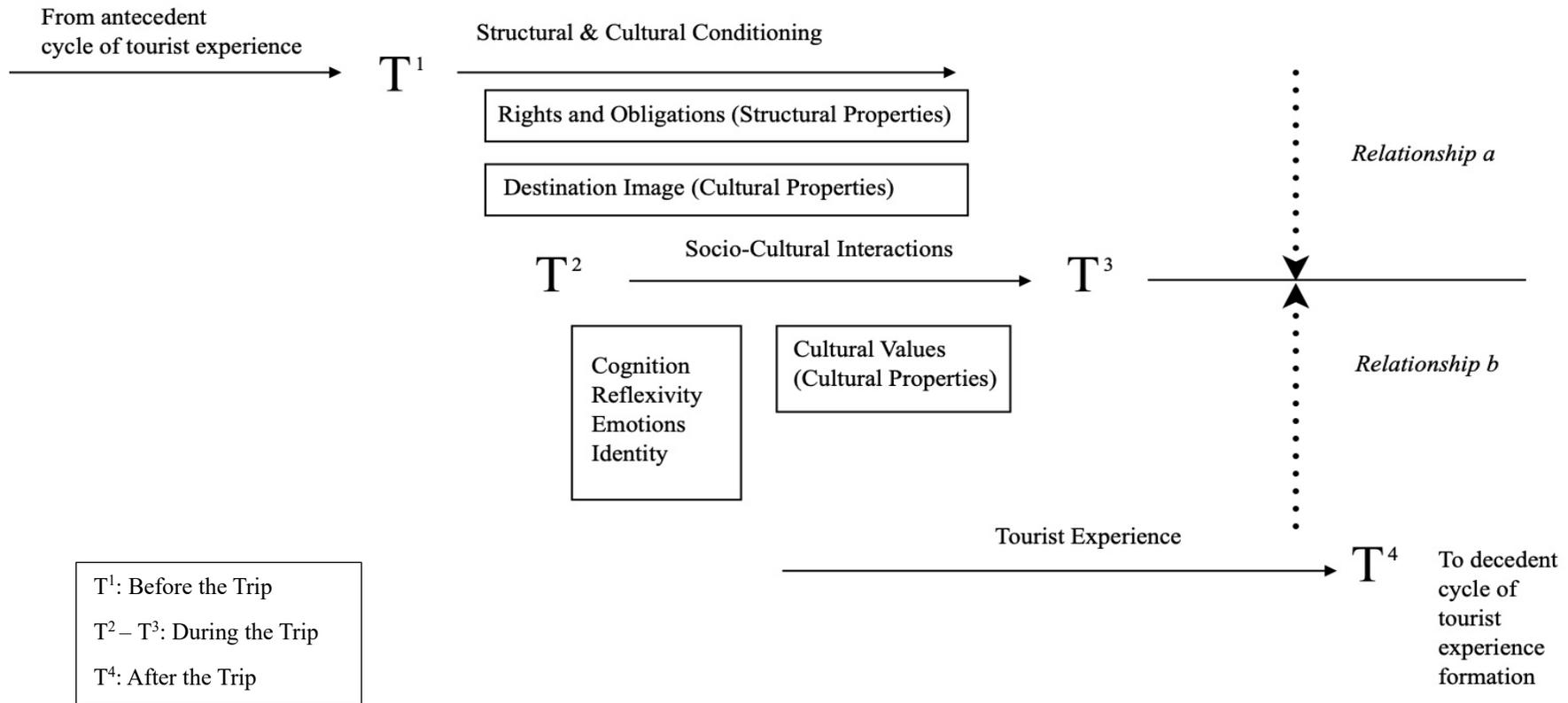


Figure 11 A Critical Realist Framework for Tourist Experience

Source: Adapted from Li (2022, 2023a, 2023b)

### **3.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has introduced Critical Realism (CR) as the philosophical underpinning of this research. It first reviewed CR's key concepts, namely the three domains, causal powers and emergence, open system, and generative mechanisms, and emphasised that this study adopts a position consistent with a fully open system. The chapter then outlined Archer's Realist Social Theory (RST) and the Morphogenetic Approach, which are adopted as the main theoretical scaffolding for this study. RST provides a clear analytical framework for examining structural, cultural and agential domains (SAC) separately, while also allowing investigation of the interactions between them over time. Importantly, RST acknowledges the autonomous reflexive capacities of individuals within the agency domain, making it well aligned with this research aim of identifying the mechanisms and processes underlying the emergence of Chinese tourist experience as a social phenomenon.

Building on this philosophical and theoretical foundation, the chapter redefined tourist experience from a critical realist perspective. It then examined several influential factors drawn from existing literature in both tourism and CR (3.4.3–3.4.5). Each element/property was critically evaluated and justified in relation to tourism scholarship through a CR lens at each domain, i.e. structural, cultural and agential. These influential factors informed the conceptual framework presented in 3.5. (Figure 11), which is developed from Li's (2022) work. However, while Li's study primarily concentrates on the moral–cultural level and ethical tourism, the present research extends this conceptual framework to address tourist experience in a more general and comprehensive sense.

## Chapter 4 Research Design

The underlying structure on this research's methodology applied Maxwell's (2012) CR approach. As a critical realist, Maxwell (2015, p. 79) proffers five steps with the realities for qualitative research design, which are Goals (why your study is worth doing), Conceptual Framework (what theories, beliefs, and prior research findings will guide or inform your research?), Research questions (what, specifically, do you want to understand by doing this study?), Methods (what will you actually do in conducting your data? ... collect and analyse your data?) and Validity (why should we believe the findings?). In this study, it has adopted these five steps as a logical root to follow, but it makes changes based on this particular context for demonstrations.

### 4.1 Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to understand how tourist experience emerges from tourist's interactions with the external environment and their personal social-cultural values. In other words, the research seeks to understand the processes that generate tourist experiences. To reach the aim, the researcher adopts Chinese tourists who travelled outbound to the UK for leisure purpose as a case for investigations, which will be explained in detail later in this chapter. Following the research aims, two major research questions were proposed:

1. What are the structural-cultural factors and the personal (agential cultural) factors that affect tourist experience before, during and after the trip?
2. How these factors operate to generate (i.e. processes) the form of tourist experience?

The study intends to identify the influential factors from the domains of structure, culture and agents/tourists, and understands how these factors operate to manifest tourist experiences. The cultural factors refer to the destination images attributions such as the history, the natural views etc., while the personal/individual factors refer to tourist's individual perceptions and other thoughts process based on the interactions with the social context. This will be achieved through the application of critical realist theory in the sociology discipline to explain the interplays between the structural domain of the tourism system and the tourist's domain. Therefore, the objectives of this research could be concluded as follows:

1. To understand the self-evaluation of the experiences of Chinese tourists visited/visiting the UK.
2. To identify structural, cultural and agential factors that influence tourist experience.
3. To analyse the processes through which identified factors generate the emerging tourist experience.

## **4.2 Research Strategy**

Explanatory research was adopted as an overarching research approach in this study, not merely as a label for the data analysis phase. Following a critical realist perspective, the primary aim of the study was to develop an explanatory account of how and why tourist experience emerges through the interplay of structural, cultural and agential mechanisms, rather than simply to describe patterns or explore meanings. Explanatory research is concerned with identifying underlying generative mechanisms operating in open systems, and with specifying the conditions under which these mechanisms are activated (Sayer, 2000). This orientation informed the entire research design: the choice of a qualitative, intensive case study of outbound Chinese tourists to the UK; the decision to collect rich narrative data from interviews and travel websites; and the use of abduction, retroduction and retrodiction as core reasoning strategies. The analytic procedures (thematic and narrative analysis) were therefore embedded within, and subordinate to, this broader explanatory purpose: they were employed not only to summarise what participants said, but to move from concrete accounts to more abstract, mechanism-based explanations. In this way, the study aligns with the notion of explanatory research as a strategy that “an intensive study, with a limited number of cases, where the researcher systematically analyses the interplay between the ontological layers” (Bygstad et al., 2016, p. 85) and uses critical realist tools to generate theoretically robust explanations of the social phenomenon under investigation.

### **4.2.1 Intensive vs. Extensive procedures**

Methods depart from qualitative research and quantitative research, which has been widely accepted by researchers and practitioners. Quantitative research prefers to operate a detailed plan with predetermined hypotheses, using statistical sampling techniques to survey respondents as representative samples and allowing generalizations to the population being studied (Abusabha and Woelfel, 2003).

Lakshman et al (2000) add that quantitative methods examine the impacts of specified circumstances (independent variables) from an outcome of interest (dependent variable) in statistical ways. Thus, the inferences are either from direct observations such as experiments, models and statistical results, or from associations established through statistical analysis. Qualitative research focuses on the understanding of a phenomenon, within the context of their own settings and systems, as well as interacting and interpreting with people (Kirk and Miller, 1986). In qualitative studies, researchers follow the flexible research design (Marshall and Rossman, 2011) and they study people in the context of past experience and the situations where they find themselves (Yin, 2011; Steven et al., 2015). Camic et al. (2003) add that qualitative researchers use language and image rather than statistical techniques to capture, describe and interpret what they have observed.

Each method has its strengths and limitations. One of the strengths of quantitative research is that it can provide the quality of the information assessments explicitly. Quantitative researchers use the techniques which are designed to provide definitive, reliable answers to questions (repeatability), validity (true value) and generalizability of their findings and conclusions (Camic et al., 2003). They tend to provide a set of standards for a scientific centre allowing one researcher to check or examine the claims of another, which could be a valuable tool because it helps with assessing the credibility of differing claims. Abusabha and Woelfel (2003) state that quantitative researchers pride themselves on being unbiased and study the subject at hand with an objective perspective. However, Lakshman et al (2000) argue that quantitative research could not answer all the questions, and it is still vulnerable no matter how rigorously collected. They highlight that the questionnaires could be sensible because respondents may misunderstand the questions, or answer questions on purpose to make good consequences. Savela (2018) holds that quantitative research cannot provide an in-depth understanding of the analysed items because of the inherently reductive nature of classification.

On the contrary, qualitative research is much more effective for understanding the actual processes (mechanisms) which in the particular context or outcomes (Maxwell, 2012). Lakshman et al. (2000) highlight that qualitative research is more helpful in specific situations such as biographical, psychological and sociology fields as it can address the complexity of human behaviour by 'why' and 'how' questions. Kirk and

Miller (1986) also point out that human experience cannot be observed by numbers or explained by measuring variables. Thus, qualitative research may be more suitable because it allows the emerging questions and keeps changing until it becomes more familiar with the subject area, rather than using a structured survey with fixed questions. However, Reichardt and Rallis (1994) argue that qualitative research is biased, and it is not precise due to the beliefs, views and prejudices of researchers, as well as the participants, also, it is closed to individuals so that it fails in large situations. Nevertheless, Barrick and Kobayashi (2020) highlight that qualitative research is the most popular method in social sciences because it focuses on individuals and the observations of the mechanisms/processes.

Qualitative method cannot fully provide the way for investigating the mechanisms. Sayer (1992) reveals that the way of investigating social phenomena incorporates both intensive and extensive periods of research from social sciences perspectives. He points out that intensive research concerns how the causal process (mechanism) operates in particular cases, while extensive research focuses on discovering the common properties and general patterns of a population as a whole (see Table 3). These two types of research explain different conceptions of groups, the former focuses on the groups whose members relate to each other structurally and causally. To be more specific, individuals (here not restricted to persons) with their properties and the connections to others. The latter considers taxonomic groups, which have similar (formal) attributes, but each member does not actually interact with others. However, Sayer (1992) also notes that the distinction between extensive and intensive procedures is not identical to survey analysis or ethnography, for example, surveys could be applied in intensive research as even researchers tend to use ethnographic methods for investigations on the nature of causal groups.

Table 3 Intensive vs. Extensive procedures

	Intensive	Extensive
Relations	Substantial relations of connection	Formal relations of similarity
Research question	How does a process work in a particular case or small number of cases? What	What are the regularities common patterns, distinguishing features

	produces a certain change? What did the agents actually do?	of a population? How widely are certain characteristics or processes distributed or represented?
Type of groups studied	Causal groups	Taxonomic groups
Type of account produced	Causal explanation of the production of certain objects or events, though not necessarily representative ones	Descriptive 'representative generalizations, lacking in explanatory penetration
Typical methods	Study of individual agents in their causal contexts, interactive interviews, ethnography. Qualitative analysis	Large-scale survey of population or representative sample, formal questionnaires, standardized interviews, statistical analysis
Limitations	Actual concrete patterns and contingent relations are unlikely to be 'representative', 'average' or generalizable. Necessary relations discovered will exist wherever their relata are present, e.g. causal powers of objects are generalizable to other contexts as they are necessary features of these objects	Although representative of a whole population, they are unlikely to be generalizable to other populations at different times and places problem of ecological fallacy in making inferences about individuals.  Limited explanatory power

Source: Sayer (2010, p. 163)

Moreover, CR is a metatheory which enables researchers to understand the importance of methodologies from different angles, thus, the central question is how generative mechanisms can be observed and conveyed by different methodologies, not whether it can be tested or not. Danermark et al. (2019) suggest that both intensive and extensive procedures are meaningful in the search for generative mechanisms and how these mechanisms manifest themselves in various contexts, but they convey in different ways. They also point out that both processes could be related to qualitative and quantitative methods:

--The intensive empirical procedure includes significant elements of data collection and qualitative analysis, which is characterized by focusing on a particular case or small number of cases. Specifically, this case may include the causal experience and interpret the event or process, as well as acknowledging the intentions involved.

--The extensive empirical procedure relates to quantitative data collecting and statistical analysis in order to describe the 'demi-regularities', patterns and a selection of characteristics.

However, Danermark et al. (2019) highlight that both intensive and extensive approaches have limitations. Intensive approaches lack statistical generalization while the extensive does not. Equally, the extensive one has limited explanatory power. To be more specific, statistical analysis could illustrate how much a single factor affects a phenomenon, but it may fail to reveal the mechanisms and how each property interacts with other mechanisms in a particular context. Therefore, it is often necessary to combine the two approaches in the concrete research procedure since both approaches are essential to understand a phenomenon in the real world. Nevertheless, it could be argued that it might not be practical or realistic to combine both procedures in one research. It is not only about the complex procedures and complicated workloads but also about how to connect the actual results from both procedures, and how to link these analysis outcomes to provide a systematic phenomenon based on the different focal points.

Following the research aims and objectives, it focuses on 'how' the Chinese tourist experience generates before, during and after they visit the UK. It could be applied to Sayer's (2010) intensive procedures' research questions (see Table 3), i.e. 'How does a process work in the Chinese tourist experience on the journey to the UK?' 'What

produces a certain change if their tourist experience is transformed?’. It provides the connections between influential factors and the tourist experience, which reveals the connection of empirical, actual with the real domain; also, it emphasizes the ‘analytical dualism’ (Chapter 3) between structure, culture and agency domain. Therefore, intensive procedures are the primary approaches in this research as it could offer causal explanations (link to research aim) of the production (mechanisms/processes) of certain objects (Chinese tourist experience visiting the UK as destination), and it is not necessarily representative because of the different influential factors including the background, education, religion etc. In other words, qualitative context and the intensive procedures could support mechanisms to work in a concrete situation involving tracing the causal powers and describing the interactions between powers that produce a social phenomenon, which exactly correspond to this research.

#### **4.2.2 Strategy of the Inquiry: Case Study**

Case study is defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). Case study research could be applied to provide more possible contributions to the existing theory, test it and even generate a new theory. It could be the best approach when the research aims to answer the question of ‘how’ and ‘why’, because the findings cannot be manipulated by the researcher’s subjective opinions (Stake, 1978; Yin, 2018).

There are several research strategies, and each strategy have distinct conditions, which requires researchers to be clear on the research focus. Yin (2018) identifies that researchers need to consider three conditions when choosing research strategy, namely forms of research question, extent of control of behavioural events and degree of focus on contemporary events (see Table 4). Comparing the case study to the other four strategies, i.e. experiment, survey, archival analysis and history, it is more explanatory focusing on ‘why’ and ‘how’ and contemporary events, also, it does not require any control. These can fully fulfil this study. Firstly, the question of this study concerns how tourist experience emerges and how these influential factors operate the tourist experience. Thus, it is an explanatory study to understand a social phenomenon. Secondly, tourist experience refers to the individual living experience in this study, so it focuses on contemporary events. Thirdly, there is not any control needed from the researcher. In addition, based on the different cultural background and the previous

experience from each tourist, it could be a huge task, and it is not realistic to cover all the tourists from all over the world. Therefore, the present research adopts a case study as a preferred strategy because of its suitability and feasibility.

Table 4 Relevant Situations for Different Research Strategies

Research Strategy	Form of Research Question	Requires Control of Behavioural Events?	Focuses on Contemporary Events?
Experiment	How, why?	Yes	Yes
Survey	Who, what, where how many, how much?	No	Yes
Archival Analysis	Who, what, where how many, how much?	No	Yes/No
History	How, why?	No	No
Case Study	How, why?	No	Yes

Source: COSMOS Corporation, cited in Yin (2018, p. 9)

When selecting a case study for this research, diversity might be one of the key principles, as outbound tourism normally involves two different countries, which may generate different cultural backgrounds. Gerring and Cojocaru (2016) point out typical and diverse can be considered when selecting cases. Typical represents a tendency, which can be the population. Diverse can refer to different cultural backgrounds in this topic. The justification of choosing the specific case is based on the previous statements (Chapter 1), Chinese tourists have made a significant economic contribution to the tourism industry, also, with the biggest population and a unique historical past. Thus, Chinese tourists can be seen as a group of people who have potential to contribute further to tourism studies as tourism expands. Equally, the United Kingdom (the UK), as a destination for Chinese tourists, has a contrasting culture and history (i.e. Individualism, Industrial Revolution etc.) and these differences are fascinating for Chinese tourists. To be more specific, two countries result in different cultures, especially Asian and Western countries, with differentiation in background, education,

religion etc. which leads to different values, perspectives, and thinking processes. These could lead tourists to compare, or reflect, in other words, it provides more possibilities for different situations and offers a comprehensive explanatory account on the phenomenon. Therefore, this research focuses on the case of Chinese tourists visiting the UK as the destination, to explore the mechanisms on the emergence of the tourist experience.

In addition, as mentioned in Chapter 1 (1.2), this research focuses on Chinese tourists who visited the UK between 2017 to 2019 because there are no leisure outbound tourists visiting the UK after 2019 due to the pandemic (Covid-19), the board restriction has affected significantly on outbound tourists (VisitBritain, 2021). The data was collected in 2022, so the focal period was pre-pandemic (before 2019), b) tourists can still have fresh memory and talk about their experience if it was a recent travel, so this research sets up the time after 2017.

#### **4.2.3 Secondary Data & Interview**

Referring to research aims and questions, there are mutual ways to achieve it. This study needs to explore the factors that influence Chinese tourists' experience at the structural cultural domain. At the same time, the research explains the mechanisms of how Chinese tourist experience (individual) emerges/transforms based on these factors/interactions at the agential cultural domain. Therefore, secondary data was collected to identify the factors of how websites portray the UK to attract Chinese tourists, which aims to identify structural and cultural factors on agents in research objectives. At the same time, interviews (thirty) were adopted to capture the individual tourist experience, referring to cultural agential elements.

As for secondary data analysis, it was collected from the Top five popular Chinese websites, which is detailed later in 4.3. The information from Chinese websites was analysed to identify which factors could affect tourist's experience. The logic behind this refers to 'attractiveness', specifically, these websites aim to make profit, so they made reports/guidelines based on the market research and big data such as general/specific information about the destination images, previous tourists' opinions and travelling suggestions (Cao and Yang, 2016). Thus, it was evidenced that this information could affect Chinese tourists from external (structural cultural domain). However, structure may or may not have power on agents, because individuals may not experience that, for example, these websites could affect tourists with their expectations

and impressions, only if they read them physically, and perceived the information consciously/unconsciously.

Maxwell (2012) also states that using a variety of sources and methods to collect information could reduce the risk of the systematic biases and limitations from a specific source or method, and it could allow the researchers to get a better understanding of the issues they are investigating. Therefore, interviews are necessary to examine a) whether these factors have power on individuals, in other words, whether Chinese tourists have impressions on the UK as the websites portrayed; b) how these factors/properties affect the tourist experience, and what the mechanisms are from the 'real' domain.

Interviewing is a method that could enable the research to investigate participants' experience and unobservable information (Patton, 2014). The interview method is essential in qualitative research in mutual ways, one aspect is to understand "central features of our conversational world", also, "a burden for qualitative interviewers that they use conversations to study a world, which is always already itself saturated with conversation" (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 4). In other words, tourist experience is related to the conversational world, which should be examined in an in-depth way that encourages them to express their thoughts. Also, interviewers (researchers) in social research should be able to transform these thoughts/experiences via a linguistical way to provide a collective/individual illustration. There are various forms in qualitative interviews which could be differentiated from the informal to formal conversation (see Table 5). Each type of interview has its own strengths and weakness while it needs to be justified for the specific research. In addition, interviews can be conducted in different forms, such as face-to-face (in-person), electronic through telephone, online meeting applications, or in a group (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Table 5 Variations in Interviewing

	Characteristics	Strengths	Weakness
Unstructured	Questions emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of things.	Increasing the salience and relevance of questions, matching the interview to individuals and circumstances.	Generating less systematic data, thus difficult to organise and analyse data.
Semi-structured	Topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance; sequence and wording of questions are decided in the course of the interview.	Increased comprehensiveness of data; logical gaps in data can be worded questions can lead anticipated and dosed; interviews to substantially different remain conversational and responses, thus reducing situational.	Flexibility in sequencing and wording questions can lead to substantially different responses, thus reducing the comparability of responses.
Structured	Asking all respondents the same series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories.	Increased comparability of responses, reduced bias.	Little flexibility in relating the interview to particular individuals and circumstances.

Source: Adapted from Fontana et al., (2005) and Patton (2002), cited in Li (2012)

The semi-structured interview method could provide some unstructured explorations based on structured questions, and these explorations could uncover the unknown issues from the previous research (Wilson, 2014). Furthermore, it could be flexible for both interviewers and interviewees, while it also provides a mechanism that could redirect conversations if it digresses from the main topic (Wilson, 2014). These advantages could be well applied in this research, as Chinese tourists have flexibility to talk about their travel experience to the UK and explain why they generated those thoughts. At the

same time, the conversations were directed by the main topic about tourist experience. Therefore, this research conducted semi-structured interviews since topics and issues are specified in advance.

However, some limitations such as reducing the comparability of responses (Fontana et al., 2005; Patton, 2002), and lack of consistency because of particular questions during different interviews (Wilson, 2014). To be specific, semi-structured interviews had several different following questions based on interviewees' responses, which could lead to different outcomes because of various individual experiences. Thus, it cannot be compared, or it is not enough to keep consistency for the responses. Nevertheless, from a critical realist's perspective, this research aims to examine the process of how Chinese tourist experience emerges, so it is beneficial if it could find the same process from an inconsistent interview, as that is the goal for all social science.

Interview questions are essential for critical realists, as they contribute more detailed descriptions when explaining mechanisms. It bridges between "a researcher's ontological perception of reality and realist findings as mechanism-based theories" (Brönnimann, 2022, p. 20). Porpora (2016) also highlights the importance of in-depth interviews, as it could be seen as an intermediate between the empirical and the real domain, and it could identify the causal relations which contribute to mechanisms. Rather than focusing on tourist experience, influential factors or tourists' motivations, critical realists (this study's point of view) apply in-depth interviews to figure out under what social conditions form these (tourist experience, influential factors and tourists' motivations), and in which conditions/context they have been triggered.

The interview questions in this study were developed through the conceptual framework (Figure 11) aligned with the critical realist research design. Specifically, they were guided by the two research questions, the conceptual framework derived from Archer's structure–culture–agency (SAC) model. Drawing on the principles of semi-structured interviewing, the questions were intentionally designed to elicit participants' subjective accounts (empirical), their interpretations and reflection processes (actual), and deeper reflections that would allow retroductive inference of underlying mechanisms (real). The initial set of questions was drafted based on insights from the literature on tourist experience (Chapter 2), as well as echoing with critical realists' perspectives (Brönnimann, 2022; Danermark et al., 2019, Moore, 2024). These questions focused on cognition, reflexivity and pre-trip/during/after-trip behaviours,

which mirrored their emotions and identity. These were then refined through a pilot test (see 4.2.4) and through supervisory feedback, ensuring clarity, cultural appropriateness, and alignment with the study's analytical aims. The final set of questions allowed flexibility for narrative exploration while maintaining consistency across interviews to support analytic reliability (see Appendix 2).

#### **4.2.4 Selecting Settings and Participants (Sampling Strategy)**

Sampling strategy in qualitative research often refers to the selection of settings and participants, it has been named differently by qualitative researchers because a) limited numbers of samples cannot make generalizations; b) two methods have different goals, quantitative claims a relationship between variables and population, while qualitative focuses on the process and particular context that influences the phenomena (Yin, 2018). Maxwell (2012) points out that sampling strategy in qualitative research is not about ensuring presentiveness or comparability, but to identify individuals/groups that help researchers to understand settings and exhibit the characteristics of the phenomena. There are two principles that could guide selecting settings and participants, 'purposive sampling' (Palys, 2008) and 'convenience sampling' (Patton, 2001). The former refers to the strategic choices about when, where and whom to collect the data based on research objectives, while the latter means the research seeks to select the most accessible individuals to understand the whole settings. These two could both be beneficial to identify settings for later interview schedule. However, from a realist point, Maxwell (2012, p. 95) emphasizes that "no selection strategy guarantees that you will actually select the settings and participants that best allow you to answer your questions or achieve your goals." Nevertheless, it aims to provide a structure for researchers to test on pre-set interview questions and make changes if needed based on interviewees' responses.

Moreover, Maxwell (2012) identifies two implications which could help the researchers to bridge a logical connection between interview questions and research questions. Firstly, researchers can put themselves in the interviewee's position and imagine how they would respond to these questions. Secondly, adopt a 'pilot-test' to examine whether these answers work as intended, and what may need to be revised. This research conducted sampling interviews in 2021. It aimed to help the researcher to comprehend the settings, including proper interview questions, interview process (recordings and transcripts), and data validity. Furthermore, from a critical realist lens, the interviewees'

reactions to questions referred to the ‘empirical’ and ‘actual’ domain, while the conversations/interactions could provide insights from the ‘real’ domain to help the researcher to understand the process of tourist experience phenomena. The first participant was from the researcher’s social relations, who visited the UK between 2017-2019 to visit friends and relatives. The interview was conducted online via WeChat as the participant preferred, and it was recorded on the researcher’s phone as both agreed. The transcript was sent after the recording, and it was agreed by the participant. Within the interview time, the researcher tried to make the interview similar to a relaxed conversation and tried not to fully control the exchange but only leading if the interviewee started to discuss other topics. The interview language was used in Mandarin as preferred by the participant, and it followed the interview schedule (see Appendix 2). As a result, the process went smoothly as the interviewee shared as much information that referred to the experience (before, during and after visiting the UK).

Apart from being familiar with the process of interview, the researcher identified two more tips that helped with the later interviews (the whole data collection process). Firstly, the interviewee may/may not follow the orders of interview questions. Specifically, when the interviewee answers one of the questions, they may cover the answers for other questions. For example, when the interviewee was answering Q6 (‘Could you please describe the previous visit(s) to the UK?’ (destination(s) visited, time visited UK, with whom etc.)), their answer could be “I went to the British Museum, and it was amazing, it was spacious and so many collections, I spent the whole day there, it was a surprise.” This information was not only for Q6, but also for Q14, which means the researcher needs to be adaptable for their answers. However, from a critical realist lens, it requires the researcher to be more in depth for their answers, thus, following the example stated before, the researcher changed the question when it reached Q14, “You mentioned it was a surprise when you visited the British Museum, why is that? Could you explain more about why you were so excited about it?”, then the interviewee’s answers provided more on the reasons and their own reflexivity. Therefore, the pilot test provided an example that the researcher could be adjustable and focus more on ‘why’ questions in the later other interviews.

Secondly, with some subjective questions such as Q8 and Q13, the researcher found that the interviewee was confused about how to answer, or in what way they could describe it. Thus, the researcher offered another type of relevant question, for example,

“how do you rank your experience and why? One to ten refers to the worst to the best.” It significantly helped the interviewee with answering it, she then answered “Eight, because...”. When the researcher changed the question, it helped the interviewee with expressing themselves easily, also, the transcripts were clearer for the researcher to analyse.

Overall, this study adopted convenient sampling strategy because the focal point was to provide a structure for interviews. This pilot test helped the researcher with understanding the process of interviews, including communication, recordings, and data storage. Especially, it provided advice for the later data collection process: a) Focused on the ‘why’ questions and encouraged interviewees to discuss as much as possible; b) Being adaptable with all the interview questions, even when answers might overlap, because it could enrich the data analysis; c) Changed to a simpler way for asking questions, so that interviewees could understand easily and gave the best responses.

## 4.3 Data Collection

### 4.3.1 Research Sites for Destination Images

The data was collected from two angles in this research. Firstly, by looking at how the UK is portrayed by Chinese websites from the structural domain. Secondly, by examining how the Chinese tourist (as an individual) perceived the information and how their real experience emerged from the agential level. As literature has revealed (Chapter 2), destination image could be one of the essential external causes from the structural domain that influences their experience, so it was examined first by collecting the secondary data from top five Chinese traveling websites. The collected data was used to investigate how Chinese networks advertise British attributions or culture. Thus, it refers to both structural-culture and agents-culture intersections. This aims to observe the emergent properties and manifest the mechanisms within the tourist experience, so it can be seen as an explanatory from a critical realist perspective.

In the process of collecting the data, this research firstly picked up the top eight popular websites, Ctrip, Qunar, Fliggy, Mafengwo, Tongcheng Travel, Meituan, Tuniu, Qyar as they are the most well-known websites that Chinese tourists used (VisitBritain, 2024) (see Table 6). But when searching information on these eight websites, four of them (Fliggy, Tongcheng Travel, Meituan and Tuniu) only sold packages while there was limited information or descriptions about the UK, specifically, these four online travel agencies (OTA) only had price and packages for UK destinations, for example, when searching for “London” on Fliggy, it would show “Windsor Castle, ¥275” “A trip from London to Scotland, ¥4409” etc. Thus, these cannot be collected in this research because they are only for commercial purposes, and they were unable to provide any practical content for analysis. Furthermore, the interview data from participants revealed that 90% of the participants used Ctrip, Qunar, Mafengwo and Qyar before they visited the UK. As a result, four main OTA websites were used for analysing external influential factors, and 19 documents were manually collected for analysis mostly on their texts, as well as some images. In details, six documents were resourced from Qyar, three documents were from Mafengwo, five documents were from Qunar and Ctrip respectively.

Table 6 Chinese OTA's Percentage of Users

Online Travel Agency	Percentage of users
Ctrip	37%
Others (Mafengwo, Qyar)	20%
Qunar	17%
Fliggy	14%
Meituan	3%
Tuniu	3%

Source: VisitBritain (2024)

### 4.3.2 Interview

Sayer (1992) states individuals do not have to be typical when selected before interviews as long as the researchers could build up an understanding of the causal groups and observe the mechanisms. The process of finding participants was complicated. Firstly, the researcher created a public Chinese website (<http://khkt.sixunnet.cn>) with all the research information, i.e. research purpose, research questions and objectives, the participant forms, consent form and contact email. The public could view the website in Chinese, easily understand and decide whether to get involved with this research, then they could download the consent form, sign up and send to the researcher's email. However, there was a limited number of participants from this website because it was fully voluntary. Secondly, the researcher started to use 'snowball' (convenience) strategy for collecting the data, which relied on social relations, friends of friends or relatives. Travel agencies were not adopted as a gatekeeper in this research because: a) the pandemic (Covid-19) had caused several problems, for example, flight restrictions and social distancing, thus, the researcher was not able to be back in China and contact the travel agencies in person; b) even when the researcher made an attempt to contact travel agencies virtually, the data was collected in 2021, while this study focused on the Chinese tourists who visited the UK from 2017 to 2019 (before the pandemic), so travel agencies were not able to provide participants' data as it had expired.

Even though finding participants was time consuming, all interviews went smoothly,

and rich data was collected for this research. Due to the familiarity of the interview process via pilot study (as stated in 4.2.4), all interviews were recorded on the researcher's UK devices, and university One Drive, so it would not break the rules/law of data protection between two countries (China and the UK). Some problems emerged during the process of interview such as the unclear questions and interviewees' concerns, but they were all solved. After three interviews, the researcher noticed that Question 11 ('What was your impression of the destination(s) before your trip?') and Question 12 ('What was your impression of the UK before your trip?') was confusing to participants, so the researcher gave examples in the rest of interviews. The first three were confused because they thought these two questions were asking for the same result, so the researcher swapped the order for these two questions and gave a brief explanation in later interviews, specifically, participants were asked "what was your impressions of this country (the UK) before your trip?", then "within this country, you probably saw many destinations or attractions within the UK before the trip, what was your impression of these destination(s)?" These changes successfully made the questions easier for the rest of the participants because they could focus on different points between the whole country and specific destinations.

Moreover, the first six participants required a quick talk before the recordings, they asked whether they could say anything they like and what if it affected the data findings in a negative way. The researcher explained that they could be honest with anything they observed, they felt, even they heard from others, and these would not affect the data analysis, oppositely, the more they said, the more it would help with this study. Then these participants said some negatives which they actually experienced in the UK trip. These facts implied that Chinese participants may be cautious when they were asked to judge/criticise other countries. As a result, the researcher started to give a brief declaration before each recording for the rest of interviews, "this recording will be anonymised after being transcribed, so you could talk anything you like or dislike when you travelled to the UK, it would not affect data findings in this study. Please feel free to talk anything about your experience." This strongly encouraged most of participants shared their entire experience and thoughts. As a result, 30 participants have been collected for the interview data (see Table 7).

Table 7 Interviewees' Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Group	Occupation
Anna	Female	26-35	Sales
Betty	Female	18-25	Jewellery
Cathy	Female	18-25	Student
Chris	Male	36-45	Business
Cindy	Female	45-60	Accountant
Edward	Male	45-60	Sales
Ella	Female	45-60	Finance
Gary	Male	45-60	Media
Grace	Female	18-25	Student
Harry	Male	26-35	Medical
Jack	Male	45-60	Government Employee
Jasmine	Female	26-35	Operation Manager
Jennie	Female	26-35	Media
Johnny	Male	26-35	Student
Kelly	Female	45-60	Manager
Lucy	Female	45-60	Medical
Luke	Male	45-60	Manager
Mary	Female	26-35	Accountant
Mike	Male	26-35	Manager
Oliver	Male	18-25	Student
Penny	Female	45-60	Manager
Peter	Male	26-35	Student
Rick	Male	45-60	Operation
Ruth	Female	45-60	Financial Employee
Ryan	Male	26-35	Student
Sherry	Female	45-60	Government Employee

Sophia	Female	26-35	Education
Tracy	Female	18-25	Student
Vicky	Female	45-60	Financial Employee
Zoe	Female	26-35	Student

### 4.3.3 Justifications and Saturation

As for secondary data, the researcher realised there would be variety of sources and information to collect, so the data collection process must be rigid and clear. Due to the dual methods in the process of data collection, there are two justifications for each method, primary interview and secondary data. As for secondary data, the researcher noticed that most of these OTA websites used the same descriptions for particular attractions, for example, the British Museum. Therefore, the researcher stopped collecting data from more websites once the information was repeated.

Secondly, there were other online travel agents which mainly used smart phone applications such as the RED (小红书), Sina Weibo and TikTok (抖音). The reasons that this study rejected them were: a) this research not only focuses on young generations, but the whole range of ages, so it would be a bias for adopting these applications while it was not fully covered or used by all ages of people; b) this research focused on the data between 2017-2019, these applications for travel recommendations and descriptions were not considered as popular as websites at that moment. Thus, these applications were excluded.

Thirdly, this research planned to analyse the posts from other tourists to investigate the gap between tourists' opinions and industry voices (selling market), because it could help to explore the consistent and inconsistent properties within the cultural structure level. However, these websites only posted the information or comments that could be beneficial for their selling market, thus, it could generate a bias at this point, in other words, it would not be helpful to explore the inconsistent properties. Nevertheless, the researcher diverted the focus to participants when interviewing them. Hence, the analysis target changed while the main purpose remained the same.

As for interviews (primary data collection), this study focused on Chinese tourist's experience from 2017 to 2019, so the interviews must have taken place with this

timeframe requirement, which means they had travelled to the UK at least once between 2017-2019, otherwise, the data was excluded. Secondly, interviews had to be conducted live online, because live talks could provide fruitful data, and the researcher could understand interviewee's experience better. For example, there were two interviewees that requested online written interview questions instead of being interviewed, but these were not conducted, thus, their data was not used in this research.

Moreover, data saturation was achieved in both collection methods. Firstly, each document from secondary data collection was analysed separately until there was no new themes emerged. In the process of analysis, no emerging themes started from the 10<sup>th</sup> document, but the researcher did all the 19 documents to ensure the data was saturated. Secondly, interview transcripts were analysed respectively. 35 interviews/primary data were collected, but the data achieved 'saturation' at the 26<sup>th</sup> transcript, so the researcher only kept 30 interviews with good data qualities.

#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

As stated, critical realist methods have been used through all this chapter, from research strategy, sampling strategy to data collection method. In this section, it adopts Danermark et al.'s (2019) model from critical realist perspective to guide data analysis process. According Danermark et al.'s (2019) model (see Appendix 3), five stages are presented to provide a way for explanatory research, from the empirical domain to the real domain, then back to the empirical domain for further research. Therefore, the process can be concluded as: firstly, empirical data should be described in an empirical domain, secondly, identify the mechanisms and reasoning causal pathways to explain the phenomenon, lastly, retrodict back to the empirical domain. Based on 4.2, the intensive approach was adopted to complete stage 1 & 2, but it lacks the specific choices as there are no particular regulations. In fact, critical realists should be open minded as human knowledge can be fallible, so any methods would be accepted as long as it helps to identify the mechanisms. Thus, narrative analysis and thematic analysis, were adopted to describe the empirical data from both destination image and interviews.

Further, abduction, retroduction and retrodiction will be explained, compared and evaluated later, they were used to contextualize and complete this explanatory research. Following Danermark et al.'s (2019) model, abduction at the stage 3 is more like a thinking process because theoretical redescriptions should be referred to the existed

structures, i.e. factors that has already been identified to influence tourist's experience, or Archer's realist social theory (RST) to help to evaluate them. Stage 4 & 5 would be the most important parts that contribute to this research, as retrodiction help to identify new mechanisms, and retrodiction aims to provide a way to explain how these mechanisms were at work in the process of the manifestation of Chinese tourist's experience.

#### **4.4.1 Narrative Analysis & Thematic Analysis (Stage 1-2)**

##### 4.4.1.1 Narrative Analysis

At the first and second stage of the Danermark et al.'s model (2019), descriptions and analytical resolutions aim to collect the data from the empirical level, and 'use everyday concepts' to analyse them. These two stages try to gather empirical information and distinct the focal point for actual research's objectives needed. In other words, empirical information can be discursive and disordered, usually not all of that information needed, so the researchers need to grab the specific information only for research and systematically analyse it. Danermark et al. (2019) suggest that researchers can use qualitative and quantitative methods for descriptions, this research adopted narrative analysis and thematic analysis to look into the stories from Chinese websites and Chinese tourists (interviews) to investigate their experience.

Narratives are stories with a clear sequence. Narrative analysis can be defined as "a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form." (Riessman, 2007, p. 11). It includes different texts such as oral, written and visual; and it has a wide range of uses not only on individuals and groups, but it can also be used to identify communities, organisations, as well as nations. Burck (2005, p. 252) emphasises that narrative analysis focuses on the way individuals present and view themselves 'both as constructions and claims of identity'. Earthy and Cronin (2008, p. 420) comment it is "an approach taken to interview data that is concerned with understanding how and why people talk about their lives as a story or a series of stories. This inevitably includes issues of identity and the interaction between the narrator and audience(s)".

To apply narrative analysis to this research, on the one side, for destination image, the study investigates the narrative on how Chinese websites portray the UK to Chinese tourist and it includes materials on the websites. Chinese websites can be seen as a group of media that promote the UK as a destination, so it includes texts, photos and

some other elements. Herman and Vervaeck (2019, p. 133) highlight that images are ‘visual means of expressing the inner world or mind of the character’, which has its own characteristics that affect readers visually. Thus, when applying narrative analysis on this part, texts and images were both investigated to understand how they portrayed the UK and why they included that information.

On the other side, it investigates how Chinese tourists described their stories of visiting the UK and why they mentioned those, in other words, they made their choices to tell a story of their experiences, because interview times were limited and they could not cover every event, so the reasons why they picked up the specific events were related to this research objective. It can also be revealed from personal and social identity. Therefore, narrative analysis would be beneficial for stage 1-2 to describe the events from the empirical level with daily concepts and then distinguish them into different themes based on research objectives. However, it cannot be the main/only method for data analysis, as it can only identify general structures rather mechanisms, so the later stages (3-5) will need other depth approaches to achieve exploring mechanisms and reasoning them from critical realists’ perspectives.

#### 4.4.1.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is defined as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). It is mostly used for qualitative data analysis because it helps to identify the clusters of similar entities from data and gives the data transparency, which further formulate findings (Aslam and Rana, 2022). Figgou and Pavlopoulos (2015) point out that thematic analysis can reveal the relationships between themes, which results with a theoretical explanation of the phenomenon. In other words, thematic analysis can be applied to summarise collective entities from empirical data, as well as linking them to provide an explanatory account on social phenomenon. Fryer (2022) highlights that thematic analysis can be applied in critical realist studies to produce causal explanations. Fryer (2022) also notes that a critical realist approach to thematic analysis is appropriate for explanatory research. To be more specific, explanatory approaches aim to explain the causes of phenomena, where thematic analysis ultimately seeks to develop these causal explanations. Thus, it is feasible to apply thematic analysis on data analysis to provide an explanatory account on the tourist experience.

To apply both narrative and thematic analysis on this study, Ross and Green (2010)

provide an integrated method named a narrative thematic analysis. It allows “individuals units of meaning, primarily words and phrases, expressing thoughts, ideas, experiences and emotions, to emerge from within the text of the interviews.” (Ross and Green, 2010, p. 113). There is no conflict between two methods. Narrative analysis explores the stories within the content from Chinese websites and interviews, then thematic analysis helps to reveal the similar entities and summarise them into properties. The extra benefit is that the characteristics of each property can be illustrated as well, as each property is consisting of the similar entities.

In this research, narrative analysis was used to extract key content from all collected data, i.e. text from websites and interview transcripts, images. In other words, narrative analysis happened at the same time when the researcher read/scanned all documents. After key information was noted collectively, thematic analysis was adopted to identify main themes and subthemes, which re-analysed the key data into similar groups and generated tables. Thus, two methods were mostly separated but they both contribute to the data analysis in different steps. Specifically, narrative analysis was adopted to extract data from unstructured content, while thematic analysis emerged to identify potential findings to answer research questions and put them into collective group for further analysis.

In addition, thematic analysis can also make the data transparent to identify the relationship among properties, referring to mechanisms in this study. However, these causal explanations may not be the ‘real’ mechanisms because real mechanisms are not fixed, so critical realists may need to mix variety of methods to provide a mostly possible explanation on social phenomena. This leads to abduction, retroduction and retrodiction in the next section.

#### **4.4.2 Abduction, Retroduction & Retrodiction (Stage 3-5)**

Abduction, induction and deduction are three modes of inference, while retroduction and retrodiction are thought operations (Danermark et al., 2019). According to Danermark et al., (2019), deductive inference cannot provide anything new to the reality because it is analytical, while inductive inference generates properties based on the existed observed phenomenon. The gap here refers to the real level, that is, something needs to be discovered in the reality, also not based on certain empirical data, hereby, abduction, retroduction and retrodiction are necessary to help researchers with thought processes.

Abduction is defined as “Inference that a particular phenomenon or event is interpreted from a set of general ideas or concepts” (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 223). They have examined two ways to describe abduction from existing literature (Collins, 1985; Habermas, 1972; Jensen, 1995; Peirce, 1990) as – “formalized logic and as redescription/recontextualization.” (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 116). Abduction differs from induction or deduction because it emphasizes ‘why’ things happens, so it seeks plausible explanations which may combine existing knowledge and new interpretations (Flick, 2014). Danermark et al. (2019) explain that abduction is a mode of inference to interpretate individual events into general structures. Individual events refer to the things that we observe in everyday life, while general structures are the collective explanatory account for the phenomenon. For example, men and women travel abroad for different purposes, as well as different behaviours. This is what we observe from the empirical level, but the general structures could be gender structures, internal relationships described in gender theories or planned behaviour theories. This differs from induction because it is not a purely empirical generalisation (Collins, 1985), neither is the conclusion logically given from hypothesis as deduction (Danermark et al., 2019). Peirce (1990) states abduction can be seen as a general interpretative element in nature of perception, because perception requires humans to give meanings to what they observe, through interpreting and classifying. However, Danermark et al. (2019) point out that interpretative/classifying is different from the abductive inference, where the former lacks the criticism, thus, they prefer to describe abduction as redescription/recontextualization.

Moreover, retroduction and retrodiction have been used in CR to identify significant procedures in explanatory research (Bhaskar, 1978, 1989; Collier, 1994; Lawson, 1997; Elder-Vass, 2012, cited in Danermark et al., 2019, p. 129). The logic form of retroduction and retrodiction are the same, they both refer to understanding reality (what reality is like or what mechanism exists) from the observation of events which have occurred (Wynn and Williams, 2012). Danermark et al. (2019, p. 224) define them as below:

- *“Retroduction: A thought operation involving a reconstruction of the basic conditions for anything to be what it is, or to put it differently, it is reasoning we can obtain knowledge of what properties are required for a phenomenon to exist. The researcher seeks to identify and specify causal properties and mechanisms*

*and in developing theories or revising existing theories.”*

- *“Retrodiction: Investigating how different mechanisms interact (reinforce, moderate, or counteract one another) and affect social events. The explanation of concrete events is in focus, rather than the analysis of social structures and mechanisms.”*

Retrodution provides a creative process to researchers, where multiple explanations are generated, describing how the existing causal mechanism produced the observed events within a social structure. The retroduted mechanisms offer a logical explanation on how the phenomenon was generated, through describing the emergent properties' interactions within the social structure, because mechanisms are rarely experienced directly. These mechanisms and real structures could be different in terms of physical, social or psychological attributes, though they may not be observed directly because they might be obscured by their effects. (Mingers, 2000). In other words, it requires researchers to answer the questions when applying retrodution, “What properties must exist for X (phenomenon) to exist and to be what X is? Or, more briefly: What makes X (phenomenon) possible?” (Danermark et al. 2019, p. 118). Thus, the objective of retrodution could be described as a process to identify compelling explanations completely and logically, from the observed events based on the specific conditions of the contextual environment.

It should be distinguished that retrodution is different from deductive or inductive research. Specifically, researchers apply existing theories to generate new theoretical relationships in deductive research, which means they use empirical tests seeking to falsify the hypothesized relationships. In inductive research, it begins with the analysis of empirical data, to identify theoretical entities and patterns. The new theory would then be held based on the observations of these patterns and commonalities, while some existing entities might not be theorized if they are not represented in the empirical data (Woo et al., 2017). Therefore, all these three inferences fit on the specified cases if there are identified mechanisms in the existing theoretical knowledge.

However, retrodution would be helpful on proposing a new mechanism (or set of mechanisms) if no existing mechanisms could explain the phenomena within a specific context, while the other two (deductive and inductive) may not be able to tackle such an issue. Wynn and Williams (2012) highlight that the principle for retrodution could

be derived from the ontological assumption of emergence, explanations from epistemological way, including the multiple potential explanations. This is based on the tenet that causal mechanisms may or may not be observed empirically. Danermark et al., (2019) add that transcendental argumentation is the core of retrodiction, is about advancing from the empirical level and arriving at the real level.

After identifying the mechanisms and emergent properties at the real level, the phenomenon must be explained in an empirical level to be understandable and accessible. This is where retrodiction is required in the explanatory social research. It is also the last stage in Danermark et al.'s model, as they noted movements from concrete text to abstract will need to return to concrete. Retrodiction aims to investigate all the social structures, mechanisms and causal properties, that is, link all the retrodicted mechanisms and provide an empirical explanation. In addition, Danermark et al., (2019) highlight that structural conditions and contextual circumstances should be distinguished in explanation.

According to Danermark et al.'s model, they state that stage 3 and stage 4 could relate closely, as abduction and retrodiction do not have a very distinct border in concrete research. But they did mention two potential clues in their work: a) abduction offers potential framework and theories for interpreting, then retrodiction specifies the causal mechanisms within them; b) retrodiction focuses on 'a specific field of use for abstract theories' (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 160). Therefore, there are some distinctions among abduction, retrodiction and retrodiction based on this research's objectives: the order/timeline is the key to distinguish these three inferences: abduction provides the potential framework/structures to guide a general direction, which is a realist theory-laden process on the tourist experience (5.3.2). Within this framework, retrodiction is the one that compares, evaluates and integrates, then identifies the properties and social structures. After that, retrodiction is applied to reasoning the identified mechanisms and provide an explanatory account. It should be noted that each stage is important and the basis for the next step, so they are irreducible to each other, specifically, retrodiction would not have a specific area to work in without abduction, vice versa, abduction would not continue to find mechanisms without retrodiction; also, retrodiction and retrodiction support each other to explain the reality.

However, Danermark et al. (2019) note that the model should only be a guideline rather than a template, the research processes can (should) be different, as separated stages

can be intertwined depending on the research practice. Based on the research's objectives and the case study as the nature of this research, abduction would be recognised as a theoretical framework that provides a context for identifying new mechanisms, because the framework/structure has been determined, that is, tourist experience in the tourism sector and Chinese tourists visiting the UK as a case, with the application of Archer's critical realist theory. Thus, it will focus more on retrodiction and retrodiction in the analytical process later (see Chapter 7) to identify properties and provide an explanatory account on mechanisms.

There are several steps for applying retrodiction on the practical studies, data collection and analysis through corroborating interviews, followed by high-order coding, process tracing and process modelling (Wynn and Williams, 2012). They state that it is more feasible for researchers to identify the potential mechanisms through the analysis of the events at different levels and observing their interactions in various ways. However, there is no guarantee that the researchers could be able to observe events with underlying mechanisms because mechanisms may not be activated (Archer, 1998; McAvoy and Butler, 2018) or rarely observed. In addition, even a mechanism is activated, it may interact with other mechanisms which will change the effect and lead to a complex analysis (McAvoy and Butler, 2018). They argue that it might be beneficial to have some known structures, for example, the existing theory, before observing the events because structures predate action. The priori theory provides the description of over-coded retrodiction (Bertilsson, 2004; Tsang, 2015), and it also suggests possible mechanisms so that researchers could select the most logical one (McAvoy and Butler, 2018).

Danermark et al. (2019) present two ways of applying theories as interpretation frameworks and as tools in retrodiction: a) interpreting the same data based on two different theories; b) applying existing theories to a new empirical field. Apparently, this research follows the latter as Archer's realist social theory has not been widely used in tourism studies, especially in tourist experience. It can not only test the application of the theory in another new area, most importantly, it contributes new ways to understand and investigate the field. Nonetheless, using existing theory or proposing framework is not an alternative method for critical realists, rather, it could be another toolkit to help with identifying mechanisms depend on the research situation and given contextual environment.

#### 4.4.3 Analytical Process

At the structural and cultural domain, the codebook (see Appendix 4) includes two parts, namely attributes of the destination and elements of the destination, following Cooper's (2021) features of destination. 'Amalgams' refers to elements of the destination including amenities, attraction sites, while culture features refer to attributes of the destination including history, festivals, residents etc. The result shows that the selling market focuses more on culture features than amalgams, which implies that Chinese tourists can be attracted more by the destination's culture features. For the finding's presentation, the researcher has chosen some typical quotations from each reference for demonstrations (see Appendix 5).

'Attraction sites' is another code for visual conclusion, which summarizes how many places tourists to visit in each city of the UK (see Appendix 4). The result is in order as follows: London, Scotland, Oxford, Cambridge, Lake District, Bath and Northern Ireland. This result shows the most popular destinations among the past Chinese tourists and the selling market recommendations, but during the analytical process, the attraction sites were not highly relevant with tourist's experience. It is because: a) this coding was only for a list of how many places were mentioned to tourists, such as 'Big Ben' 'The London Eye' 'Edinburg Castle' etc., but it doesn't contain any detailed descriptions for references, while all the descriptions were referenced in attributes of the destination, which is the key point to raise Chinese tourists' interest (proved by interviewees). b) It is not highly relevant to Chinese tourist's experience the actual places they went to, but the interactions and observations they made when they travelled to those places. Thus, the findings later focus on the amenities of the UK, illustrating how the UK was portrayed in different aspects from entertainment and infrastructure to allow tourists to visit, that is, the capability and capacity of the UK as a destination.

Moreover, thirty interviews were adopted and each of the interviews took about 45-60 minutes; however, there were four interviewees who preferred to share their experiences in detail, so the interviews exceeded the planned time. All the participants were Chinese tourists from the mainland of China, who were over 18 years old and have their own decisions and ability to consent and expressed their experience on visiting the UK. Due to Covid-19, the interviews were conducted online via apps such as Skype, Zoom or WeChat because of the social distance. The consent forms were signed before the interviews, and the interviews were recorded as agreed followed the

principles of research ethics.

At the agency domain, four themes emerged in the analytical process, namely cognition, reflexivity, emotions and identity/ties. Due to the three stages of Chinese tourists visiting the UK (before, during and after), cognitions and emotions changed during the time. Thus, cognition/emotion 1, 2, 3 were used as labels for the different stages of the data findings. However, reflexivity and identity were dynamic properties that affected the tourist experience all the time, so it would not be feasible to see as a specific moment.

There are some clarifications on cognitions from the data at different stages. Firstly, Cognition 1 is the stage before Chinese tourists visited the UK, so it includes motivations and perceptions (see Appendix 7). Motivations refer to why Chinese tourists wanted to visit the UK, and perceptions illustrated how they think about the UK, including impressions, knowledge which affected by what they may have been showed from Chinese websites (structural domain).

Secondly, cognition 2 is the stage during the trip when Chinese tourists visited the UK, and it is based on actions and physical interactions, from interacting and observing. Interacting refers to Chinese tourists getting involved within the context of their leisure activities, which encompasses visiting attractions, experiencing infrastructures (food, hospitality, transportations), shopping and communications with locals. While observing refers to Chinese tourists paying attention to the things that actually happened around them during the visit. The main difference between interacting and observing is about tourists themselves getting involved in the context or not, i.e. the formal one focuses on them actually experiencing it, while the latter one excludes tourists themselves and only 'witness' each event.

Lastly, Cognition 3 is about the evaluation after tourists return to China from the UK, it includes their emergent thoughts about this trip, future plans and how they probably share this trip on social media or by word of mouth.

#### **4.5 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are vital for the research in the social sciences as these behaviours could help with protecting individuals, both researchers and participants, as well as communities and the environment. It is essential for the researcher to avoid/minimise the long-term, systematic harm to any individuals or general environment (Israel and Hay, 2006). The primary ethical considerations refer to the

dignity, autonomy, and well-being of participants. Specifically, ethical social research should be delivered with high integrity and quality, including ensuring the full disclosure of the information to participants, respecting confidential information, as well as the clear independence of research etc. (Broom, 2006). Following the guidelines of the BERA (2018) and the approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Bath Spa University, three key ethical considerations were addressed for this research: consent, anonymity, and power.

#### **4.5.1 Consent**

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) states that children and vulnerable groups should be excluded in the research unless the research is particularly designed for these people. Also, all the participants need to be voluntary with their consent for any audio/video recordings. This research adopts all the participants from the mainland of China and all of them are over 18 years old. It does not include any vulnerable people in this research and all the participants are fully voluntary for the involvement. Specifically, the researcher created a website that contains general information about the research and researcher's contact details, so that participants could be ensured with their autonomy and rights to decide, thus, it is a fully voluntary activity. Following BERA (2018), informed consent from participants is required for each ethical research. Participants were required to read the Information Sheet (in Chinese) which contained research information, interview plan, data storage, contact details. The online interviews were conducted in this research because of the pandemic (Covid-19). All the interviews were audio recorded, and these were all agreed from the participants, to ensure the data's quality. Additionally, they were informed they had rights to withdraw their data without any reasons if they changed their mind before the data analysis was completed. They were asked to sign the Consent Form if they decided to participate in this research after reading the Information Sheet. Therefore, each participant is fully volunteered, and the data collection can be considered ethical.

#### **4.5.2 Anonymity**

According to the BERA (2018), participants need to be anonymised, and any confidential information cannot be identified in the research. As the focal point of the case study within the research, the participants were only Chinese tourists who visited the UK between 2017 to 2019. Thus, the ethnicity was only Chinese, which means the religious and cultural background was limited within a Chinese context. Furthermore,

participants have been clearly informed that their confidential information will not be used in this research even if they accidentally talked about it in the interviews. Before the interview, the participants were required to sign up for the consent form after reading the Information Sheet, so they could ask any questions about the strategy on how to keep the data privacy. During the interview, some questions included gender, age group, occupation and salary range which may relate to the confidential information, but the audio recordings were transcribed pseudonyms and saved in the BSU secured network. The original recordings were deleted once the transcripts' accuracy was confirmed. Therefore, any personal and confidential information were not included or recorded in this research.

### **4.5.3 Power**

Power has been raised as one of the ethical considerations in social science, especially in qualitative research interviews. Interviewers shouldn't regard the power that is related to the interviewees because of the mutual understandings and purposes. Specifically, the relationship between interviewers and interviewees are not the same as friendship or partnership, they may not share the same value and background, also, it is not the same as daily life conversation as interviewers' questions are mostly based on different purposes. This indicates the power could have negative effects from both ontology and epistemology, on the one side, ontology means the data outcome could lead to different way from the 'real', while the epistemology could relate to the psychological effect for interviewees if they feel they need to give the 'correct' answer rather than the 'real' one. Therefore, power asymmetry cannot be neglected in social science especially in the interview-based research.

This part discusses three stages of how the researcher tried to eliminate/minimize the power before, during and after the interviews. Firstly, transparency is the priority to the participants before the interviews. The researcher has no personal interest other than collecting the data about participants' tourist experience for the UK trip, as that was the only data needed for this research. As stated earlier, all the participants anticipated the interviews based on being voluntary. Secondly, interview questions were revised several times to ensure there was no leading questions, and the researcher tried to offer most of the interviewing time for participants to talk, to ensure the whole conversation was more like an open dialog or "join with" rather than "ask and answer" or "know and save" (Cannella and Lincoln, 2011).

Further, as a critical realist, the researcher tended to ask “why” questions to encourage the interviewees to explain themselves, this could not only provide a free talk environment but helped the researcher to identify the mechanisms/processes. Lastly, language barriers and different culture backgrounds between interviewers and interviewees might create extra power for ethical considerations (Mertens and Ginsberg, 2009). The researcher and participants were all from the same country (the mainland of China), the interviews were conducted in Chinese, thus, there was no language barriers, which could create the extra power for ethical consideration. It could be argued that the value might be different when participant comes from the different area from the researcher, but the culture background or the environmental context were similar. Therefore, in this case, the interviewer (the researcher) and interviewees did not have any communication barriers or unequal power positions.

However, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) imply that power asymmetry is not possible/easy to fully eliminate in social research, for example, analysing the data transcripts after interviews are always based on the knowledge of the researcher. Based on the critical realist’s perspective and this research’s aims, it tends to explore the ‘real’ domain rather than the ‘empirical’ or ‘actual’ domain, so it focused on the mechanisms/processes, i.e. ‘why’, ‘what makes he/she say/think that’ etc. The researcher could analyse the data based on their own knowledge and the understandings of Chinese language, culture, and values. This might generate asymmetric power in this situation, but as stated before, the research’s data was analysed in Chinese, and only translated the final findings into English, so it would minimize the language barrier, also, the same ethnicity could minimize the power when the analysis was based on the same culture background.

#### **4.6 Validity**

Based on the qualitative research in nature underpinning a critical realist’ perspective, the validity followed Maxwell’s (2012) and Danermark et al.’s (2019) principles, it explains how this research addressed each issue that emerged from empirical data to interpretative process. From a critical realist perspective, Maxwell (2012, p. 130) sees the validity of “an account as inherent, not in the procedures used to produce and validate it, but in its relationship to those things that it is intended to be and account of”. Wolcott (1990, p. 146) highlights that “understanding is the foundation concept of qualitative research rather than validity”. But it is argued that critical realists’ research

does not follow the traditional validity (credibility, transferability, dependability etc.) because there are no definitive methods for validity in realism (Given 2008; Maxwell, 2012). Specifically, a realist approach not only identifies the mechanisms so to explain the emergence of reality but tends to explain how, which can be fallible and finite. Therefore, Maxwell (2012) suggests dealing with broad understandings, i.e. descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability and evaluative validity.

#### **4.6.1 Descriptive Validity**

Descriptive validity refers to the accuracy of transferring, that is, the researcher follows participants' meaning clearly and transparently, not making up or distorting things they observed or heard (Maxwell, 2012). Two characteristics are identified within it: a) they all aim to solve specific problems, or in a specific context, and it is capable to represent or generalise other groups; b) the data should be appropriately transcribed and easily achieved, for example, the audio recording should be an adequate quality to be used. As stated in Ethical part (5.5), participants were open to talk about their experiences when they visited the UK, and all the interviews were recorded in a high quality that can be transcribed easily. Furthermore, Maxwell (2012) points out that reliability should be considered as it threatens validity, and that different methods or researchers could have different outcomes from describing the interview data, so he agrees with Miller (2008) and suggests two ways to achieve: a) to have a consensus opinion from different researchers; b) figure out the differences and understand the reasons for these differences, such as perspectives, situations and purposes. This research has been viewed by two other authentic researchers who are supervisors for the researcher, so it followed the former method to achieve the descriptive validity.

#### **4.6.2 Interpretive Validity**

Interpretive validity is the process that the researcher 'make sense of things' in general (Maxwell, 2012; Wolcott, 2009). It refers to the 'meanings' to those people who get involved in the context about objects, events and behaviours. This type of 'meanings' includes cognition, affect, belief etc. that anything could be related to the communicative meaning in a narrow perspective. In other words, researchers are required to use their communicative language to explain the phenomenon from empirical data (what they observed, heard and understood), and their goal is to make sense of what the participants mean, and their meanings to the current research, even to

other research (generalizability). Maxwell (2012) advocates interpretive understanding is unlike descriptive validity, it is rather more difficult to achieve because it is a mental process for researchers, a matter of inference as to how they make sense of participants' words and actions into specific studies. However, several social theorists agree that a recognition of consensus could help (House, 1991; Manicas, 2009; Maxwell, 2012), that is, researchers need to respect the perspectives of the actors in that situation, although it need not be centred on that perspective.

Three actions were done to achieve a valid interpretation and make sense of the reliable empirical data. Firstly, during the interview, the researcher tried to adopt participants' viewpoints rather than only focusing on the interview questions. The researcher took the priority of these participants and tried to understand them clearly. For example, when participants mentioned a vague emotion, the researcher would ask: 'when you said you liked it, why was that or any particular stuff there you interested in?' or, 'you just mentioned you don't like it, do you mean the attraction itself, or the history behind?' etc. This could not only help the researcher understand participants but also delve further into the reasons and be able to figure out the mechanisms in a realist way.

The second step was to double check with the participants, which was the same logic as the first step, but it was after the interviews, so each participants received their interview transcript, they could read through and edit it if there was anything different from their original meanings. They would need to agree with the final version of their transcripts and ensure the meanings of what they said. Thus, this not only made participants feel secure with their data but also guided the researcher on how to interpret their meanings.

Lastly, it was the shared language and beliefs that enhanced the understanding, which was not an action but a mental process. Specifically, the researcher and the participants had the same beliefs, values, and general background, so the researcher understood properly what the participants meant and why they said their statements. It should be noted that the researcher did not have any other purposes apart from research. In addition, the language for communication was Chinese, which was the native language for both the researcher and participants. Therefore, three steps supported the researcher to, at least, avoid the empirical biases and achieve the validity for interpretations.

### 4.6.3 Theoretical Validity

Theoretical validity is defined as “an account’s validity as a theory of some phenomenon” (Maxwell, 2019, p. 140). It is different from the other two types of validity (descriptive and interpretation validity) because it goes beyond the other two and it does not simply describe the concepts and theories but explain it instead. In other words, theoretical validity is fundamental not only in qualitative research, but in a realist approach, because it aims to explain the phenomenon which meets the requirements on figuring out the mechanisms and causal powers, to provide an explanatory account of social phenomenon. Maxwell (2012) points out that any theories have two components: the concepts that the theory applies to, and the relationship among these concepts within this theory context. As a result, there are two validity issues that need to be addressed based on these two aspects of the theory: a) the blocks for researcher to build a model, that is, theoretical settings for the phenomenon to study; b) the blocks to connect all the settings within the theory and explain the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2012). In other words, it is about how to set a theoretical framework and how to provide an explanation after figuring out all the causal powers and mechanisms. Theoretical validity can be seen as a core in qualitative research, as Maxwell (2012) notes that descriptive validity and interpretive validity are not independent, but theory-laden instead. Thus, valid theories are essential to be addressed along the whole process of the research.

To address these two issues in the theory, the researcher applied Danermark et al.’s (2019) and Li’s (2022, 2023a, 2023b) work and guidance to help with the solutions. Firstly, due to the theory-laden method, i.e. the application of abstract general theories (see 3.4.2), Danermark et al. (2019) summarise two principles to address issues in the validity of adopting general theories: a) even the general theories are abstract, they still need to be tested and modified, in short, not all abstract theories can be applied in any research, they need to be adequately examined in both theory discussions and empirical studies; b) they need to follow the principles of CR, which implies that theories cannot be dogmatic to entirely predict what is/is not the findings. According to these two principles, the researcher adopted Li’s (2022, 2023a, 2023b) incorporated theories, that have already been accepted by both tourism and CR studies, mostly importantly, her work has already figured out underlying mechanisms from structural, cultural and agential domains, which can be seen tested successfully. Furthermore, incorporating

Archer's M/M approach in examining Chinese tourist's experience cannot be entirely predictable, as there were only general factors being identified before interviews, while the findings still emerged from the empirical data.

As for the second issue on how to connect identified mechanisms (as a critical realist) to explain the phenomenon, this research adopted abduction, retrodiction and retrodiction (see 4.4). These three inferences have been consensus agreed by most critical realists (Danermark et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2012; Sayer, 2010) and can be adopted for identifying underlying mechanisms and explain the causal powers among them. The researcher aimed to provide an explanatory account following Danermark et al.'s (2019) model, where they highlight that retrodiction is the last step to investigate the relationships between structures and mechanisms, and then contextualize the phenomenon. Therefore, both issues within theoretical validity were addressed through the methods stated in a realist approach.

#### **4.6.4 Transferability and Reliability**

In this qualitative, critical realist case study, the concern is less with statistical generalisation but more with transferability and theoretical generalisation. Transferability refers to the extent to which the insights generated in one study can be meaningfully applied to other settings, based on the richness of contextual description provided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Stalmeijer et al. (2024) further argue that transferability in qualitative research is multidimensional, involving applicability (whether readers can judge the fit of findings to their own context), resonance (whether the account evokes a sense of familiarity or shared experience), and theoretical engagement (whether the study connects to, refines or generates theory that others can use). From a critical realist perspective, theoretical generalisation includes theories themselves and analytical process (properties and mechanisms conceptualisation) (Danermark et al., 2019; Mingers, 2004; Tsang, 2014), which also aligns with the third dimension of mentioned in Stalmeijer et al. (2024) work. Thus, this part addresses transferability issues following Stalmeijer et al. (2024) three dimensions.

Firstly, applicability was supported by providing thick and thoughtful description (Stalmeijer et al., 2024) of the specific case: outbound Chinese tourists visiting the UK between 2017 and 2019. The potential structural, cultural and agential properties of this setting have been described in detail in Chapter 3. The characteristics of participants, the timing of their trips, and the nature of Chinese travel websites analysed were all

documented. This allowed readers and future researchers to judge whether their own contexts share sufficiently similar structural or cultural conditions for the mechanisms identified here to be relevant. Secondly, resonance was fostered through rich, narrative data from interviews and websites, presenting Chinese tourists' own lived experience of UK.

Lastly, theoretical engagement was achieved through the use of retrodution to infer mechanisms operating in the 'real' domain, explicitly linking the findings to Archer's structure–culture–agency framework. Retrodution is widely recognised as a central method in critical realist research for uncovering underlying mechanisms from empirical data (Danermark et al., 2019; Sayer, 2000; Stalmeijer et al., 2024; Tsang, 2014). Danermark et al. (2019) highlight that theories can be generalisable when proposed at a high abstract level, while Tsang (2014) argues that case studies are particularly valuable in critical realism because they enable both empirical generalisation (through identifying “demi-regularities”) and theoretical generalisation (through retroductively inferring mechanisms). In line with Tsang's critical realist account, the case was thus used not only to illuminate this specific setting, but also to contribute to broader theoretical generalisation about mechanisms in tourist experience. Thus, this study addressed theoretical generalisation by grounding its retrodution-based explanations in empirical data while identifying mechanisms that hold potential relevance beyond the case.

However, as Danermark et al. (2019, p. 100) argue “the ways in which generalizations are applied and prioritized have significant epistemological and ontological implications,” meaning that different researchers may link mechanisms in different ways. Acknowledging that human knowledge is inherently fallible, the retrodictive explanations offered in this thesis are therefore provisional rather than definitive, a limitation shared by all critical realist research.

Within this framework, reliability is conceptualised as the consistency, dependability and transparency of the research process rather than the replicability of findings in a statistical sense (Maxwell, 2012). For critical realists, reliability also concerns the coherence of the analytic reasoning used to move from empirical accounts to claims about deeper mechanisms (Sayer, 2000). In this study, reliability was supported by using a semi-structured interview guide developed from the research questions, Archer's SAC framework and applied consistently across all participants, which

following Li et al. (2012) work. Specifically, all interviews followed a common online protocol and were analysed in Chinese, then translated in English. The selection of Chinese travel websites was guided by explicit inclusion criteria (see 4.3). The analysis employed an iterative coding framework applied systematically to both datasets, with earlier transcripts revisited to check for coding drift and to refine categories. Themes were continually cross-checked against raw data, and patterns from interviews were compared with those from online travel narratives, where provided a form of dependability.

#### **4.7 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has stated research design in detail, including research strategy, sampling methods, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations and validity. Due to the nature of qualitative research, it adopted intensive approach within a case study context, which followed critical realists' approach. The data collection contained two ways including secondary data from Chinese websites, primary data from interviewing Chinese tourists. From a critical realist perspective, these two ways provided a mutual area allowed the researcher to investigate how structural cultural properties (secondary data) interacted with agential cultural properties (interviews). It applied convenient sampling strategy that aiming to adjust settings for the interview process, i.e. clarified interview questions, targeted participants and got familiar with recording settings. It ended up with 19 documents from four main Chinese OTA websites, 30 participants for interviews that achieved data saturation. As for data analysis, this research followed Danermark et al.'s (2019) model in critical realists' approach. Narrative and thematic analysis have been applied from the first to second stage, followed by abduction, retrodution and retrodiction for the rest of three stages. Ethical issues have been considered from consent, anonymity and power to protect both the researcher and participants. Data validity has been discussed from four elements, i.e. descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability & evaluative validity, which ensure research findings can be valid for other studies.

## Chapter 5 Findings

Echoing the research objectives (4.1), data analysis was conducted in two phases; in that, the secondary data on destination image from Chinese websites, and primary data from interviews on individual Chinese tourists were analysed separately. As stated in Chapter 4, the reason for dividing into two parts is to investigate the gap between structural cultural domain and agency cultural domain, so it would help to find what factors are at work in processes, in other words, the mechanisms on how tourist experience generates. From a critical realist perspective, cultural domain has always been seen as important as structural and agency domain, which all the three domains should be analysed separately.

This chapter firstly presents the data findings (5.1) and identifies the general mechanisms (5.2) through retrodiction based on the empirical findings; it answers the first research question about personal and cultural factors on tourist experience. It then adopts retrodiction to provide an explanatory account on how these mechanisms interact with each other to manifest tourist experience, in other words, how these mechanisms operate to generate the tourist experience, which answers the second research question (5.3). In this way, it provides a clear insight of *Relationship a* and *Relationship b* based on Archer's realist social theory (RST), that is, structure and human agency domain cannot be reduced from each other. Specifically, 'things done to agents' from the structural domain cannot be reduced the whole of the reality because 'agents act back to the reality' from the agency domain, which could either reproduce or transform the existing structure. This research also holds a position that the cultural domain provides a way to help realists explain the mechanisms and investigate the depth of the interplay between structure and agency.

### 5.1 Coding Analysis – Secondary Data

Coding has been recognised as a crucial key in qualitative research. Basit (2023) highlights that coding allows researchers to connect and understand the depth of the data, which aims to provide an explanatory account on the emerging phenomena, even generating a theory grounded in the data. Coding exercise was carried out to destination image at the structural cultural domain and data at agency domain. The former adopted content analysis, where focusing on descriptive contents on Chinese websites, in terms of how the UK's destination image was being portrayed in China, and how Chinese

tourism organisations sell the UK as an attractive destination. The latter adopted narrative analysis, where aiming to investigate the settings, characters and structures through individual tourist's story and get to understand the depth of their personal experience.

For the destination image coding, it was clear from the materials on Chinese websites, where it is necessary for the selling market. These materials have already been categorized into different sections, for example, attractions, entertainment, food, hotels etc., so the coding process focused on these descriptions and categorized them into a clear structure for data presentation. Figure 12 shows the coding process and finding from the secondary data on destination image.

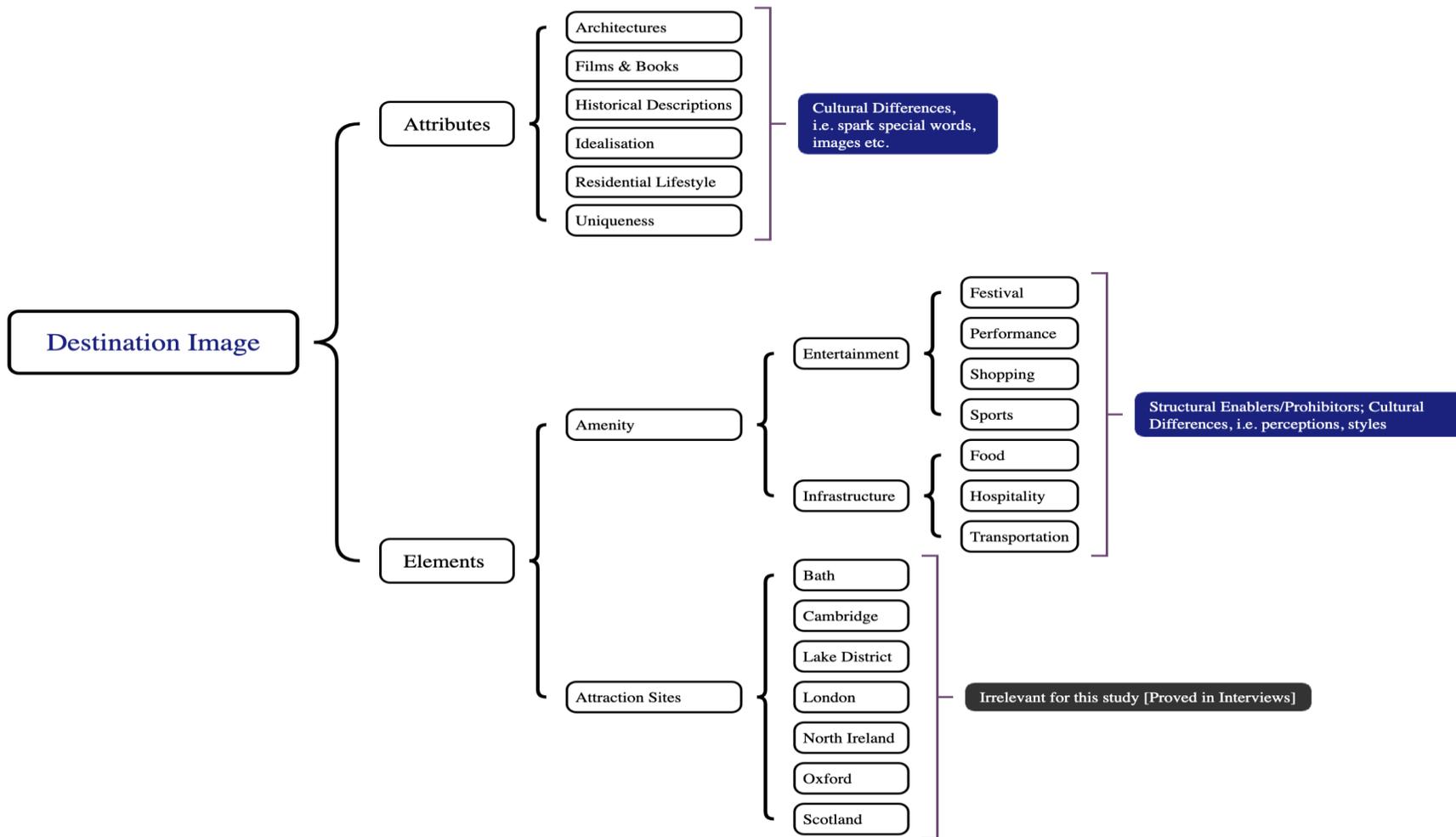


Figure 12: Coding Process of Destination Image (Secondary Data)

### 5.1.1 Attributes of the Destination (Culture Features)

The coding result shows six aspects on how culture features are being described, i.e. uniqueness, historical, films and books, architecture, idealisation and residents. It picked five typical references for each aspect to present the specific descriptions how the UK was being portrayed. The findings of the descriptions on British attributes primarily focus on the difference, specifically, culture features' differences (Figure 12, see Appendix 5).

Firstly, 'uniqueness' is the major way to describe the UK with the largest quantity of references (190), followed by historical and architecture descriptions, 141 and 86 references respectively. It is also noted that each document includes descriptions about the uniqueness and history, which implies that both are a priority to the selling market, as a method to get attention from Chinese tourists. 'Uniqueness' investigated how British attributes have been portrayed uniquely from other countries, especially China. The finding shows that the selling market tends to use special/unique words to emphasize the UK's speciality, i.e. 'one of the most' 'the most' 'the biggest' 'the earliest' 'the only one in the world' etc. Apart from that, it uses some famous sayings that create a unique outcome, for example, at the beginning of the introduction for London, it includes a quote from Samuel Johnson: "*when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life*" (Mafengwo, 2022). It uses this saying to create an equalness between London and life, which implies that people can never get bored of London for its diversity and uniqueness. This finding indicates that Chinese tourists could be attracted by the speciality of the attributes, which has been identified as 'uniqueness as a theme.

Secondly, 'Historical descriptions' refers to contents and materials that based on the historical events. These materials were presented in a way that tells a story. Historical descriptions often take more coverage than other five aspects when introducing attributes of the UK. Specifically, it can take several paragraphs to talk about historical events. Furthermore, each event included 'what happened' 'when' 'who were involved in this event' and most importantly, 'where it happened' because the stories' purposes are normally to introduce the attraction sites. For example, 'Windsor Castle' has been portrayed from its built time and significant events which happened in the past thousand years, also, it mentions about the royal family members who lived in there before, but the main purpose is to emphasize how special Windsor Castle is and how different it is from other castles.

This could be linked to the third aspect named ‘Films & Books’, that includes famous movies, books and authors to get the attention. It can prove the culture dimensions in Chapter 2, that is, Chinese tend to be collectivists, so the influencers’ affects cannot be neglected. There are two aspects that Chinese websites used to portray the UK: a) one aspect refer to those scenes in famous films, such as 221B Baker Street in Sherlock Holmes, Platform 9 ¾ in Harry Potter, and Paddington Station in Paddington Bear. These are the scenes that actually appeared in films, and tourists can be closer to the characters if they are fans of these films; b) the other aspect is about the location where famous movies were filmed, or famous authors used to live. For example, several authors lived in Bath to write their books, including Jane Austin and Charles Dickens, which leaves a good impression for tourists that Bath is good for creativity. Both aspects can be concluded from the influencers’ affect, that is, the selling market can catch tourists’ attention through something they familiar and have good impressions on. In more depth, differences are the main mechanism that stimulates the tourists, and the selling market find these differences to meet their requirements.

Fourthly, ‘architectures’ could be related to the differences as well because the descriptions focus on the different styles that varied from Chinese buildings, i.e. the colours, shapes and styles, which relate to different times. It could be argued that architectural descriptions have potential to be included in ‘Historical descriptions’ and ‘Uniqueness’, as most of them refer to different time periods and how unique they are. However, this research kept architecture as a separated code because a) it was clear to see how many references talked about the UK’s architecture; b) some images attached in these documents visually show British architecture, which emphasizes that these travel websites take architecture to be one of the factors that are attractive to Chinese tourists.

Within the architecture descriptions, the findings could be concluded in three directions. Firstly, different styles were mentioned such as Gothic, Baroque and Classicist architecture. Secondly, most descriptions not only focused on British architecture styles, but also related to different periods of British history, in which those buildings have various characters, i.e. ‘Victorian’ ‘Georgian’ ‘Romanesque’ ‘Tudor’ etc. Both findings aim to provide a view that differ from Chinese architecture. The third result indicated that several references described the details about the height, materials and colours to create images to attract tourists, which can be related to the idealisation.

'Idealisation', as the fifth aspect, refers to the images/scenes/atmosphere that the selling market tries to create to impress Chinese tourists. They tend to use more adjective words to portray a romantic scene that deliver a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere, so it can leave a better impression. The result finds that the sentences tend to start with 'if', followed by some visual descriptions on the interactions between natural views and human behaviours, such as "*walking dogs on green grass*" "*watching the sunset surrounded by historical buildings*" (Qunar, 2022). It shapes a good natural view and peaceful moments that shows leisure tourists can escape from their normal life, which meets their requirements. Some descriptions also outline the typical local life of the residents, which refer to the last explanations in attributes coding process named 'residents' lifestyle'.

Lastly, 'Residents' lifestyle' outlines the traditions of British people and highlights the perceptions/cognitions' differences. It builds up some rules and regulations that enable/prohibit Chinese tourists to do/not to do. For example, "*you are supposed to talk about the weather instead of the personal matters to start a conversation with British*" (Ctrip, 2022). Some opposite traditions which refer to 'differences' could raise more interest and curiosity, such as "*most shops close early around 4pm on Sunday afternoon in the UK while shops in China open until midnight*" "*their lunch are normally light and cold food with bread, sandwich etc., while Chinese lunch are normally warm rice*" (Mafengwo, 2022). Thus, the selling market try to emphasize the differences from seeing, hearing and speaking in these documents, which encourages Chinese tourists to experience these differences.

However, there are some overlaps within these 6 aspects, some codes not only describe the architecture but also how unique it is in the whole world in which refers to 'uniqueness'. For example, "*The round Radcliffe Rotunda is the library's collection of medical and scientific books, built in 1749 and this beautiful Baroque building has become one of Oxford's landmarks*" (Qyar, 2022). This includes three codes, 'architecture' 'historical descriptions' and 'uniqueness'. There are some other references which have the same situation, thus, these references were categorized more than once, because it cannot be separated from each other, and it cannot be neglected from one another. In addition, the extra finding is that there is no explanation for the specific details about each style's differences or characters, for example, the character between Victorian and Georgian might relate to the lights, the room spaces etc.

Nevertheless, the selling market might only focus on superficial descriptions of British architecture in these guidebooks to raise tourists' curiosity.

### **5.1.2 Elements of the Destination ('Amalgams')**

There are two major parts included in elements of the UK from the analytical process, amenity and attraction sites. Amenity covers entertainment and infrastructures, i.e. festival, performance, shopping and sports in entertainment section, while food, hospitality and transportation in infrastructures section.

As for entertainment, shopping contains the largest coverage with 83 references, followed by festival (38), performances (21) and sports (10). It has been proved in existing literature (see Chapter 2) and later in interviews' findings (see 5.2), shopping has become one of the most popular activities for Chinese tourists in their leisure travels. According to the findings, these websites not only listed the shopping malls and numbers of famous brands, such as 'Selfridges' 'Harrods' 'John Lewis' 'Burberry' 'Clarks' etc., but also included some markets that are different from Chinese ones, such as 'Borough Market' 'vintage shops' 'outlet shopping mall, for example, Bicester Village'. Firstly, cheaper prices for luxury brands and the variety of shops were mentioned in several documents to attract Chinese tourists. Secondly, unique shopping activities such as vintage shops, handmade shops and food markets were introduced as well because tourists cannot get the same experience in China. Some typical references examples as below:

*"There are more than 30,000 shops in the city of London, Selfridges, Liberty and John Lewis, as well as designer boutiques. Bond Street and Regent Street, which are connected to Oxford Street, are also one of London's major business districts, with pillowcases and bed linen ranging from a few pounds to thousands of pounds of high-end clothing and fine jewellery"* (Mafengwo, 2022).

*"The closest outlet to London called Bicester Village, where many luxury brands such as Dior, Valentino, Gucci and Prada have stores, is also the largest outlet mall in the vicinity of London, and it attracts a lot of visitors"* (Qyar, 2022).

*"Portobello Road: a former mecca for London's hippies, home to ancient clothing, jewellery, coins and curios, and the world's largest antique flea market. It opens every Saturday from 7am to 5pm"* (Qunar, 2022).

*"Borough Market opens Friday mornings and Saturdays all day. The area is famous for its delicious tapas and offers a variety of flavours, from bison hunt to cheese and organic*

*vegetables” (Mafengwo, 2022).*

Moreover, festivals, performances and sports were three other parts of the entertainment section. Festivals covered different events all over the year in the UK, such as ‘Trooping the Colour’ ‘Winter Wonderland’ ‘Edinburgh International Festival’ etc. Performance encompassed the introductions of several shows and relevant places, for example, *“Her Majesty’s Theatre is The Phantom of the Opera since its premiere in 1986, it has become one of the longest-running plays in London and is well worth watching” (Qyar, 2022).* It also introduced a couple of famous operas namely ‘Mamma Mia’ ‘The Lion King’ ‘Les Misérables’. Sports mostly focused on football and some famous stadiums. This is because *“England is the birthplace of modern football and the cradle of its development” (Ctrip, 2022),* and it has become ‘football culture’ in British traditions. Thus, football has been seen as a way to get to know British culture, that is, an access for Chinese tourists to have a common interest which provides a chance to get involved in different experience, as it says *“For travellers, whether it’s attending a Premier League match live, visiting the home stadium of a big club, getting up close and personal with big stars at a training base, or just going to a pub to watch a game with local fans, you can feel the huge impact that football has on United Kingdom’s lives” (Qyar, 2022).*

Apart from football, tennis, marathon and rugby were mentioned on these websites as well, along with stadiums such as ‘Stamford Bridge’ ‘Murrayfield Stadium’. These portrayals illustrated the capacity of the UK as a leisure destination for Chinese tourists, specifically, they could find different leisure activities to entertain themselves. Furthermore, it can be linked to the ‘difference’ as well if it digs into more depth. In particular, the descriptions listed for these leisure activities were mostly different from them in China, i.e. cheaper prices and more variety to choose on shopping activity; festivals and sports into culture and traditions; famous opera theatres. Therefore, structural capacity was the main finding on entertainment part, but it also enhanced the importance of ‘difference’ across the analytical process.

As for infrastructure, the most covered content was food and transportation with 34 and 33 references respectively. These references only included the introductions on food and transportation, and excluded a list of restaurants or recommended routes, because the selling market recommendations contained commercial purposes. It was found that the selling market not only described differences in words but also displayed

images/photos posted by other tourists or from British websites to provide visual evidence.

Following the ‘difference’ theme, a variety of food and typical British foods were introduced and illustrated, for example, “*Fish & Chips are the ‘national dish’ of the United Kingdom, with shops scattered all over the streets and relatively inexpensive, usually £5-10 per person. Don’t miss the traditional English Breakfast, which usually includes English tea or coffee, bread, jam, ham, sausages, eggs, soybeans, tomatoes, hash browns and mushrooms*” (Mafengwo, 2022). Figure 13 shows how Chinese websites portrayed British food to Chinese tourists. On the left top, it says, ‘Must-have Food’ and each column shows the photos about the food: ‘English afternoon tea’, ‘fish and chips’ and ‘English breakfast’ (from the left to the right). Beneath the title, it described the uniqueness and what were included in each picture. An example of the English afternoon tea in Figure 13, the description as “*When you come to London, you must experience the famous English afternoon tea, a leisurely afternoon in a fine restaurant to enjoy mellow tea and a variety of snacks, so comfortable. Londoners are very particular about afternoon tea, not just a random snack, usually with a set, usually with a three-tiered dim sum tower with a pot of tea, you can relax and enjoy a long afternoon*” (Ctrip, 2022). Hence, it not only outlined the specific food included in each picture, but also introduced the meanings and importance how it contributed to British culture, which can refer to the ‘difference’ again.

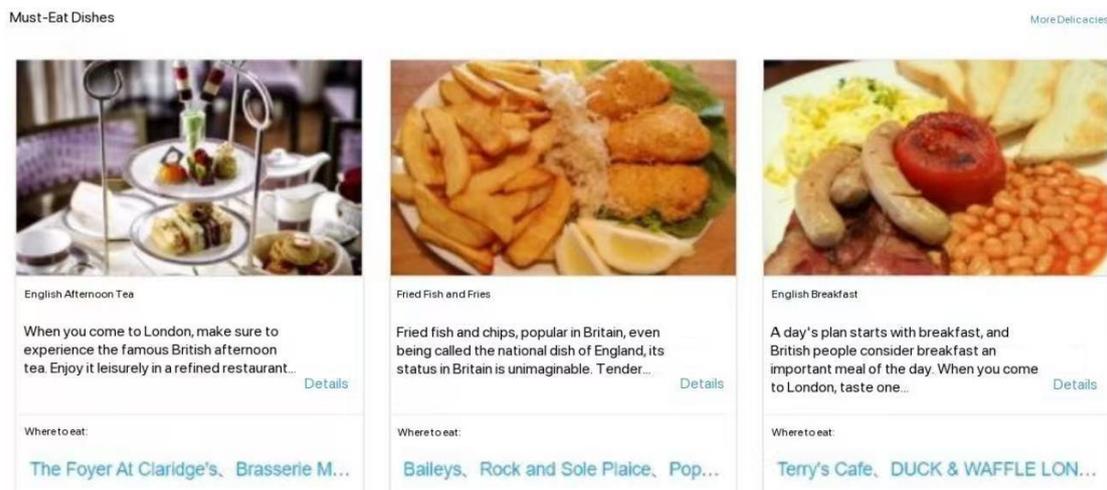


Figure 13 Food Snaps on Ctrip

Source: Ctrip (2022)

Furthermore, all the words in the blue colour (see Figure 13) can be clicked in detail,

and the bottom of the pictures showed some recommendations for specific restaurants, so tourists can click and mark the locations before they visit the UK. In addition, ‘More food choices’ on the right top side lead to more pictures and recommendations, for example, *“The United Kingdom also offers a wide range of Chinese restaurants and takeaways, while in recent years Thailand, Viet Nam, Korea and Indonesian restaurants have sprung up, offering diners both cheap and different flavours”* (Ctrip, 2022), which shows that tourists can have many choices and taste international food.

Lastly, transportation and hospitality were similar with the previous findings, which focused on the guidance and differences. General guidance was mainly about introductions on the commute and stay, i.e. airports, train stations, tubes, taxis, hotels, safety. These references mainly focus on helping Chinese tourists in their best convenience and physically safety:

*“Heathrow International Airport is located 50 kilometres from central London. The way to get to central London: a) Heathrow Express: 15 minutes to Paddington Station, £11.50; b) Underground (Piccadilly Line): 55 minutes, £3.8; c) Bus (lines A1 and A2): 80 minutes, £15; d) Taxi: about £50”* (Mafengwo, 2022).

*“B&B stands for Bed & Breakfast. It is very common in the UK, which means that you will be provided overnight beds and breakfast. Similar to Airbnb, is a simple but comfortable and affordable accommodation option, the price will be the same or slightly lower than ordinary star hotels”* (Qunar, 2022).

*“However, it is strongly recommended to choose the area near the Canary Wharf station in the financial district to the west, north or east, as the south of the River Thames and east London are relatively unsafe for tourists”* (Qyar, 2022).

Apart from that, ‘difference’ was across all the descriptions, that is, the selling market uses unique aspects of British transportation to imply a different experience will be guaranteed when Chinese tourists visit the UK. It can refer back to the historical descriptions about long history of tubes in London, or different style of living, such as booking in advance, ticket regulations etc. For example:

*“There are 12 undergrounds in London, it is one of the oldest underground systems in the world. Hundreds of stations are spread across the city and are the most frequently used means of transport for Londoners on a daily basis. The sign of the metro station is a red ring with white letters on a blue background”* (Mafengwo, 2022).

*“Taking a taxi in Scotland is very different from in China. Except for the airport and train*

*station where taxis are waiting for them, all taxis need to be booked by phone, there is no vehicle that is parked at the beckon, and you need to indicate your location, where you want to go, and your name when making a reservation. If you are traveling from the hotel, you can ask the hotel staff to help you make a reservation” (Qyar, 2022).*

*“Anytime: Take the train at any time, easy but expensive; Off-peak: Take any off-peak train at any time, much cheaper than Anytime ticket. There are two types of tickets: Off-peak Single, Off-peak Day Return, and Off-peak Return. As for what is the peak time and what is the off-peak time, the regulations for each section of the train are different, so you should pay attention to it when buying a ticket. If you take an off-peak ticket and get on a rush-hour train, you will get a fine” (Mafengwo, 2022).*

Overall, two findings from destination image shows that ‘differences’ is the main finding across all the coding analytical processes. As for culture features, the coding findings found that ‘differences’ are the main method used by the Chinese selling market to portray the UK as a destination for leisure travel. The differences focus on sparking special words, descriptions including true events, stories, as well as creating images on local life. This also indicates that Chinese tourists can be attracted by these culture differences, which raises their interests and curiosity. Equally, this finding was proved by Chinese interviewees later in 5.2, that is, curiosity is the main motivation that ‘push’ Chinese tourists to visit the UK. On the other hand, findings from ‘elements of the UK’ showed that the content focused on the approved capability and capacity of the UK as a leisure destination, including numbers of attractions sites and leisure activities. Furthermore, they were linked to the ‘difference’ theme as well, that some of the different perspectives/styles that Chinese tourists can experience. This creates conditions that enable/prohibit Chinese tourists to visit the UK at the structural cultural conditioning stage (T<sup>1</sup>).

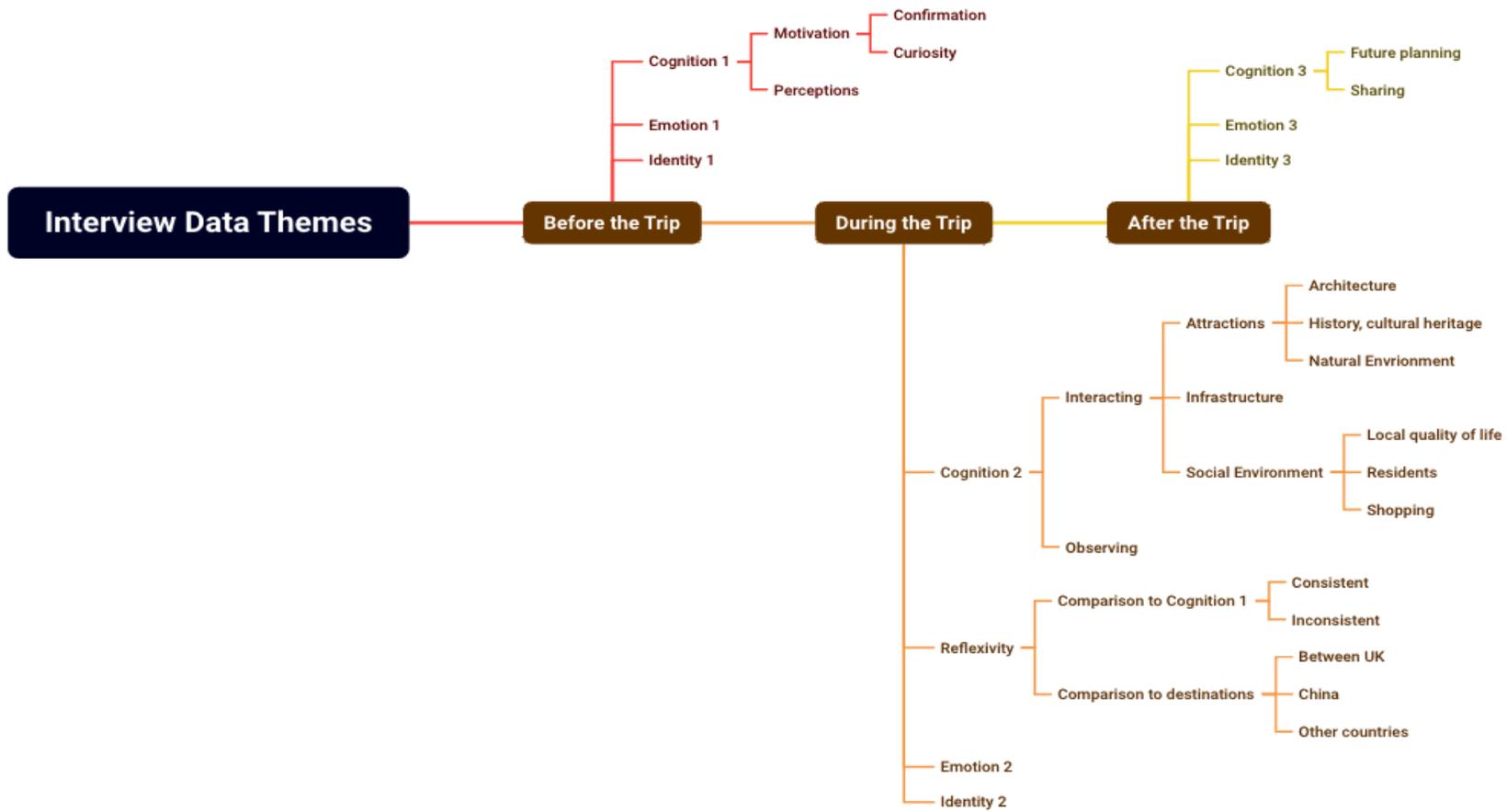


Figure 14 Coding Process of Interview Data (Primary Data)

## 5.2 Coding Analysis – Interviews

The analytical process for interviews was from open to focus coding, it then summarised the themes and subthemes afterwards. The codebook (see Figure 14; Appendix 6) has been divided into three stages, i.e. before, during and after the trip. For the interview data, the coding process followed timeframe in Archer's morphogenetic approach model (M/M) (see Chapter 3). With the application of this research, the timeframe refers to three stages, namely before the trip ( $T^1$ ), during the trip ( $T^2$ - $T^3$ ) and after the trip ( $T^4$ ). Retroduction and retrodiction then were applied to investigate the whole journey from  $T^1$  to  $T^4$ , to find the mechanisms that explain the tourist experience's manifestation. Data was analysed in Chinese, then it was translated into English for writing up the thesis. The reason for that is to minimize loss of meaning in translation. Key data findings were translated into English at the very last step of the data analysis. This section will look through three stages with different quote examples from interviews, then it will present based on each theme so it can clearly show how mechanisms were identified in the analytical process.

### 5.2.1 Cognition

#### 5.2.1.1 Cognition 1 – Motivation

The findings show that Chinese tourists chose the UK as travel destination for two main reasons: a) they were curious about the UK because of the differences, i.e. policies, history, culture; b) they wanted to confirm their acknowledgment and perceptions. These two could be connected but they are different from each other. Curiosity focused on the word 'look' without a particular purpose, most participants mentioned that 'I just want to have a look', it mostly contains a thing they did not know completely. While confirmation referred to the tourists that wanted to see and experience the things that they have already known about. The confirmations were mostly on specific sites, for example, *'I want to see...'* *'I have a list of things I have to try...'*. These specific sites usually related to cultural purposes, it has been concluded as films, books, stories, arts and museums, as well as future educational purposes, which can be proved by destination image coding findings, that cultural difference is main element that attracts Chinese tourists visiting the UK.

Lastly, perceptions of the UK were the group of codes that described how Chinese tourist's thoughts, impressions about the UK before they physically visited. It

summarised that Chinese tourist's perceptions varied from three categories (see Appendix 7): a) Destination attributes including architectures, food, weather; b) Local characteristics including British people, traditions, accent, monarchy; c) World-famous institutions encompassing famous art galleries, museums, sports, and high-ranking universities in education.

#### 5.2.1.2 Cognition 2 – Interacting and Observing

##### **Interacting**

The findings showed that interacting was the main activity Chinese did more than observing during the trip. They interacted with attraction sites, infrastructures and social environments including local residents. It was separated into different categories to present the findings clearer about their main activities and some typical quotes (see Appendix 7) so it can help to understand the process later why Chinese tourists have different reflexivity or evaluation to their general experience. Cognition 2 were the intermediate between Cognition 1 and Cognition 3, so it is important to understand clearly at this stage to infer the mechanisms later.

Chinese tourists interacted with attractions mostly with architecture, history & cultural heritage, and natural environment. This also proves the findings from destination images, that Chinese tourists prefer to see and experience more about the differences, mainly cultural differences. There is a justification to separate the codes of architecture and history & culture heritage. Specifically, architecture focused on the physical buildings. Tourists only wanted to have a visual record but little knowledge, for example, they may see decorative patterns inside the buildings, and took pictures of them, but without knowing the history of them, nor did they want to know. However, history & cultural heritage were more about museums, galleries and historical descriptions that they intended to learn about, or they wanted to confirm with their knowledge. As a result, the consensus feedback from thirty participants was that they were all satisfied with architecture and history & cultural heritage. But the experience with the natural environment was not fully satisfied, and seven participants complained about the weather and streets cleanliness, for example, *“it was pouring with the rains when we were in Lake District, and we didn't enjoy at all”* *“the street was not clean, full of bird poo”* (Harry).

As for infrastructure, Chinese tourists investigated the food standards, clothes wearing

(referring to weather), hotel conditions, and transport conditions. The result shows that nearly two third of participants complained about the food and the transport conditions. Specifically, nineteen participants disliked the food in the UK, they complained about the taste and variety of choices. Only three participants stated they love British food while the rest of them (8) says they could accept it only during travel time.

*“There are not many choices except fried food, and every meal has chips. I got PTSD about chips after I went back to China” (Cathy).*

*“We started to cook meals in Airbnb ourselves after three days in the UK, the food there had really bad taste” (Ella).*

Furthermore, fifteen participants complained about the transport, especially with train delays, slow speed, no air conditioning or signals on tubes etc about the poor conditions of the facilities. Seven participants stated they thought it is convenient though it is not as good as transport conditions in China, while eight tourists booked drivers or cars for touring during their visit.

Apart from food and transport, accommodation conditions including hotels and Airbnb were mostly rated as satisfactory by Chinese tourists, for example, *“I was surprised that they provided breakfast with hot tea and bakery stuff! It was brilliant” (Cathy)*, although some participants said it would be better to have air conditioning. In addition, the extra findings from infrastructure were that most (27) participants reflected the general facilities were not good enough to provide basic needs, for example, *“it was not convenient because some shops only took cash, whereas everything is tapping payment on our phone in China now” (Sophia).*

In the last section of interacting, social environment or social engagement is about Chinese tourists knowing residents' life and getting involved in local contexts. It has three parts, namely local quality of life, residents and shopping. Shopping could be arguable to put into leisure activities, but Chinese tourists' shopping was not only purchasing products, but they saw it as a communicative method with local people, and they will get emotional from the way they have been served, so it was categorised in social environment. First of all, residents had the highest coverage during the analytical process, twenty participants stated that they were helped by residents and they thought British people were friendly to them, for example, Cindy said, *“when I was in York, we took the coach to the Lake District, and the luggage I was carrying was actually very*

heavy, and the coach driver offered to carry the luggage for me”. Penny also said: “I think one thing impressed me, is that British people will always ask you whether you need any help when you look confused. Maybe it is their gentleman's kind of model, anyway, that makes me feel secure and a sense of reassurance”. There are three cases where Chinese tourists emphasized that they had been offered to pay for the bus tickets because they did not have cash. Sophia said, “we took the bus when we went to Glasgow and had no change. I went to a nanny next to me to exchange, but the change was really small. So that nanny just paid for me. I insisted to pay her back, but she refused it, she smiled to me and wrote 0 on my hand because I cannot speak English, that really touches me.”

In addition, twenty-one participants thought it is expensive for cost of living in the UK for the local quality of life, and they did not feel safe using public transport, Betty said, “I wish there was security check before getting to the public transports like in China, such as tubes, trains, it made me feel unsafe”. However, seventeen participants stated about their shopping experience, and they were all satisfied with it, because there were no discriminations or any inconvenient problems even when there was language barriers.

### **Observing**

Chinese tourists’ observations mostly focused on British humanities and lifestyles, i.e. British clothes, manners, and how they live. Twenty-six participants talked about what they observed during the trip, and all of them implied their likes on British humanities, ranging from locals’ slow pace of life, comfortable and harmonious environment, to that they rarely break the rules and follow them strictly. “I always saw some locals drink in this bar no matter at noon or night, or some lied on the grass and enjoyed sunshine on weekends, it seems very comfortable and chill life. They don't have to work overtime on weekends like Chinese do” (Edward).

Ella also said, “they are very friendly to pets. They will put a bowl in front of the door, and there is water in it, which is for the puppies. And dogs are also very good to people, they don't bark or bite without reason. That feelings were just good.’ Besides, ‘The other thing I noticed was that British follow the rules and very mannered, things like they always waited for the traffic lights even there were no cars.”

In addition, ‘idealisation’ from destination image codes was proved as well. Chinese

tourists found romantic images with nice scenery could leave them with impressed moments, for example, *“the view is beautiful and relaxing, and sometimes even if you don't do anything, just sitting by the river or in the park feels very laid-back. There are many attractions that have been seen in some movies or photos, but the actual experience is still very different, and the reality can surprise you in a good way”* (Mary).

### 5.2.1.3 Cognition 3 – Future Planning

Thirty participants in the interviews gave a general rank. The average score for the UK trip is over eight out of ten. The real scenery match with the photos they saw before the trip reach to nine out of ten. This means that they were very satisfied with what they had experienced from their expectations, and the overall tourist experience was excellent. The reasons for not giving full scores were ranked due to transport, food and weather. However, twenty-eight participants highlighted that they would revisit the UK after Covid-19 for their holiday, the other two stated they would go somewhere new such as Italy, France and other European countries.

Furthermore, the findings showed that the pandemic (Covid-19) changed their ways of thinking which links to reflexivity (see 5.2.2). Specifically, it stimulated their travel intentions because of the travel regulations. Due to these travel intention changes, it made their memory for the UK trips turn better when reviewing. In other words, they preferred to remind themselves with all the good moments for the UK trips.

*“I just felt we need to take any free time to travel instead of staying at home, as you never know what day you may not even be allowed for travelling abroad”* (Jack).

*“Not only the pandemic, but also Notre-Dame de Paris was damaged by the fire. Both were just sad, so I think we need to take the chance to visit it when we still have it for other places. That is why I want to go back to the UK to visit these places on my list”* (Jonny).

### 5.2.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity was another theme that cannot be reduced even it was not through the whole journey. The data showed that reflexivity emerged at the second stage when interactions and observations happened during the trip. It has the highest number of references (see Appendix 6) which implied it was highly relevant to Chinese tourists' experience. There are two parts within this code, and they were separated to demonstrate it clearly. Generally, both parts were about comparison, Chinese tourists evaluated surroundings

they encountered and compared them to the prior cognition. Specifically, they compared to Cognition 1 which were mostly their perceptions before the trip, also, they compared the UK to other destinations, i.e. China, cities within the UK, as well as other countries. Then it ends with an evaluative conclusion, which is new cognitive status.

In the first part of reflexivity, Cognition 1 was compared, in other words, Chinese tourists compared the reality to their images and perceptions they had before the trip. It resulted as consistent and inconsistent to their Cognition 1 (see Appendix 7). The consistency was mostly discussed about visual attractions that were the same as they expected. Over ten participants admitted that they were surprised to see those buildings, and attractions were actually the same, even more magnificent than photos online. Betty said, *"I found those attractions were actually the same as photos on websites, it was a surprise, because you know, most destinations would filter their photos to attract visitors."* Hereby, the feedback was positive from Chinese tourists about the reality, and even better than expectations. This also implied that Chinese tourists did not expect to find the location to be the same as the pictures because they had been 'betrayed' regarding experience from other destinations. As a result, the average score from thirty participants for the scenery matched with the photos achieved nine out of ten.

As for inconsistencies, the focus could be summarised with general infrastructures and locals. Specifically, most Chinese tourists remarked that the UK was expected to be advanced, modern and highly developed, but the reality was lower than their expectations. Gary said, *"I thought the UK was highly prosperous. The city should've been very clean and tidy, but it was not as I expected."* Sherry added, *"I think in the past it was world-leading, and it was probably more modern at that time, but it has not been developed much from then, so it was not as prosperous as I expected."* These were both negative feedback because they were not satisfied with the reality when comparing to their expectations. However, all the participants were very positive about residents' friendliness, *"I heard people said British were very cold. I don't think at all. They were indeed very friendly on the road. Especially when you were waiting for the bus, people would talk to you"* (Cathy). Betty said, *"I was worried about the language barriers, but I've never met any problems when I was in the UK, I used body language, and people there were always willing to help."* Nevertheless, both these comments either negative or positive, showed Chinese tourists' thinking and evaluative processes based on the surroundings during the trip. Thus, reflexivity from comparison to Cognition 1

reshaped their cognitions and emerged new knowledge that contributed to Cognition 2. In the second part of reflexivity, Chinese tourists tended to compare the UK with other destinations and between its own destinations. Twenty-six participants noted 69 references of comparing China with the UK. The objects of comparison range from their interactions and observations, attractions, general infrastructure to natural and social environment. The positive comments were mostly about attractions, and natural and social environment, while the negative comments were about general infrastructure. Essentially, the thinking process behind that was still on the 'differences', that is, Chinese tourists paid more attention to things that were different from China, so they compared the UK with China and then evaluated whether they liked it or not, if yes, they had positive tourist experience, if not, then negative. For instance, some tourists complained that everything needs reservations in the UK while they do not have to book a service in China, "*it was not convenient for independent travellers like us*" (Anna). Another opposite example, they loved the experience in the UK for its scenery because they were surprised that it looked the same as pictures, while some attractions in China have a big difference between pictures and reality.

Furthermore, twenty-one participants compared cities within the UK, for example, London and Oxford. There were two directions within these comparisons: a) Chinese tourists stated there is no differentiation between cities in the UK apart from London and Edinburgh. Jennie said, "*it feels the same for each city after the fifth day, apart from London which was very different. Other cities I visited like York, Bath, Oxford, Cambridge felt the same to me, but the good thing was they all have a chilled vibe which feels better than London*"; b) some participants particularly compared London and Edinburgh, they noted these two cities were totally different from each other, and most participants preferred Edinburgh because it has more historical features and locals were more friendly there. Also, some participants see London the same as Shanghai because they have many similarities, i.e. cost of living, local fast-paced lifestyle, busy and modern. In addition, ten participants compared the UK with their past travel countries, i.e. the USA, Japan, Spain, Austria etc.

### **5.2.3 Emotions**

Emotion was one of the strongest themes that emerged. There were several categories that were highlighted at each stage of the trip (see Table 8). This means emotions were prominent throughout the whole trip when Chinese tourists visited the UK, and they

played a significant role in shaping Chinese tourists' experience.

Table 8 Emotion at different stages of the trip

Theme Name	Category	Codes (examples)
Emotion 1 (T <sup>1</sup> )	Anxiety/fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>"Yes, we were worried about the communications because we can't speak English" (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>"I think it is just me, I am always nervous before travelling even in China. Especially to a place with unfamiliar faces" (Cindy).</i></li> </ul>
	Expect/excitement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>"I was looking forward to it, but I was worried about the language barrier" (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>"I expected to try some local food" (Jennie).</i></li> <li>- <i>"Tower Bridge is the most one I want to look" (Penny).</i></li> <li>- <i>"I read some books and learned about it when I was young, and then when I went, I was expected to confirm to my knowledge" (Vicky).</i></li> </ul>
	Relaxed/easy-going	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>"No, I was very relaxed, I didn't have many expectations as long as I don't have to study at that time" (Peter).</i></li> <li>- <i>"I don't want to be too restricted when I travel, so I didn't have a fixed travel plan in mind of a leisurely vacation" (Oliver).</i></li> <li>- <i>"Me and my friend were kind of chill with the travel, we don't have strong purposes, just look around" (Jasmine).</i></li> </ul>

Emotion 2 (T <sup>2</sup> – T <sup>3</sup> )	Surprised/shocked	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“It was surprised that they were still using these tubes and trains from 200 years ago, can’t believe it” (Luke).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I was shocked with Egypt display room in British Museum, it was magnificent” (Ella).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Like Cambridge, it is a shocking feeling from the university, world ranking university” (Rick).</i></li> </ul>
	Anxiety/fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“We feel unsecure and a bit afraid of safety in London” (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I nearly got stolen in London, it made me feel anxiety all the time in crowds” (Anna)</i></li> </ul>
	Disappointed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I was disappointed that Big Ben was refurbishing at that time” (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“It was a bit disappointed that I didn’t see the Tower Bridge when that bridge opened” (Anna).</i></li> <li>- <i>“It was rainy for half of the time, disappointed” (Jodie).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The food was boring” (Grace).</i></li> </ul>
	Satisfactory/ comfortable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I saw what I expected on this trip, and the whole journey was good, just had a good time” (Kelly).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I feel very happy, because I was with my friends, so this trip was not boring” (Johnny).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The overall sense of experience is very good; I think as it meets my requirements for travelling” (Sophia).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The trip in the UK is comfortable,</i></li> </ul>

		<i>nothing to stressed about, felt chill” (Mike).</i>
Emotion 3 (T <sup>3</sup> – T <sup>4</sup> )	Regret/pity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“Not enough time, I wanted to go more places” (Anna)</i></li> <li>- <i>“There are still many places that I wanted to go that I haven't had time to visit, I hope to have the opportunity to travel again” (Jordie).</i></li> <li>- <i>“But it's a pity that I didn't go to Hogwarts Harry Potter's factory, and there is a factory next to London that didn't go to it” (Zoe).</i></li> </ul>
	Grateful/lucky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I am very glad that I went before the Covid-19, it is very difficult to travel abroad now” (Johnny).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I felt I have learnt a lot from this trip, so I am grateful for it” (Cindy).</i></li> </ul>
	Expect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I want to travel with my friends again, it will be different experience and I am looking forward to it” (Ryan).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I wish I can still have a chance to revisit the UK” (Ruth).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I want to visit again after I get retired” (Jack).</i></li> </ul>

Source: Exported from NVivo (self-created)

Table 8 illustrates the variety of emotion along the whole journey from Chinese tourists. It shows their commentary directly resulting from what they saw, heard and felt. Before the trip, they were expecting, anxious, or relaxed. This is because of their knowledge and personal interests. Some tourists were anxious about the language barriers in a new country with new unknown fields etc, while some tourists were more relaxed about it because they did not have too many expectations and accept there will be language barriers. This can also be explained by their previous experience and personal characteristics, for example, *“we have been to several European countries, so we think*

*the UK should be similar with other European countries, so we were actually not worried too much about it” (Gary).*

During the trip, mixed feelings emerged from Chinese tourists, i.e. anxiety, satisfaction, disappointment and surprise, based on their interactions and observations. The emotions of satisfaction and surprise were positive as the tourists gave compliments about the attraction sites, cultural heritage conservation and natural environment, whereas disappointment and anxiety emerged from the weather and infrastructures including food, security and transport, as well as the attractions they couldn't see. The anxiety before and during the trip was caused by different reasons, the former was because of the lack of knowledge while the latter referred to the interactions and observations. This means even when the emotion/result is the same, it could be caused by different mechanisms.

At the last stage, tourists went back to China and were interviewed, and different emotions emerged, i.e. regret, gratitude and expectation, because of the external environment (Covid-19) and internal conversations. Most tourists regretted that they should have visited more places and spent more time in the UK, so they expected to revisit there in the future. Some also were grateful that they travelled before the Covid-19 pandemic, because there was uncertainty about the future (the interviews were taken in 2022 while the restrictions were not lifted yet).

Besides, it should be noted that some tourists experienced conflicting emotions even at the same stage along the whole journey. Specifically, they talked about their worries about the language, but they still expected to visit the UK before the trip. During the trip, many tourists complained about different aspects that made them disappointed or anxious, but they still expressed satisfaction from the trip. After the trip, nearly all of the tourists stated they regretted the short visit length, and they expected to revisit the UK.

#### **5.2.4 Identity**

Identity was another strongest theme that came through the participants' stories, along all their journeys. It is about self-interests and self-recognition about their positions in the social interactions. There are two types of identity that emerged from the coding process, which were personal identity and social identity. Personal identity mostly consisted of their preferences based on their past experiences or their future

expectations, while social identity encompassed how they see themselves in society with all the interactions.

Table 9 Identity

Identity Types	Codes (Examples)
Personal Identity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>"I like exploring, so I didn't like to read these guidance" (Anna). (T<sup>1</sup>)</i></li> <li>2. <i>"...For example, when I was making my plan, I focused more on the sceneries and art galleries, I don't really pay attention to food or environment" (Jasmine). (T<sup>1</sup>)</i></li> <li>3. <i>"I am not like some other people; I prefer to go depth of one place rather than just look around all places" (Ella). (T<sup>1</sup>)</i></li> <li>4. <i>"I tended to know and learn about history, their culture" (Luke). (T<sup>2</sup> – T<sup>3</sup>)</i></li> <li>5. <i>"I don't know others, but I live a fast-paced life, I cannot live in the UK because they are so slow" (Ryan). (T<sup>2</sup> – T<sup>3</sup>)</i></li> <li>6. <i>"I want to revisit the UK because I want to feel more about the culture, like residents' lifestyles etc" (Betty). (T<sup>3</sup> – T<sup>4</sup>)</i></li> <li>7. <i>"Next time I want to visit more countryside in the UK, to see more green areas" (Anna). (T<sup>3</sup> – T<sup>4</sup>)</i></li> </ol>
Social Identity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>"It was a leisure trip, so I didn't make much plan" (Harry). (T<sup>1</sup>)</i></li> <li>2. <i>"I wanted to see how other Chinese people's life in the UK" (Kelly). (T<sup>1</sup>)</i></li> <li>3. <i>"British were very friendly, but you know, maybe it was because I was a foreigner to them" (Cindy). (T<sup>2</sup>)</i></li> <li>4. <i>"I don't feel good when I see Chinese artifacts in the British Museum because they plundered from us" (Cathy). (T<sup>2</sup>)</i></li> <li>5. <i>"I was just a tourist, an outsider, so I was just observing" (Lucy). (T<sup>2</sup>)</i></li> <li>6. <i>"Wish the pandemic can end soon, so Chinese and British can have mutual travel" (Vicky). (T<sup>3</sup> – T<sup>4</sup>)</i></li> <li>7. <i>"Travel is definitely okay, but I think it might not be easy for</i></li> </ol>

	<i>Chinese to live there long-term” (Sherry). (T<sup>3</sup> – T<sup>4</sup>)</i>
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Source: Exported from NVivo (self-created)

Table 9 shows two types of identity both emerged from participants’ coding process, and it was a strong theme that crossed through all the stages of the journey. Personal identity in this case was mostly on the characteristics and self-interests. It distinguished themselves from others as individuals, and it usually had a strong expression when Chinese tourists talked about it, for example, ‘not like others’ ‘probably just me’, which they were trying to express their own interests that were distinct from the groups.

Moreover, social identity was another type of the identity that differs from personal identity, and it appeared that social identity (95) has more coverage in participants’ conversations than personal identity (51). The data showed that social identity in this research mainly focused on the nationality and social groups. Firstly, social group, referring to being a tourist, was the strongest theme across the whole participants’ conversations. They consciously/unconsciously mentioned they were only a tourist, which means they were aware that they would not stay for a long time in the UK, so they would not have the same needs as in their daily life, as well as more acceptance to most of the things happening.

This resulted in a situation where Chinese tourists were more tolerant or accommodative of differences, or more tolerant to the things they disliked. For example, *“I was just traveling to there for two weeks, so you know, even though I can’t get used to the food, it was only for two weeks anyway” (Rick)*, which demonstrated they would deliberately enjoy the things made them comfortable, at the same time, be more willing to accept differences.

Secondly, nationality was another social identity as being Chinese in this case. Many participants saw themselves as a foreigner in the UK because they have different nationality and ethnicity. For instance, Zoe said, *“we know everything about the UK from our news. They probably have some cases of racism, but so far from what I experienced, I think British were very friendly.”* Furthermore, some participants admitted that they did not feel good when they saw Chinese artifacts in the British museum and related history. But some participants felt more relaxed about it, *“I think we cannot narrow our mind, at least they keep them very well, and showed our excellent stuff to the whole world” (Grace)*. Both of these cognitions were evidenced that they

have a strong identity of Chinese belongings regardless of their different findings. Consequently, it could be affirmed that identity underpins the cognitions and can shape/reshape it. However, the data from thirty participants showed that both aspects of social identity had not changed along the whole journey, even for further plans (new T<sup>1</sup>). Specifically, most participants still see themselves as a Chinese, a tourist before, during and after the trip, even when they were talking about revisiting the UK in the future. This differs from the personal identity that changed along the trip, which could possibly be explained as cognition that developed their personal identity, while social identity was rooted in the cognition and shaped/reshaped it.

Lastly, age is an overlap between personal identity and social identity. Participants mentioned their age in both identities, two examples as below:

*“I was young, so I didn’t really mind where to go as long as I don’t have to stay at home for studying.” (Cathy)*

*“I am not young anymore, you know, people like me, we just want to go out to have some chill time and enjoy my retirement.” (Jack)*

Obviously, they both mentioned age, but they referred to different identities, the former was personal identity because it was an individual’s character and interests, while the latter was social identity as individuals categorized themselves as a group. Nevertheless, age as either personal identity or social identity did not change/transfer afterwards, so it would affect tourist experience in the same way, that is, shaping/reshaping the cognitions.

## **5.3 Retroduction**

According to the previous two sections, several strong themes emerged from the data analysis, i.e. emotion, identity, cognition along with reflexivity. In this section, it adopted retroduction to identify the generative mechanisms, which could help to explore from the empirical domain to the real domain and figure out the properties at the real level.

### **5.3.1 Structural Properties**

#### **5.3.1.1 Economical Structural Enablers**

In this research case, income and age could be highly related to Chinese tourists, as gender and race will not block a Chinese person from visiting the UK. Among these

three demographic elements, income can be the primary factor that distinguish Chinese tourists visiting the UK. To be specific, the data (VisitBritain, 2020) shows that Chinese tourists' average spending in the UK was £1937 per visit in 2019, which in currency was ¥ 18,102, while the Chinese annual average wage was ¥ 90,501. This means visiting the UK would cost them over two months wages if they are on an average wage. Based on the characteristics of leisure travelling, tourists normally would choose another cheaper destination if they do not have enough budget. Thus, people who visited the UK at that time were at least higher than average wage earners, if only based on the income, and they can be categorised as middle/upper middle class at least. This can also be proved from interviews. None of the participants' annual income were lower than ¥ 100,000, apart from nine participants that were still students without any salary, but they were supported by their parents and family. Also, eleven participants' incomes were over ¥ 300,000 a year. Therefore, income conditions become a barrier, also known as structural conditioning, to enable some tourists visiting the UK, at the same time, prevent other tourists from doing it.

Furthermore, age could be another factor that divides people into different groups. VisitBritain (2024) reported that only 9% of Chinese tourists were aged 55+, and about 50% of Chinese tourists were aged 25-44. The data illustrates that age can affect Chinese tourists' choices. In addition, education background could be an influential factor on Chinese tourist's cognition, but it was excluded in this research because: a) some participants talked about the history, but there was no evidence that they acknowledged it from their education. Even though the researcher can prove the Chinese education system included British history, it cannot be evidenced that these books were the same due to the frequency of updates, or that they still have power on tourists; b) participants did not talk about their education background, and it would be bias if the researcher only judged from the interviews. Hence, education was excluded in this research, but it would be one of the demographic elements that should be taken account of in further studies. Therefore, income and age were two of the demographic factors that enabled Chinese tourists to visit the UK.

### 5.3.1.2 Socio-political Prohibitors

Socio-political prohibitors refer to any rules and regulations that prohibit agencies from achieving or reaching aims. It is a type of restriction that stops individuals or divides

people into groups. For example, the pandemic (Covid-19) emerged new restrictions on social distance, which asked people to keep two meters distance apart. There are two regulations that emerged in this research case, that have shaped Chinese tourists' actualization of visiting the UK, namely visa restrictions and media restrictions. Visa restrictions prohibit tourists' physical actions from getting into the UK, while cultural conditioning in media shapes tourists' knowledge about the UK.

Visa restrictions refer to the board requirements for Chinese tourists visiting the UK, as they will need the specific UK travel visa to visit the destination. It is noted that the visa for the UK is not the same as Schengen Visa because of Brexit, so it is not the first choice for most Chinese tourists because they need to apply for the specific visa and it only lasts for six months, while they could apply for Schengen Visa and travel to more than one country at the same time, which offers them more choices. Lucy said, "*you know, Chinese travel to Europe countries with the same visa, but that does not apply to the UK, so I always thought the UK was probably the same as other European countries.*" Thus, it was evidenced that visa restrictions can be one of the structural conditionings that prevent Chinese tourists visiting the UK.

Restrictions in media can be another factor that prohibits Chinese tourists knowing the UK. Overseas websites and media are all banned in China, such as YouTube, Instagram, Tripadvisor and VisitBritain etc., this means Chinese tourists can only know about the UK from Chinese media, which limited their knowledge. It results in Chinese tourists relying on those travel websites and agents to gain information about the UK, and it also implied the importance of online travel websites in China. Furthermore, this structural conditioning can as well affect Chinese tourist's experience during the trip. As Anna stated, "*it was not convenient for independent travellers like us because some of them needed reservations, including attractions and restaurants*". The reason is that Chinese tourists could not access overseas websites when they were in China, so they were not able to make reservations. Therefore, restrictions in media not only allowed Chinese tourists to learn limited knowledge about the UK but it also affected tourist experience in a negative way.

### **5.3.2 Cultural Properties**

#### **5.3.2.1 Cultural Differences**

Based on the data from the destination image part at the structural domain, 'differences'

were the strongest theme that Chinese websites used to portray the UK. This type of differences refers to cross-cultural differences between China and the UK. Specifically, two countries have different ideologies, specifically, China is a Communist country while the UK is a Capitalist country, so it can lead to different beliefs and values. In more depth, the UK has different parliament from China, i.e. royal family and prime minister both have powers in certain ways (Ctrip, 2024), and British have more individualism than Chinese (Hofstede, 1979). Due to a variety of reasons, British people have different traditions, beliefs and values from Chinese people, for example, ‘classes’ and ‘gentlemen’ were most interviewees’ impressions of the British. Besides, the UK is well known as ‘*the empire on which the sun never sets*’ (Jack) or ‘*British Empire*’ (Ruth) in China because it was the largest empire in history at its height in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (later explained in interviews). Thus, all these differences raise Chinese tourists’ interests on visiting it, as ‘seeing is believing’ (later explained in Cognition) is Chinese tourists’ values and beliefs.

#### 5.3.2.2 Sociocultural Patterns

##### **Cultural Learning**

As revealed, Chinese travel websites can be seen as the entity from the selling market and past Chinese tourists’ experiences, and their content is based on the past real experience from the big data and the expectations from the selling market. Hence, they are not the only way to investigate how Chinese websites portray the UK but also can help to reveal what catches the attention of Chinese tourists. According to 5.1.1, uniqueness, history and architecture are the top 3 number of codes from Chinese travel websites. These three aspects are all related to cultural heritage and history, which means the selling market assures that culture and history can attract Chinese tourists. It can also be proved in later interviews, that all participants visited the British Museum during the trip and talked about history stories and architecture that impressed them. Indeed, it can be explained that China has a long history, and the interest is rooted in a long tradition of valuing education and cultural heritage. Chinese tourists value history and cultural learning as a way to understand the world in depth and improve their knowledge. Furthermore, some participants stated that they have different feelings when they saw Chinese displays in the British Museum, Edward felt “*not comfortable and angry*”; Jonny said, “*I think it was very interesting, at least it is a chance to show our chinas to the whole world.*” Grace said, “*I don’t feel angry, instead, I saw many*

*Chinese things that I did not even have chance to see in China, I learnt a lot at least!*" Regardless of these reflexivity and identity at the agency domain, they all proved that Chinese tourists are interested in cultural and historical heritage, especially if linked to Chinese history.

### **Rooted Traditional Cultural Values**

As revealed in Chapter 3, Confucianism and Taoism have influenced Chinese tourists for over two millennia in their ways of knowing, feeling and acting. This reflected that Chinese tourists prefer to understand real things through their eyes/experience, and have a structured experience, including well-organised, guided tours or clear guidance, as well as their thinking process and certain logic for systematic descriptions.

Firstly, the recurring phrase ‘眼见为实’ (‘seeing is believing’), used by participants in the interviews to justify their decisions to visit the UK, which resonated with Confucian’s emphasis on learning through direct engagement with the world. Classic concepts such as 格物致知 (‘investigating things to extend knowledge’) and 知行合一 (‘the unity of knowledge and action’) (Fung, 2020), which underline the importance of embodied experience as the foundation of real understanding. This orientation was evident in participants’ insistence on “having a look” as a way to verify or correct second-hand images of the UK. As Penny noted, *“I shared this experience to others, some believed it, but some don’t. They think I was exaggerated how great the UK was, but I was just stating what I have observed, so I guess they won’t believe it until they experience it.”* reflecting the Confucian epistemic norm that authentic knowledge requires personal verification.

Secondly, Confucianism’s concern with order, structure and proper arrangements - articulated most clearly in 礼 (‘ritual order’ or ‘propriety’) (Radice, 2017), which helps illuminate Chinese tourists’ preference for well-organised tours, clear guidance and reliable infrastructures. Many participants stated that they preferred clear guidance and information that could be easily understood, as well as the convenience. For example, most participants highlighted as an excellent experience in British Museum since they were provided with the guiding machine that explained all the related history. *“It was an amazing experience in British Museum, they provided a guiding machine, and every sign is clear to follow even it was huge there, I didn’t get lost”* (Betty). Conversely, disruptions to transport order, such as repeated train delays, were

experienced negatively. Peter said, *“it was annoying that I have encountered 4 times of the train delays, the longest one was about 40 minutes! This is not a good experience especially for tourists.”* These reactions reflected a culturally rooted expectation that public environments should be regulated, predictable and respectful of others’ time and needs, where resonated with Confucian ethical-social thought (Yao, 2000). Thus, Confucian values act as cultural properties shaping what tourists regard as appropriate organisation, which in turn affects emotional responses and evaluations.

Thirdly, the way participants structured and narrated their experiences following ‘衣食住行’ (clothing, food, hotels, transport) and ‘游购娱’ (attractions, shopping, entertainment) reflected classical prioritisation of basic necessities as the foundation of wellbeing. This logic has shaped how they think and evaluate their experience. ‘衣食住行’ means the basic necessities of human manipulation of all human activities, it contains four general words which are clothing, food, housing and transport. It was later then adapted to describe weather & temperature, food, accommodation and transport in travel by Chinese tourists, and became the four key elements to describe and measure tourist experience. In fact, there are other three elements along with these four, namely ‘游购娱’, which refers to attractions, shopping and entertainment. This pattern echoed passages such as 民以食为天 (‘the people should always priorities food’) in Mencius and the Confucian emphasis on securing material stability before engaging in higher pursuits. This has been proved during the interview processes, as thirty participants all described their experience following this structure. They may have different orders, but they reminded themselves when they did not know what to say about experience. For example, *“I just talked about the weather, transports, food, what else... oh commute, yes, so talking about transportation...”* (Grace), hence, it explains that Chinese websites introduced infrastructure from these aspects for destination image to meet Chinese traditions. In addition, Chinese travel websites mirror these categories by presenting destination information around these seven elements, which indicates deliberate alignment with culturally embedded expectations (Fang, 2012).

Taoist insights further inform the emphasis on feeling, atmosphere and embodied sensing, i.e. openness to naturalness (自然) and advocate learning through affective travelling/wandering (游). In the interviews, participants frequently described their desire to “feel” and “sense” the environment, weather and atmosphere of British

cities—not only to “see” them. This type of interplay of seeing, feeling and sensing were consistent with Confucian & Taoist concepts, where cognition is embodied and emotional rather than purely abstract.

### **Face (‘Mianzi’) and Social Relations (‘Guanxi’)**

Chinese culture is strongly collectivist, emphasizing harmony in social groups, and collective well-being over individualism. It could be proved from participants’ information, that only two participants stated they travelled on their own whereas other participants all travel with their family members or friends in 2-6 person groups.

As stated above, all the participants remarked that they have shared to their family, friends and colleagues in certain ways, either posts on the social media, or talked to others and made recommendations. This also proves that Chinese tend to be collectivist in their beliefs and values, so sharing would be seen as an important thing. Thus, the collectivism reflects that Chinese tourists tend to travel in groups rather than as individuals.

Furthermore, some tourists noted they took many gifts from the UK to their family and friends, this not only evidences the collectivism rooted in Chinese tourists, but also about their social status (Face/ ‘Mianzi’) and social relations (‘Guanxi’). Specifically, Chinese tourists bought friends gifts to show that they went to the UK themselves (face) and they thought about their friends and family (‘Guanxi’) to bond with the relations. As Zoe said, *“My mom asked to buy several scarves from Scotland as gifts for her friends and family members, because Scottish scarves are well-known handmade ones.”* Sherry also stated, *“British are famous for their unique classic patterns, like Burberry, so I bought several shirts, scarves that have those patterns for gifts.”* These examples show that Chinese tourists not only buy gifts for their friends and family members, but they also chose unique and memorable gifts that differentiate from other places, which aims to show their social status (‘Mianzi’) and social relations (‘Guanxi’). In addition, this also explains that Chinese tourists go shopping in destinations not only for cheaper luxury products, but also for their social status and social relations.

In addition, it can be remarked that all the tourists were involved in talking about the UK trips in their conversations, while not all of them chose to post on social media because of their job positions. This also implies that they felt the UK trip was showing good social status (Face/ ‘Mianzi’), but they wanted to be humble to keep a good

relationship ('Guanxi'). For example, *"No, I don't share on media. You know, managers cannot show too much about their private life, so I just talked to friends, not showing off"* (Luke).

### **5.3.3 Agential Properties**

#### **5.3.3.1 Cognition**

Cognition has emerged as one of the strongest themes from empirical interview data and three stages were identified. Cognition as a subjective 'container' that indicates the process and outcome of Chinese tourists' learning, understanding and the knowledge development. Cognition captures properties including motivation, perception and understanding of destination, local culture, future planning.

Cognition 1 refers to Chinese tourists' motivations and perceptions about the UK. Firstly, Chinese tourists raised their curiosity and interests for confirmation based on Chinese media (structural conditioning). Cognition 1 revealed that the main purpose for Chinese tourists visiting the UK was for hedonism, although some participants have other purposes such as further education plans or visiting friends and relatives etc. It can be explained that all participants were from leisure tourism groups in particular, so hedonism was the major purpose for travelling outbound. Apart from that, the data also identified the curiosity and the confirmation as two motivation themes. Specifically, curiosity refers to the stuff that tourists do not completely know about, whilst confirmation refers to the things that they have already known in their mind but need to be proved in person.

In addition, perceptions were the outcome that individual tourists generated different thoughts and knowledge about the UK from the information they perceived. Although receiving information can be both active and passive behaviour, Chinese tourists can only passively perceive the information they got online or word-of-mouth due to the media restrictions in the structural system. Hence, it can be proved that tourists' perceptions at Cognition 1 were similar to each other about the local weather, the local customs and world-famous attractions, and similar to the content on Chinese websites as they mostly received the information from them. For instance, *"I think Chinese tourists probably all have similar perceptions, such as British accent from TV series, weather, icon attractions like Big Ben etc"* (Tracy).

Cognition 2 was the period when Chinese tourists physically stayed in the UK. It

involves tourists' actions, i.e. interacting and observing, that leads to reflexivity, which in turn, contributes to Cognition 2 as an outcome. From the empirical data, interacting was divided into attractions, infrastructure and social environment. It could be concluded as two sections: leisure activities and physical needs. Specifically, leisure activities include all the social actions that Chinese tourists chose to do to meet their leisure requirements, which tend to be different from their daily routine and environment. For example, all Chinese tourists visited iconic attractions in the UK, including unique architecture and historic sites, and these were all the different activities from their daily routine. Besides, they talked to residents, went shopping or walked in the park in the UK which was related to different environments that offered them a thought of 'escaping their life' and adopt hedonism.

On the other hand, physical needs encompass those activities that meet their biological requirements, that is, keep them alive, but it should be noted that hedonism was the main purpose for Chinese tourists visiting the UK from Cognition 1, so individual tourist's standards can be higher or lower than their normal life. Even though they feel they have escaped their normal life from these leisure activities, they still have physical needs, i.e. food and drinks, accommodation, transportation, and safety. These physical needs have transformed to different characteristics when they are on the leisure trip. For instance, *"I have to find some authentic Chinese restaurants for food, as I didn't get used to local food"* (Mary), while Oliver stated that *"I didn't set a high standard for food, as I knew it was different country with their own culture"*. The data also revealed that Chinese tourists generally did not have a much higher standard for all the physical needs, because they stated they would revisit the UK even though they complained about the food and transport in Cognition 3. It might be argued some overlaps between the two aspects, i.e. leisure activities and physical needs, for example, local quality of life would both relate to their physical needs and different environments in leisure activities, so it should explore tourists' thinking process (leads to reflexivity) when categorising their activities.

Moreover, observing is the second part within Cognition 2, as it showed tourists were excluded from the context and environment as a 'watcher'. At this part, all the participants' statements on observations concentrated on the residents' lives and their environment, including their life pace, their traditions, their awareness of regulations, and cleanness of the streets and natural parks. The outcomes of the observing part

tended to be neutral to positive about the general environment and high civilisation of British residents. For example, Jack noted that *“I was surprised that most residents, regardless of they were drivers or pedestrians, they all follow the traffic light rules even there is no police or camera.”* However, observing is only the feedback from Chinese tourists’ thinking processes, but how and why they formulate the findings with the feedback was based on the reflexivity.

Lastly, Cognition 3 refers to the present time (when being interviewed). Chinese tourists returned from the UK, went back to their hometowns, and got back to their normal routine and evaluated the whole journey. At this stage, they may/may not have generated new thoughts after seeing life in China as normal, but they had comparisons from the UK visits, so their cognitions developed from Cognition 2. As stated in the data, most participants were satisfied with whole journey even when there were some negative points such as food, feeling unsafe and weather etc (see Cognition 3 in Appendix 7).

Therefore, cognitions have been present throughout the whole journey, which directly demonstrates Chinese tourist experience. They are agential mechanisms that indicate how tourists developed their knowledge from the beginning (before the trip) to the end (after the trip). Cognition 2 can be seen as emergent properties that further shape Cognition 3, so Cognition 2 cannot be reduced because it is either different from Cognition 1 or Cognition 3. However, they are also the outcomes of other thinking operations, i.e. reflexivity, emotions and identities, because they can be investigated from conversations as a direct indicator.

### 5.3.3.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity was indicated in all the participants’ accounts and accompanied by their evaluative commentaries. The participants reflected upon surroundings including things that happened and the people they encountered directly/indirectly vis-à-vis their concerns and the social context they were in. These ‘deliberate’ thinking operations demonstrated how Chinese tourists reflected upon the surroundings based on their own past experience at the agency domain and the current reality at the structural domain. Hence, it is proved that reflexivity, as an agential property, interplays with the structural domain.

In contextualising the reflexivity, the data showed that Chinese tourists compared with

Cognition 1 their perceptions to ‘examine’ the consistency and inconsistency. Simultaneously, they compared with other destinations, especially China, as they were much more familiar with their hometown. As indicated, Chinese tourists’ evaluations during the visit in the UK compared to their perceptions have both positive and negative sides, i.e. positive on environment, attractions, residents’ attitudes, and negative on cities characteristics of homogenisation, and less ‘city’ styles than their expectations. Chinese tourists not only reflected on what they had seen but also evaluated the possible reasons. For example, they complained that the infrastructures were not modern, then they evaluated the reasons for that, and most participants had a similar statement such as: *“I can imagine how prosperous the UK was 100 years ago, but they probably did not update/refurbish these infrastructures since then, so that is why these all look old and history now.”* Then they also criticized it, *“it at lease shows the high quality of these infrastructures, imagine using it for over 100 years! It is incredible”* (Edward). This example shows that Chinese tourists can be positively surprised (related to emotions) even on the negative things they were not satisfied with. But this should be explained as they only treated themselves as a tourist (identity), so they still wanted to enjoy most parts of their journey.

Furthermore, they compared the UK with other destinations, especially China. It can be explained that they evaluated the surroundings with scenarios (China) or past experiences (other countries they travelled to before) that they are familiar with. Thus, it is implied that reflexivity is a thinking operation/process, and humans reflect upon surroundings and have reasoning evaluations that are more likely based on their past experiences and prior knowledge. Therefore, reflexivity is an agential property of which manifestation emerges at the socio-cultural interaction level. The outcome of this property’s operation has enabled the trajectory of cognitive development from Cognition 1 to Cognition 2 and Cognition 3.

### 5.3.3.3 Emotions

Emotions are reactions to events, but they do not emerge, instead, they are attached with human agents all the time. In other words, they are always one of the properties that belong to the agents, but they may not be observed/investigated easily. Thus, emotions are an agential mechanism that operate agents’ thinking process.

In contextualisation of emotions based on the empirical data (5.2.3), it is evidenced that

emotions were identified through all participants' interviews, and both positive and negative about their experiences. Specifically, positive emotions such as relaxed, satisfactory, excited and even positively surprised bring out their positive feedback and evaluations, which is reflexivity. For example, participants stated they enjoyed the time visiting the British Museum because they were provided with the audio guide, so they were not worried about the language or finding a tour guide. Hence, their feedback for visiting the British Museum was highly enthusiastic and full of compliments.

In opposition, the negative emotions can lead to an unsatisfied experience, even changing tourists' behaviours. The typical example from the data is safety, most Chinese tourists worried about their safety before and during the visit, i.e. getting harmed, lost or robbed. They felt anxious and feared when they were in crowds or on the tube because there was no security check. As a result, many participants especially females, said they deliberately chose to avoid the possibility to be in danger, such as returning to accommodation before nighttime, not making any plans at night, even taking taxis instead of tubes. Thus, both examples have shown that emotions are central to agents' reflexive process regardless of whether they are positive or negative.

Furthermore, emotions are intrinsically linked to an individual's sense of self-concept, which refers to identity/ties, influencing agents on how to react to social situations. As revealed, participants sometimes had mixed emotions, even conflicting ones. They felt excited before visiting the UK but anxious about the language barriers and safety problems as well. However, most Chinese tourists despite not learning English nor joining a group to overcome these anxieties or fears, still visited the UK with mixed/opposite emotions attached. It can be explained that identity played a significant role in this situation (see 5.3.3.4), because 'being a tourist' was still their main identity, so their priority was to be hedonistic and visit the places they wanted to. They could avoid negative emotions through different actions but still achieve their positive emotions, i.e. leisure purposes. Therefore, emotions are inherent and an intrinsic agential mechanism that is the centre of reflexive process, as well as linking to agents' identity/ties.

#### 5.3.3.4 Identity/ties

According to the data result, two types of identity emerged from the participants' materials, which are personal identity and social identity. In this case, personal identity

refers to Chinese tourist's self-concepts which can distinguish themselves from others, i.e. 'I like history' 'I like to be close to nature'. It can be opposite when individuals have different personal identities, for example, 'I prefer to know in more depth when I visit a place' versus 'I just want to walk around and have a chill moment', so the former tends to learn and obtain knowledge about destinations, while the latter aims to escape their normal life routine and enjoy leisure time. There is no judgement for which one is better, but the justification could explain that these differences might be their past experience, intrinsic qualities (Erikson, 1968), and it should be noted that it could affect their actions, thinking processes (reflexivity), and emotions further on the tourist's experience. For instance, tourists who stated they love history and arts tended to talk more about the British Museum, while those who preferred to be close to the natural described their observations in parks and residents' life.

Furthermore, the data showed that personal identity has transformed in the process of socio-cultural interactions and reflexive evaluations, for example, "*I have learnt about history a lot in this trip, which was brilliant, I would like to seek more green areas and experience local life next time*" (Lucy). This shows that personal identity has transformed from obtaining history knowledge to get involved more in natural and social environments. It implies that agents can reform their thinking, which further leads to their actions because of the identity transformation.

On the other hand, social identity is another essential factor that can affect, even 'manipulate' Chinese tourists' thinking processes. Due to the unique characters of participants in this research as outbound tourists related to different nations, the data reveals that Chinese tourists categorised themselves as 'Chinese' and 'tourist'. Firstly, being a 'tourist' is evidenced to be a strong social identity amongst participants. They divided themselves from British residents and defined themselves as a short stay visitor in the UK, so they would not live or have a normal routine in the UK. Thus, Chinese tourists have generated reflexive process and emotions individually, which were different from residents, which can further shape their tourist's experience as an outcome.

As mentioned, Chinese tourists have their priority based on their own personal concerns and identity, so they do not require a high standard of physical needs or other irrelevant issues. For example, most Chinese tourists complained about the local food and inconvenient transport, but their outcome of the tourist's experience was still

satisfactory with a high revisit intention. This phenomenon can be explained because food and transport were not their priority as a tourist, as Sophia said, *“I think it was a very good place for travelling, it can meet most requirements for tourists, so that was enough already.”* The participant used ‘mostly’ ‘enough already’ which implied he/she accepted some unsatisfactory experience that occurred in their visits, if it mostly met the leisure requirements. This can also be linked to the cultural system, that Chinese citizens tended to avoid conflicts and pursue a harmonious environment because of their values and beliefs. Thus, being a ‘tourist’ as a social identity, has reshaped Chinese tourists’ perception of expectations and reflexive process, i.e. it formed their focal points on leisure activities rather than high standards on life quality or physical needs.

Furthermore, being ‘Chinese’ was demonstrated as a strong social identity theme from participants, specifically, national identity. It is evidenced that nationality for Chinese tourists was essential, and they kept reminding themselves of being a Chinese citizen. Chinese tourists reflected upon the things and people they encountered in the UK, and compared almost everything with China, i.e. infrastructure, architecture styles, general environment, local life quality and residents’ lifestyle (social environment). The outcomes to some extent affect their emotions and cognitions and further affect their tourist experience. For example, most participants complained about that the trains were slower than in China, and no security checks before getting on tubes made them feel anxious, so their evaluation result was that China had better advanced technology, and residents can have a more convenient and safe life. They also experienced uncivilized tourism when comparing Chinese tourists and British residents. For instance, some participants revealed that British residents always followed the rules, such as waiting in a queue or waiting for cars when crossing roads etc., *“they seem to be more civilised and mannered than our Chinese, everything is rushing in China”* (Zoe).

Despite some negative points about China, they still stated they can only be tourists, and they cannot live in the UK for their whole life, because they didn’t feel they belonged. Jack said, *“I am a Chinese, I have my country, my friends, I can only visit the UK, but I need to go back my hometown.”* This also proves that being ‘Chinese’ underpins their social identity in being a ‘tourist’, which feeds back into their identity being ‘Chinese’. In other words, national identity shapes the other social identity, i.e. being a ‘tourist’, which in turn, the other social identity enriches national identity. Therefore, social identity is inherent to shape/reshape Chinese tourists’ evaluative

process, which affects their emotions and cognitions, and further influences tourist experience.

Age is a unique identity which overlapped in both social and personal identity. Age can refer to either personal identity or social identity, depending on how participants/tourists fitted themselves in groups or not. Specifically, some participants recognised their age and different interests and concerns emerged, which were categorised in personal identity. For example, the participants aged between 18 and 25 stated they only wanted to escape from their study and relax themselves, while some middle-aged participants (45 to 60) stated they did not want to be stressed about travel plans, instead, they wanted to spend time for cultural learning. However, age could also be categorised as social identity because they included/excluded themselves from a particular group. For instance, Luke (middle-aged) stated: *“we are not young anymore, we cannot go to parties at night like those young generations. For us, walking around and have a chill moment was already satisfactory.”* This shows that he has already excluded himself from young-aged groups, it also shows the thinking process which led to his behaviours, further shaping his tourist experience. Thus, age can be the overlap between personal identity and social identity. Researchers may need to investigate the purposes from participants’ conversations, that is, the questions of ‘why did they say that?’ or ‘did they try to fit in/exclude to a particular group?’. These questions need to be answered before defining the type of the identity. Regardless of categorising the identity, i.e. personal or social, both evidenced that identity shapes tourists’ reflexivity, emotions and cognitions, which further shape individual tourist’s experience.

## **5.4 Retrodiction: Providing an Explanatory Account at the Real**

### **Domain**

From 5.1 to 5.4, the empirical data have been interpreting the components and aspects of the phenomenon to answer the first research question and its relevant field, i.e. what is fundamentally constitutive for the structures? What properties must exist to make tourist experience happen? Following Danermark et al.’s (2019) methods, retrodiction has been adopted to investigate the properties within CR, specifically, Archer’s realist social theory (RST). As a result, various factors/properties have been identified from the structural, cultural and agency domains, i.e. economical structural enablers and

socio-political prohibitors from the structural domain, cultural differences and sociocultural patterns from cultural domain; cognition, reflexivity, emotions and identity/ties at the agency domain. These identified factors answered the first research question with the depth of the understandings through a critical realist lens. Yet still, the phenomenon has not been explained, i.e. how these factors/properties interact with each other, or how the mechanism/process of those properties operate to generate tourist's experience.

As noted in Danermark et al. (2019), although mechanisms are investigated from the empirical data at the real domain, it still needs to be contextualised back to the empirical domain. In other words, the empirical domain contributes to finding the 'reality' in the real domain, but it needs to be explained in the empirical domain for further implications at the last stage. Thus, this section will apply retrodiction as a thought operation from the last stage of Danermark et al.'s model (2019) and provide an explanatory account of how tourist experience generates as a social phenomenon. It includes how these identified properties interact with each other and how they operate the process, as well as the application on the conceptual framework developed previously (see 3.4.2).

According to the findings from retrodiction, the framework can be drafted by simply putting each property into the suitable field within Archer's model (Figure 11). As stated, Archer insists *relationships a and b* need to be unpacked to investigate how properties interact with each other and operate the process. Indeed, although Figure 11 shows the basic influential factors within the framework, there is neither logical connections to 'gel' them together, nor specific explanations on how these mechanisms are at work. In other words, it cannot show how mechanisms are activated at different domains, i.e. structure, agency and culture. However, following Archer's analytical dualism within RST, each domain (SAC) needs to be analysed separately as it has own power to produce certain social organisations, and the tourist experience (social phenomenon) is generated by their 'gelling' (interactions). Furthermore, as stated previously, *relationship a* refers to the structural and cultural conditioning, that '*things/facts do to agents*', whilst *relationship b* refers to all three domains, i.e. structure, culture and agency, that '*social agents act back to things.*' Therefore, it is necessary to unpack *relationships a and b*, to explore the process of how these mechanisms generate the tourist experience.

### **5.4.1 Structural Mechanisms**

From the structural mechanism perspective, *relationships a and b* are related to the properties from the structural system (SS) at the structural domain. These properties have their own powers which predate agents and form the social organisations, as well as affecting agents' social actions at the S-C level. In short, properties at the SS level can enable/prohibit agents' social actions in both periods of *relationships a and b*.

This research has identified two properties, i.e. economical structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors. Economical structural enablers refer to Chinese tourists' income and their budget on traveling, which allow them to make decisions on their travelling choices. For example, the income and budget can enable Chinese tourists to choose economy or business class flights for their comfort, since it is over a 9-hour flight from China to the UK. Or having a limited budget probably constrains Chinese tourists to book a four-star hotel or even choosing to travel abroad as it is cheaper to have an inbound trip.

Secondly, socio-political prohibitors imply two restrictions that prohibit Chinese tourists' actions and knowledge, i.e. visa and media restrictions. If Chinese tourists do not have permission (visa) to visit the UK, or they have limited knowledge about the UK because of the media restrictions, they cannot choose the UK as their destination for a visit. Which means socio-political prohibitors have the power that can potentially prohibit/stop agents' social actions. Therefore, economical structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors are two structural mechanisms at the structural system (SS) level, that enable/prohibit agents' social actions in relationship a, as well as their social interactions in relationship b.

### **5.4.2 Cultural Mechanisms**

From a cultural mechanism perspective, *relationships a and b* refer to those cultural items/properties at the cultural system (CS) level and S-C level. Cultural items differ from the structural mechanisms that only enable/prohibit humans' actions, instead, they operate human agents' thinking processes and distinguish them into different groups. In detail, cultural mechanisms contextualise the structural mechanisms and deliver the information into human agents, while individuals understand in their own way based on their knowledge which may enhance/reshape social structures at the structural domain.

According to the findings, destination image and sociocultural patterns have been identified that affect Chinese tourists' experience. Firstly, cultural differences have been revealed as the main character of the destination image, which is evidenced from both Chinese websites and participants' interviews. Secondly, sociocultural patterns are mainly focused on culture and history interests, Confucian values associated with face ('Mianzi') and social relations ('Guanxi'). These factors are not only materially real such as the cultural differences between two countries, unique architecture in the UK etc., but also the ideally real and socially real, that refers to Chinese traditions and cultural roots. Specifically, cultural items exist at the cultural system (CS) level, that can enable/prohibit Chinese tourists before the trip, and they can be contextualised in the destination image, as well as Chinese traditions. They have powers to affect social agents' perceptions and knowledge through the given context. But it should be noted that they may/may not be triggered by agents, because the 'sayings' and 'meanings' are separated, for example, British travel websites do not have cultural meaning to Chinese tourists because they have limited access to acknowledge the information.

During the socio-cultural interactions level (S-C), agents reflect upon the surroundings and generate cognitions that may be consistent/inconsistent to either 'sayings' or 'meanings', or neither of them (emergent properties), which may enrich/reshape the 'meanings' to agents, and simultaneously enrich/reshape the 'sayings' from the structural cultural domain for the next cycle. In this case, during Chinese tourists' visit in the UK, their cognitions may be changed/unchanged from their perceptions because of the reflexivity, which enrich/reshape their perceptions.

After the trip, their cognitions on the UK might be the same/different from their perceptions, but no matter which situation, these cognitions are the new perceptions for their next trip to the UK. Furthermore, Chinese norms and values influence Chinese tourists' thinking and perceiving processes at both CS and S-C level. For example, Chinese norms and values impact Chinese tourists to focus more on cultural and historical items before the trip (CS level), then the Confucian values, i.e. respect authority, structured travel, guide them to have positive reflection when there is clear information for tourists at the destination (S-C level). Therefore, it evidences that cultural mechanisms exist at both the CS and S-C level associated with relationship a & b, and it also demonstrates that cultural mechanism interplays between the structure and agency domain.

### 5.4.3 Agential Mechanisms

Human agencies have generative properties and their own powers to enrich/reshape structures for the next cycle. Agential mechanisms exist at the S-C level related to *relationship b*. Archer (2000) insists that agents operate autonomously following the situational logic of actions and these actions have powers to enhance/transform the current structures. As revealed from the empirical data, four agential mechanisms have been identified, i.e. cognitions, emotions, reflexivity and identity/ties. Due to the object of the research, tourist experience tends to be a more subjective moment within a social phenomenon, so agential mechanisms are necessary to be analysed separately to understand the whole process. In other words, the interactions between these four agential mechanisms need to be constructed/reframed.

#### 5.4.3.1 Link between Cognition and Reflexivity

Cognition refers to a mental process of how individuals perceive, interpret and understand the world, it is a 'meaning' for agents through the 'sayings', so it is influenced by structural and cultural conditioning. It also implies agents' capacity to gain knowledge, reasoning and problem-solving. When agents are involved in social activities at the S-C level, reflexivity emerges to reflect on the social contexts, assess situations and make decisions on agents' following actions. Cognition is 'internal conversation' that individuals engage in to navigate the social world (Archer, 2003), where individuals evaluate their concerns, plan actions on their set goals, and prioritise their actions due to different concerns through reflexivity. Thus, cognition is the foundation to reflexivity, and in turn, reflexivity transforms cognition through its deliberations. In other words, cognition provides a social context to reflexivity, in which reflexivity can enrich/reshape cognition to better understand the social context.

Indeed, cognition 1, 2, 3 in this research evidence different stages, i.e. before, during and after the trip of Chinese tourists' cognition outcome, and reflexivity is a 'motivator' that pushes the cognitive process during the journey. It continues through all the journeys. Specifically, during the trip, when Chinese tourists interact and observe in the UK, they compare with their cognition 1, as well as other destinations, and it reshapes their cognition and becomes cognition 2. After the trip, Chinese tourists go back to China interacting and observing based on their cognition 2, especially when they share the information to others, it then triggers their reflexivity again at this point, which finally updates cognition 2 into cognition 3. Thus, reflexivity always exists in the social

context at the agency domain, and it contributes to the transformation of the cognition. In addition, it should be noted here Chinese tourists' sharing behaviours is the structural change at the structural cultural domain, as they become the new 'sayings' from the structural cultural domain to other Chinese tourists who have not visited the UK.

#### 5.4.3.2 Link between Emotions and Reflexivity

Emotion is an attachment to the cognition. It is not an emergent property, instead, it is attached to agents all the time. It is remarked that emotion is not passively attached to other elements but is an active component of reflexive deliberation. Archer (2000) points out that emotion is an evaluative response to logic situations, and it illustrates agents' individual concerns. Hereby, emotion can be seen the direct influence on reflexivity, in turn, it can also be a transformative outcome from reflexivity. Thus, emotion is central to the reflexive process because its subjective evaluation power can guide to different circumstances and decision-making processes.

Chinese tourists' emotions have transformed in this research based on the reflexive process. To unpack that, Chinese tourists have different emotions based on their perceptions before the trip, i.e. worried, excited, relaxed etc. When social interactions were involved and they engaged in social context during and after the trip, their emotions transformed to surprise, satisfactory, disappointed etc. These emotions' transformations are the direct outcome from tourist' reflexive evaluations.

On the other hand, emotions are also actively interplaying in the whole process. As stated, different emotions can affect agents' reflexivity, which may completely change agents' cognitions. Taking an example from participants, Betty and Cathy, both queued for the London Eye without booking it. Betty felt negatively surprised that *"I didn't know we need to book it, and we queued there for 40 minutes! This is not convenient for tourists like us."* While Cathy felt relaxed about it, *"Oh yes, we waited for about 40 minutes, that's nothing since we haven't got reservations anyway."* The reality is the same in these two cases, which is waiting for 40 minutes without reservations, the emotions lead two participants into an opposite reflexive process, as well as an opposite cognition. Thus, the same reality may lead to different cognition and tourist experiences based on agents' emotions and reflexivity. It is also evidenced that emotions are not passively affected to cognitions but actively interplay within the reflexive process to guide agents' reasoning evaluations, as well as their actions.

#### 5.4.3.3 Identity Formation

Identity is an emergent property that interplays among cognition, reflexivity and emotions. As revealed in the data process, personal identity and social identity both impact on Chinese tourists' reflexivity and cognition in certain ways along the whole journey, before, during and after the trip. Personal identity encourages Chinese tourists to deliberate and pursue their personal concerns, such as cultural and historical interests versus being close to nature and green space, experiencing local traditions versus focusing on the 'beauty' attributes of the scenery. It shows Chinese tourists focused on destinations' attributes including infrastructures, costs of living and safety during the trip, which is not the same as their personal identity before the trip ( $T^1$ ), so it emerges during the reflexive process. It can also explain why Chinese tourists were generally satisfied with their trip in the UK, as it met their requirements of their personal concerns and identities. This can be evidenced through Chinese travel websites at the structural domain, specifically, Chinese travel websites tend to deliver the information to raise tourists' interests from various aspects, including history, architecture, green parks and residents' traditions etc., because agents can include variety of personal concerns/identities that need to be fulfilled.

Furthermore, Chinese tourists' personal identity has transformed/reshaped later after the trip, where most participants stated they would have different expectations/experience if they revisited the UK. Despite the fact that personal identity is hardly predicted based on individuals' reflexive evaluations, it is obvious that a) personal identity is a dynamic process throughout the whole journey; b) it plays a vital role in agents' reflexivity, which in turn, is formed/reformed through reflexivity as well.

On the other hand, social identity postdates personal identity, but it can overtake the position more than personal identity, especially for outbound Chinese tourists. Specifically, individuals reflect upon the world and fit themselves into the given/particular groups because of the social identity. Due to Face ('Mianzi') and 'Guanxi' in Chinese cultural values, Chinese people tend to put group benefits over personal benefits if there is a conflict between them. For example, Chinese tourists would try to avoid conflict when travelling in groups so they will 'hide' their personal interests if the majority of group members want to visit a place while he/she only wants to stay inside. Although this is not shown in this research data, it is relevant to social identity and personal identity here, that is, Chinese tourists would put social identity

over personal identity because of their cultural values, i.e. collectivism, Confucian values. For example, the data shows several participants admitted that the Chinese displays in the British Museum are well-preserved. However, they were dissatisfied because it reminded them of uncomfortable history, i.e. unfairly traded artifacts that no longer belong to China, which contradicted their inherent national Chinese identity.

As demonstrated, 'being a Chinese' and 'being a tourist' are two social identities from the participants. Chinese tourists' national identity of being Chinese underpins their evaluation process; they reflect upon the social actions in the UK and subjectively compare with China. This is not only related to social identity, but also reflexivity, as human evaluative reasoning is most likely linked to their past experiences and prior knowledge, that is, the knowledge they are familiar with.

Furthermore, 'being a tourist' changes Chinese tourists' thinking mode and their standard, they tend to focus more on their personal concerns/leisure activities rather than their physical needs. It can be demonstrated from their conflicting emotions and cognitions, for instance, almost all the participants complained about several elements in the UK, i.e. food, transport, weather, safety, but all the participants stated that they expected to revisit the UK again. Their willingness to overlook the negative aspects of visiting can be explained as they were only 'being a tourist' not a resident in the UK, as they only interact for leisure purposes for a short stay. Thus, identity is an emergent property that exists in the whole process of a tourist's journey, before, during and after the trip, and it keeps interplays with cognition, reflexivity and emotions.

The findings from the empirical data also shows that Chinese tourists' social identity, especially national identity has been enriched (morphostasis), while the personal identity has been transformed/reshaped (morphogenesis) along the journey. In addition, age has been identified as the overlap between personal identity and social identity. Despite the fact that age always switches between personal identity and social identity, it has not been transformed along the process, and it has affected the tourist experience in the same way as other identities.

## **5.5 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented the findings derived from both the secondary data and primary interview data. It began by outlining the coding process through thematic and narrative analysis, which identified all key themes emerging from Chinese online

websites (5.1) and interview data (5.2). Figures x and x illustrate the identified themes, including attributes and elements from the destination image (secondary data), as well as cognition, reflexivity, emotion, and identity from the interview data, organised along the temporal sequence of the trip.

Within the destination image themes, attributes comprise architecture, films and books, historical description, idealisation, residential lifestyle, and uniqueness. Elements encompass amenities and attraction sites; however, the latter was excluded from further analysis because interview data indicated that attraction sites had only a minor influence on tourists' overall journey experiences. Consequently, the amenity theme—particularly entertainment (e.g., festivals, performances, shopping, sports) and infrastructure (e.g., food, hospitality, transportation)—was identified as representing key structural enablers and prohibitors.

For the interview data, cognition, emotion, and identity emerged as the main recurring themes. Although these dimensions varied among individuals, their patterns remained consistent across different time phases of the trip, appearing before, during, and after travel. That means those themes are persistent before, during and after the trip at different timelines, but they are different from each other based on tourists' reactions on the wider context. Reflexivity emerged as a distinct and dynamic theme during the middle stage of the trip ( $T^2$ – $T^3$ ), signifying that tourists actively compared their current travel contexts with their previous experiences.

Following the thematic analysis, specific critical realist analytical methods—namely retrodution and retrodiction (5.3 and 5.4)—were applied to identify the generative mechanisms operating within the real domain. Through the retroductive process, several properties were identified across the three domains of structure, culture, and agency. These include:

- Structural properties: economic structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors.
- Cultural properties: cultural differences and sociocultural patterns.
- Agential properties: cognition, reflexivity, emotions, and identity/ties.

Subsequently, retrodiction was employed to connect these properties, thereby providing an explanatory account of how these mechanisms interact within the real domain. The findings elucidate two key mechanisms, *relationship a and b*, which capture the

dynamic interrelations among structural, cultural, and agential dimensions. Specifically, relationship a explores how economic structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors allow or restrict Chinese tourists' behaviours, while cultural differences and sociocultural patterns influence their reflexivity. *Relationship b*, in turn, examines how Chinese tourists act back upon, and consequently transform or reproduce, existing structures through their autonomous actions.

In summary, Figure 15 in Chapter 6 presents the final theoretical synthesis of the study's findings, illustrating how the interplay among structural, cultural, and agential mechanisms explains the emergent process of the tourist experience.

## Chapter 6 Discussion

*“When we try to understand a person’s experience of the world, [...], we understand it as a dynamic process in which external and internal stimuli are in constant interaction with each other. We find in this internal space not only the drives and their conscious and unconscious representation, but also our internal objects, those immediate family members or caretakers whom we have ‘taken in’ during the process of our psychological development, integrating or failing to integrate them with the other structures.” (Craib, 1988, p. 168-169)*

In this chapter, it discusses the findings from both the tourism and critical realist fields, demonstrating the advanced knowledge comparing the existing literature. Rewinding to the objectives of this research: (1) To understand the self-evaluation of the experiences of Chinese tourists visiting the UK; (2) To identify structural, cultural and agential factors that influence tourist experience; (3) To analyse the processes through which identified factors generate the emerging tourist experience. To bridge between the data and the existing literature in a clear way, it follows three research objectives, so it ensures the responses to research questions. As emphasised, this research is an explanatory study on how the tourist experience generates instead of superficially identifying the influential factors, thus, the key point is to explain the process/mechanism in manifesting the tourist experience. It should be noted that the structure, culture and agency domains are always intertwined, interacting with each other even though it should be analysed separately. None of the domain among three can be reducible as they affect and influence each other. In other words, the morphogenetic cycle can help researchers understand the reality only when the three domains (SAC) can be examined properly.

There are three key findings based on the data findings. Figure 15 has been created to interpretate the influential properties and possible realist process on manifestation of the tourist experience. Firstly, this study sees tourist experience as a self-evaluative process that generated as a social phenomenon. It emphasises the subjectivity and ‘self’ concept in this study, to investigate the tourist experience at the ‘real’ domain.

Secondly, several influential factors/properties have been identified separately through adopting abduction and retroduction, i.e. economical structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors at the structural domain; cultural differences and sociocultural patterns at the cultural domain; cognition, reflexivity, emotion and identity at the agency domain. Those properties have mostly resonated with both CR and tourism

studies. Due to the subjectivity and self-evaluative characteristics, identity/ties have been revealed as a major property reasoning the manifestation of the tourist experience at the real agential domain.

Lastly, this research has also examined the depth of how these properties (influential factors) interact with each other at different domains, and operate the tourist experience manifestation, which is the process/mechanism of the tourist experience. It unpacked *Relationship a* and *Relationship b*. *Relationship a* can be summarised as enablers and prohibitors that allow/limit agents' actions. *Relationship b* can be concluded as the agents act back to the reality. Agential mechanism (*Relationship b*) is found as: a) cognitions as a 'container' that are always being updated through other three elements; b) emotions as an 'attachment' that attached with the reflexivity and identity along the journey; c) reflexivity as a 'bridge' throughout the whole evaluative process; d) identity as a continuous formation of reasoning tourists' thinking and behaviours.

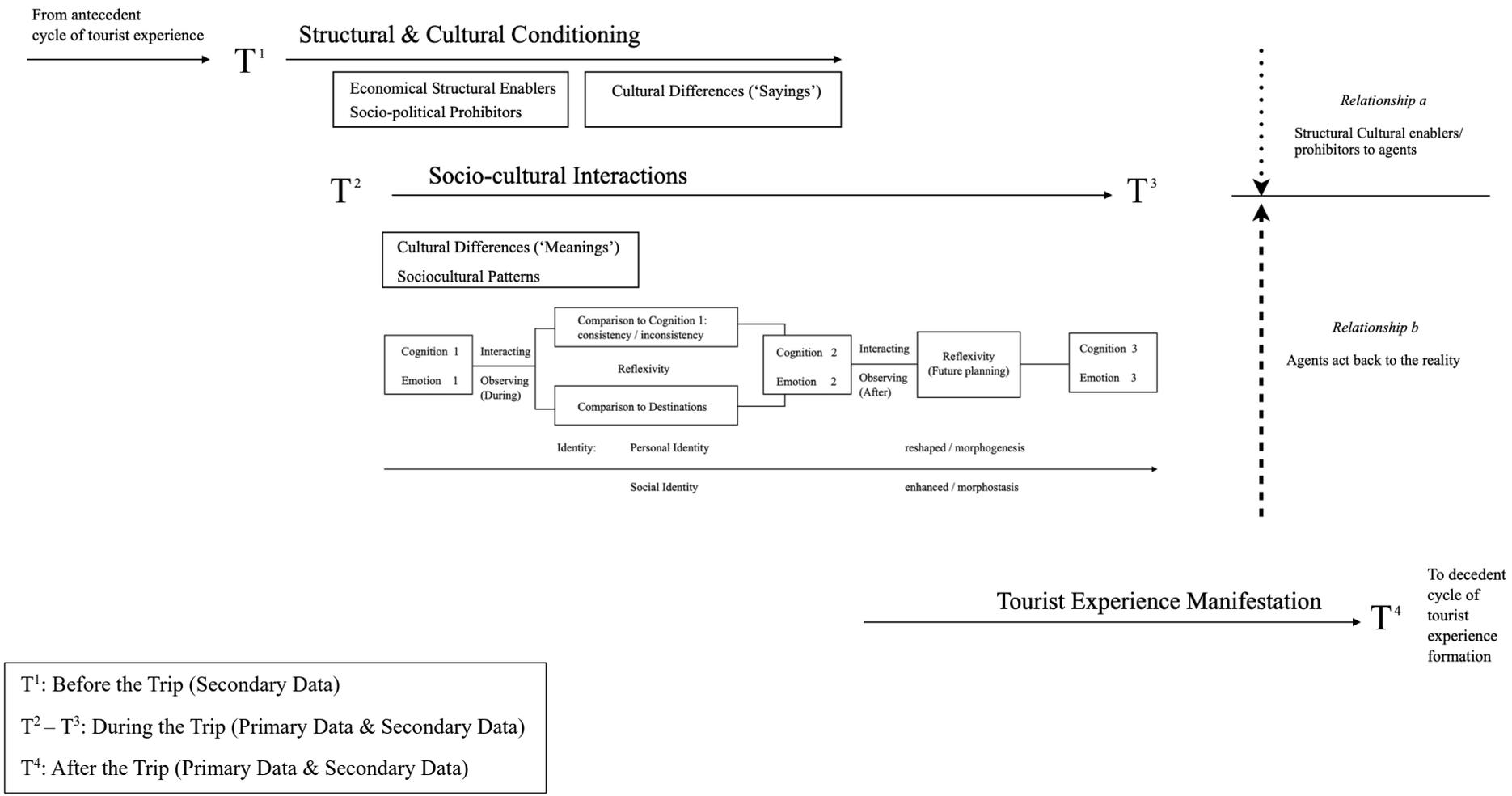


Figure 15 Framework on the Manifestation of the Tourist Experience

## 6.1 Tourist Experience as a Self-evaluative Social Phenomenon

Referring to literature review (Chapter 2 & Appendix 1), although most existing literature has identified the tourist experience in tourism and marketing fields, there are still some researchers that have explained it from the sociological perspective, i.e. Boorstin (1964), MacCannell (1973), Selstad (2007). This study sees the tourist experience as a social phenomenon, which varies from individuals because of their different background and thinking process. This echoes Cohen's (1979) comments, who firstly sees the tourist experience as a social phenomenon due to individuals' desires. It also enriches Archer's realist social theory in the CR field, that is, agents/individuals have the ability to transform/reshape the structures when interacting within social contexts. Thus, key findings can be discussed around two key words 'social phenomenon' and 'self-evaluative'.

Firstly, several research (Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009; Prebensen et al., 2013; Sfandla and Björk, 2013) have identified tourist experience involves tourists interacting with surroundings, i.e. destinations, residents, peer tourists and other tourists (Fan et al., 2019). Tourists also interact with themselves, including past experience and their perceptions, which are known as the concept of identity and the 'self' (Larson, 2007). This echoes Archer's (2003, 2007) work of reflexivity, that is, the sense of 'self', as one of the unique human beings' properties, and allows individuals to find themselves when they actively interplay with the environment. This study's data also supports that Chinese tourists 'interact with' and observe the surrounding along the journey. For instance, Peter noted: *"I was sitting in the café and looked out of the window, just observing residents, seeing how they live their life and I found..."* Also, over 20 participants highlighted they were surprised and grateful when they were helped by residents in finding information. These both illustrate that tourist experience is not only an individual experience, but also a social phenomenon that involves interactions with elements/properties within a particular social context.

Secondly, self-evaluation process reveals the 'subjectivity' and the substantial role of 'reflexivity'. As stated, subjectivity is one of the main characteristics in tourist experience (Filep and Pearce, 2014; Hosany and Gilber, 2010; Wang, 1999). Individuals can reflect upon the environment and their own knowledge, so it can be a different outcome even for the same event. Wielecki (2021, p. 378) states as "subjectivity actuates this subjective potential and integrates it in the action", which links between

the subjectivity and agency following Archer's reflexivity concept from a CR perspective. This has also been supported by this study, i.e. 'reflexivity' as one of the agential properties.

Archer (2003, 2007) reminds that individuals' selfhood cannot be pro-active in selecting the environment, while they can reflect upon social context afterwards. Wielecki (2021) explains that subjectivity is an inherent ability which motivates individuals to position themselves in certain situations, such as human relationships, nature, culture and environment. He also advocates that actions can be the way of fulfilling the 'subjective formula of Good'. Thus, tourist experience is the process of how tourists/individuals find their position in the whole social context, i.e. travelling and interacting with surroundings. Self-evaluation/subjectivity is the main characteristic of the whole process, that is, tourists transform/reshape their knowledge based on the inherent reflexivity, which further generate their tourist experience.

## **6.2 Key Properties**

Properties can be seen as the inherent 'characteristics' of the tourist experience from three domains at the real domain. They interact with each other in different social contexts, which may/may not emerge new properties. Based on Archer's M/M approach and research findings, properties have been identified from three stages, i.e. structural and cultural conditioning ( $T^1$ ), socio-cultural interactions ( $T^2$ - $T^3$ ), social elaborations ( $T^4$ ). This section discusses the properties from the domains of SAC, along with existing tourism literature.

### **6.2.1 Enablers and Prohibitors**

Economic and political factors have influenced the tourist experience, especially on Chinese tourists' destination choices because they exist in 'socially real', which created by collective human recognition. Bhaskar (1986) discusses the 'complex entity' that reality can exist in various types: the materially real (e.g. gravity), the ideally real (e.g. normative theories), the artefactually real (e.g. technologies), and the socially real (e.g. governments, economies). From the structural mechanism perspective at the SS level, the socially real in this study refers to economical structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors because they arise from social process and interactions. They can be powerful in shaping human behaviour and their experiences, as well as social outcomes. This study's finding from the secondary research echoed the existing research, i.e.

income (Jin and Wang, 2016; Lin et al., 2015), visa restrictions (Sparks and Pan, 2009; Wang and Davidson, 2010) and media restrictions (Li et al., 2011; Tse and Hobson, 2008).

On the other hand, economic factors identified in Xie and Tveterås (2020) do not appear to be important factors. Xie and Tveterås (2020) highlight three specific aspects within economic structure, i.e. high price sensitivity, exchange rate fluctuations and the living costs in China, which has not been identified in this research. However, participants in the present study have not discussed the political relationship between China and the UK, which argue with Hall's (1994) point that positive relationship can have an encouragement for Chinese outbound tourists. In addition, media regulations on Chinese websites also refers to the artifactually real, as technologies are human-made objects, but here the focal point is on the regulations that prohibit Chinese tourists to gaining the knowledge, which is about the government structural regulations, so it prioritises the 'socially real'.

### **6.2.2 'Contradiction' and 'Complementarity'**

At the CS level, cultural differences and sociocultural patterns are two cultural properties that affect the tourist experience. Archer (1996) also concludes two properties as inherent characteristics of cultural items, namely 'contradiction and complementarity' (Archer, 1996). This leads to two pathways, on the one hand, cultural items define themselves through their uniqueness which are referred to as 'inconsistency or contradiction'; on the other hand, some intellectual positions support and enhance each other, that lead to 'consistency or complementarity'. Undeniably, Archer's 'contradiction and complementarity' concept comply with two cultural properties in this research. They hold two different positions on the tourist experience.

Firstly, this study identifies that cultural differences are the main characteristic of the destination image that raise Chinese tourists' interests and curiosity. Cultural differences aim to deliver the material reality (Bhaskar, 1986) to the tourists, i.e. the differences between China and the UK, these differences are 'real' existing between two countries which are independent from tourists' knowledge. It also argues that a collective property (cultural differences) may be able to summarise the existing literature regardless of the differences on food, accommodation or other cultural items. Specifically, destination image has been popularly examined as an influential factor and most of the existing literature focuses on a specific area such as food and

accommodation (Aybek and Özdemir, 2022; Guo et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2021), aesthetic experience (Adgate et al., 2014; Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter, 2002; Vespestad and Lindberg, 2011; Wang et al., 2018; Zhang and Xu, 2020) and cultural attributes (Anderson, 2006; Chhabra, 2015; Timothy and Teye, 2009; Xie and Shi, 2020; Yabanci, 2022). While this study argues cultural difference is the main mechanism that underpins the destination image to provide situational logics and interconnected content to attract Chinese tourists. Thus, properties such as food, accommodation and cultural attributes are a ‘contradiction’ to each other to affect the tourist experience, but the logic beneath them is revealed as the same, known as cultural differences in this study, which refers to ‘consistency’ (‘complementarity’).

Secondly, sociocultural patterns affect tourists’ thinking process, choices and behaviours, so their meanings can be varied between individuals. Tourists from different culture backgrounds can perceive the UK differently as a destination. Furthermore, Taoism and Confucianism both have impact on Chinese tourists’ thinking and behaviours. Taoism encourages people to get into nature and purify the spirit, while Confucianism highlights respecting authority and to keep learning and educating. They have ‘contradictions’ in the way human beings improve themselves, but they ‘complement’ each other by improving their inner selves and building up a harmonious society (Shao and Perkins, 2017).

Therefore, cultural differences stay at the CS level, but sociocultural patterns affect the whole tourist’s journey at both CS and S-C level. In addition, the institutional culture underpins the material context (normative structures) which has the power to shape humans’ daily activities and experiences, so it affects both context conditions ( $T^1$ ) and socio-cultural interactions ( $T^2 - T^3$ ) (Archer, 2003; 2007).

### **6.2.3 Key Agential Properties**

Archer (1995) highlights that social structures condition agents’ course of actions but not determine them. It can be explained that social structures provide a context where humans find themselves, but they can decide to be involved into the situation or not due to the nature of their subjectivity. It should be justified that  $T^1$  consists of a number of pre-existing structures that emerge from the previous cycle, while  $T^2$  is the moment that agents define and find themselves, i.e. they are constrained and enabled by pre-existing structures (Fleetwood, 2005). In other words, agents’ involvements occur at the end of  $T^1$  and the beginning of the  $T^2$ . The reason for clarifying that is to ensure the explicit

timing of interactions between agents and structures, and it aligns with analytical dualism principles, i.e. structure and agency should be analysed separately.

Firstly, cognition is found to be one of the main properties at the agential domain in this study. This study finds that curiosity and confirming are two major elements within the cognition regardless of the context of motivations. It argues with some studies (Cajiao et al., 2022; Sundbo and Dixit, 2020) that a variety of detailed factors that influence tourists' motivations, such as social media, novelty, adventure etc. Within the cognitive domain, Bhaskar (2008) points out curiosity as one subjective vector that 'push' individuals' actions. In this study, curiosity refers to the tourists that have superficial knowledge about the destination, and it raises their interest and wondering. Recurring codes from interviews of *"have a look"* *"curious about it"* have supported Bhaskar's (2008) concept. Confirming refers to the tourists who think they have a depth knowledge (in their mind), so they need to be confirmed in reality, i.e. *"just to see in real"* *"check whether it looks the same as images/videos online"*. This links to the CS level which predates agents and provide guidance on agents' behaviours (Archer, 2007). Specifically, sociocultural patterns play an important role in Chinese tourist experience, i.e. Confucianism and Taoism (Chen et al., 2014; Huang and Wen, 2021; Jiang et al., 2015; Luo and Deng, 2008; Wu and Pearce, 2014). They do not emerge from tourists but pre-exist at the cultural system (CS) that underpins Chinese tourists' reflexivity. In other words, they are the 'philosophy' to guide Chinese tourists' thinking process, behaviour and evaluative reasoning, which generate their tourist experience. For example, '眼见为实' ('Seeing is believing') generates the desire of confirming the images from the reality at the CS level.

Secondly, this research argues identity as a 'reasoning' that is highly relevant in the process of manifestation of the tourist experience. There are two pathways leading to this argument. On the one hand, infrastructure (Aybek and Özdemir, 2022; Lee et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2021) such as food, hospitality, and transport may not be the key factors for Chinese tourists, because all thirty participants in this study stated they enjoyed the journey and would revisit the UK in the future, even though they did not like some infrastructure elements, i.e. *"I would definitely revisit the UK to see more views in more other cities"* (Jonny). *"Definitely, I didn't have enough time to visit all places in the UK, I am sure I will go back some time"* (Zoe).

To explain this, identity plays an essential role in forming/reshaping Chinese tourists'

cognitions, which further influences their tourist experience. Specifically, Chinese tourists' personal identity produces individual concerns, i.e. what they want to visit/confirm, what they want to know about etc., whilst tourists' social identity can be connected to their emotions and reflexivity in measuring their experiences: a) social identity of 'being a tourist' allows Chinese tourists to focus on their personal concerns such as history, scenery and local lifestyle instead of their physical needs on infrastructure; b) national identity encourages them to compare between the UK and China, as well as other destinations, and see the differences/gaps between two countries, where they achieve their goals (personal identity). Hedonic experience and uniqueness in Chen and Huang's (2021) work also resonate with this research, i.e. Chinese tourists tend to visit places that are unique from their daily routines, and enjoy the identity being a tourist in the UK. Most participants (26/30) mentioned "*I am just a tourist here*" or "*I am only travelling here*", which separated themselves from residents and emphasised their social identity of 'being a tourist'.

On the other hand, one's social identity postdates but overweighs personal identity in the process of reflexivity. Yang et al. (2020) reveal that tourists, especially Chinese tourists in leisure tourism, desire to feel better about China's international standing in their outbound travel, as well as their own social status, i.e. symbolizes leisure and wealth, the strength of the national infrastructure, the ability and freedom to travel. Their work might be correct in certain ways explaining that Chinese tourists feel satisfied with their tourist experiences even if they have complained about the infrastructure. Zhang et al., (2019) proves that Chinese tourists' social identity can regulate themselves to avoid 'losing face ('Mianzi')' from uncivilised behaviour when travelling. For instance, Tracy gave an example that "*I felt very embarrassed when I said tomato sauce, while the waiter told me it was called ketchup. I didn't know that and I felt I lost the face for my country.*" This should be noted that Chinese tourists' sociocultural patterns of making a harmonious society may not allow them to speak out their true feelings, i.e. they would deliberately rank a high score of the overall satisfaction because of their social status. Nonetheless, this type of 'diplomatic' expression on experiences may also happen to individuals from a different cultural background.

In addition, Chinese tourists tend to compare London and other cities, such as Shanghai, to other cities in the UK, and past travel cities (revealed in 5.2.2), this evaluative

process/reflexivity may be explained in relation to identity, because tourists have the knowledge from their past experiences. For example, Betty noted that “*I still feel safer in China, London always makes me anxious with the safety.*” They tended to compare between the new cognition and the prior cognition, which can highly be related to their ‘self’ concept, i.e. how they see themselves in a particular place. Therefore, it is argued that identity plays an irreducible role in the whole process of the tourist experience, and it underpins agents’ evaluative process along the journey.

### **6.3 Realist Mechanisms**

As noted by Tilley and Pawson (1977), mechanisms and their effects are not fixed, instead, they are dynamic and contingent. Porpora (1989) also reveals that social position can be seen as emergent mechanism, which shape human’s interests. Thus, it should be noted that the causal pathway provided in this research is only the most possible explanation based on the available evidence. However, the explanation is subject to change because human knowledge is always fallible and finite.

Following Archer’s analytical dualism and her M/M approach, it leads to a result that both structural and agency can transform/reproduce actively/passively, known as ‘double morphogenesis’ (Archer, 2020). It is explained that agency is ineluctably reshape itself at any give  $T^4$ , when it reshapes structural and cultural domains.

#### **6.3.1 ‘Sayings’ and ‘Meanings’ (*Relationships a and b*)**

This study illustrates that cultural differences have been transformed (morphogenesis) during the time because tourists’ interactions have caused structural change, specifically, sharing behaviour. While economical structural enablers, socio-political prohibitors and sociocultural patterns have been reproduced, which means they stay unchanged (morphostasis) (see Figure 16).

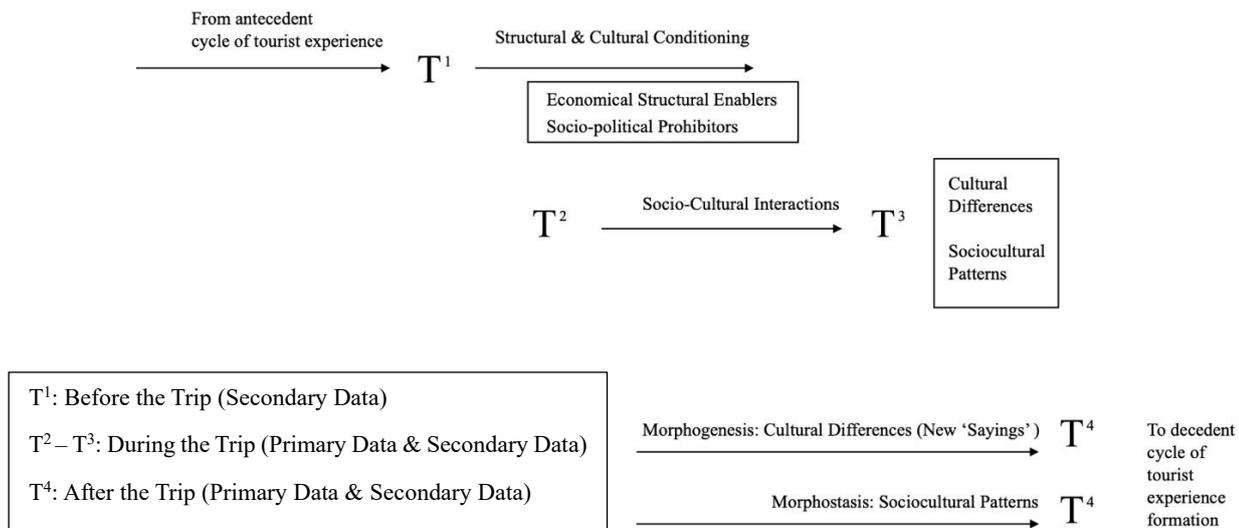


Figure 16 The Morphogenetic Cycle at the Structural Cultural Domain

Firstly, the possible reasons for structural properties could be explained from the group/national level to individual level. Economical structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors are both from government rules at the national level, which means individuals have power to make changes but are limited. Specifically, government can be seen as a group power with group interest from a collectivist perspective, so it is ‘socially real’. While these ‘socially real’ cannot be easily transformed by individuals as they are created to limit residents’ behaviour from the national level (Bhaskar, 1986).

Secondly, sociocultural patterns, as ideally real (Bhaskar, 1986), can lead humans to follow the guidance and rules, especially for Chinese tourists in this research. Due to the nature of Chinese one-party policy, Confucianism and Taoism advocate a harmonious society (Fu et al., 2017; Shao and Perkins, 2017), Chinese people tend to respect authority and not attempt to break or ruin it. Thus, the agents in this context follow the social and ideal order, which also explains cultural norms and values have been reproduced during the socio-cultural interactions. It has been evidenced that Chinese tourist’ cultural norms & values guide their reflexivity, emotion, and identity to generate and transform their cognition, which can be seen as the ‘root’ of their thinking process and evaluative reasoning.

However, cultural differences have been transformed/reshaped. As stated, sharing is an activity which happens in most collectivism countries, especially on Chinese residents because of their high collectivism (Hofstede, 1979). This study identifies that the

sharing activities not only transform the tourists' cognitions, i.e. from cognition 2 to cognition 3, but also reshape the 'sayings' at the structural cultural domain from their 'meanings'. It enriches Archer's concept of 'intelligibilia' (1996; 2000), that is, agents have ability to reshape the 'sayings' through their reflexivity, and it is the 'meanings' for themselves, but 'sayings' for other individuals. In other words, information is delivered to agents equally, that is, the 'sayings'; while individual agents interpret the information in different ways and can generate their own 'meanings'. These 'meanings' are kept in their minds, known as perceptions and personal interests.

It complies with the current tourism research (Mohamed et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022), that Chinese tourists' sharing of their experiences can positively affect other tourists' destination choices and their perceptions. In other words, the visited tourists' opinions (from 'meanings' to 'sayings') provides conditions for new tourists' perceptions (from 'sayings' to 'meanings'), which become the new  $T^1$  for the next cycle. It can be argued the reality does not change in this situation, which means the 'real' culture differences are the same between China and the UK, whilst the interpretation of these differences (the 'sayings') have been changed/transformed through the interactions between the structure and agency domain and becomes the structural change for the next cycle at  $T^1$ , which refers to morphogenesis.

### **6.3.2 Agential Mechanisms (*Relationship b*)**

From the agential perspective (Figure 17), cognitions and emotions have transformed from  $T^1$  to  $T^4$ , and this research has used cognition 1, 2, 3 and emotion 1, 2, 3 to mark them deliberately. Cognition 2 and Emotion 2 are the emergent properties that develop from Cognition 1 and Emotion 1 to Cognition 3 and Emotion 3. They are irreducible because the cognition and emotion at each stage are different from each other. This also echoes Archer's morphogenetic cycle (2003; 2007), that is, cognitions and emotions have been transformed during the reflexive process. Apart from that, identity has been revealed as another major agential cultural mechanism that influence on agents' evaluative reasoning. Due to the speciality of the characteristics, identity/ties do not only motivate the agential morphogenetic cycle but also get involved in this cycle itself.

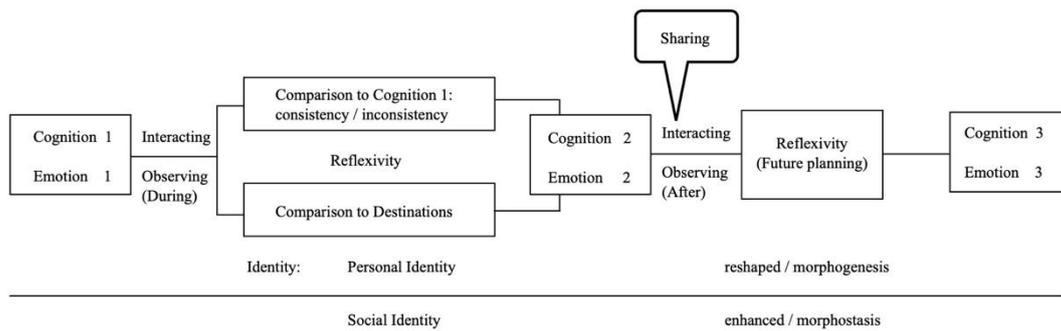


Figure 17 The Morphogenetic Cycle at the Agency Domain

Firstly, cognitions as a ‘container’ are always being updated through other properties. Bhaskar (1978) argues that cognition is more than a direct observation, instead, it is a creative and reflective process that agents’ engage with the world in his concept of ‘transcendental realism’. It is a process of recognising, testing and revising the existing structures. Archer (2003) reveals cognition as an emergent property through her concept of ‘reflexivity’. This aligns with Bhaskar’s (1978) stratified ontology, where cognition emerges from the interaction of individuals with their social contexts. Cognition has been revealed as one of the factors in tourist experience from the tourism-psychological field (Del Bosque and Martín, 2008; Rivera et al., 2019), which resonate with this research’s statement. Propora (2015) adds that human knowledge is produced and mediated by social and cultural contexts, which aligns with the intransitive dimension of cognition in CR. Thus, cognition follows through the whole journey as an emergent property that directly illustrates human knowledge, and it can be formed/reformed through agents’ actions during different social contexts.

Secondly, emotions as an ‘attachment’ link with the reflexivity and identity. Emotions are attached to the things that matter to human beings, and they are part of our evaluation reasoning (Li et al., 2023a). Archer (2000, p. 193) describes “emotions as commentaries on human concerns.” This research echoes Archer’s statement and the existing literature (Hosany and Gilber, 2010; Hu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Pestana et al., 2020), that emotions are attached to cognition, and they interplay the tourist experience with the environment. Taylor (1985) explains that humans being have goals, desires to be achieved, that emotions motivate them to protect, prevent or produce

change. Sayer (2011) also highlights that human beings are sentient because they are concerned about the things matter to them, that is, they have feelings for the things that can flourish or loss, which allow them to take actions for keeping or changing the situation. However, emotions haven't been linked intellectually within the cognitive process until Craib (1998) profounds emotional intersubjectivity, which linked emotions with identity. Indeed, emotions allow individuals to experience self-condemnation (Bandura, 1991), to deliberately act in certain ways to shape their reflexivity in cognitions (Sayer, 2011).

Due to the 'attachment' characteristic of emotions, it can be applied to reveal other agential mechanisms, i.e. reflexivity and identity. Two additional findings were highlighted in this study: a) different mechanisms can lead to the same emotion, oppositely, the same mechanism can lead to different emotions. For example, Betty and Cathy both queued for 40 minutes but their emotions were opposite. It can be explained from their different prior cognition, which links to reflexivity. Specifically, Cathy had been used to queuing as it was a frequent behaviour in her hometown, whereas Betty had not. b) identity can be seen as a 'mediator' that negotiates with individuals' conflicting emotions when generating cognitions in their reflexivity process, i.e. feeling anxious but also excited before the trip, unsafe but satisfactory during the trip, comfortable but stressed after the trip. Those conflicting emotions can be justified by their personal/social identity, which generated a self-satisfactory cognition.

Thirdly, reflexivity as a 'bridge' within the evaluative process. The finding enriches Archer's (2003) concept of reflexivity, that is, reflexivity is a fundamental element for cognition. It explains the interplays among three domains of SAC, generating new knowledge from prior knowledge or enhancing the prior knowledge from reviewing themselves. It seems that the existing tourism literature (Ho et al., 2024; Joo et al., 2019; Li et al., 2023; Volo, 2009) perpetuates pre-conceived tourist experience as an outcome from tourists' evaluations, while they failed to explain this 'evaluative process' that actually generates the tourist experience. As revealed in the findings, reflexivity follows through all the connections from cognition 1 to cognition 3, and it includes tourists' thoughts, comparisons, evaluations. Chinese tourists' reflexivity is based on their comparisons to Cognition 1 and other destinations. Hence, it is in the subjective moment that tourists reflect upon the interactions and observations, then take their time to 'digest' the external information in their own ways. This type of 'digest' is a key

component of reflexivity relating to their individual past experiences and prior knowledge.

Lastly, identity is a continuous formation reasoning tourists' thinking and behaviours. This research affirms that personal identity has been transformed (morphogenesis) while social identity has been reproduced (morphostasis). Archer (2003) posits that identity is both a personal and social phenomenon, that is, identity is rooted in individuals' internal conversations (reflexivity) and influenced by the external social conditions. Identity is an ongoing and dynamic process, it guides agents' reflexivity and help agents to position themselves in the social context, which in turn, agents' reflexive process can transform it because of its dynamic characteristics. It can also refer to Archer's M/M that identity in the whole process may/may not be transformed, which is morphogenesis/morphostasis. Thus, identity is formed and reformed as individuals reflect upon their personal concerns and social context.

It is found that some new properties within the personal identity have emerged along the journey. Specifically, most tourists stated that they wanted to have some visual records for the attractions, while their focus changed to the local people and culture when they returned from the UK and made the plan for revisiting. The possible explanation could be related to cognition, because their cognition was already transformed because they saw what they expected to see, so new things or things they hadn't explored entirely became more interesting for them. Their cognitions have transformed during and after the trip mostly because their goals/personal identities have been fulfilled, so they set another goal from a different interest for revisiting. It can be argued that their personal identity can only be transformed for the next cycle because they have completed the goal or for a different interest, which refers to the 'revisit'. Hence, if it is a tourist's first time to visit a destination, their personal identity would stay unchanged, and only when they decide to revisit a destination their personal identity would be reformed.

However, social identity/ties have been proved to stay unchanged (morphostasis) in this research regardless of 'being a tourist' or national identity. To unpack that, national identity underpins other social identities. Chinese tourists always see themselves as Chinese, so their reflexivity is about the evaluations between China and other countries. Thus, their national identity has been enhanced/reproduced along the journey. This also explains that another social identity of 'being a tourist' has not been

transformed/reshaped. National identity decides Chinese tourists' identity if they want to be in other countries, they cannot or do not want to be residents for other countries, but they still want to have different experiences which relate to their social status and face ('Mianzi'), so they keep the identity of 'being a tourist' and it will not harm their national identity at the same time. Therefore, in the agential morphogenetic cycle, cognition, emotion and personal identity are transformed (morphogenesis) while social identity is enhanced (morphostasis).

In addition, an unexpected finding is that Chinese tourists' reflexivity has transformed their cognitions after Covid-19 happened, which echoes the recent work on outbound Chinese tourists (Liu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). For example, most participants stated that they needed to take time to travel abroad when they can, because they have never realised this until the pandemic happened and their actions were restricted. Thus, they may deliberately think about the good memories and ignore the negative sides of the UK, such as the food, weather and transport etc., which explains why they still rank a high overall satisfaction for the trip. This can possibly be explained as a connection with identity, that is, participants have put themselves into a group who have visited the UK, which differs themselves from others, and this differentiation offers them a 'higher' social status linked to face ('Mianzi').

Therefore, identity is an emergent property that interplays with cognition, reflexivity and emotions. Identity is formed and reformed in the process when agents reflect upon the social contexts, personal concerns and emotional experiences, which further shapes them through its own power.

## **6.4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has discussed the connections between the existing literature and this study's findings. The discussion is organised into three interrelated subsections aligned with the research objectives: (1) tourist experience as a social phenomenon, (2) key properties that affect tourist experience, and (3) mechanisms that explain the process through which tourist experience is generated.

Section 6.1 has demonstrated that tourist experience operates as a social phenomenon, a conclusion that is consistent with the existing literature and supported by the concept of 'self-evaluation'. This section also bridges the concept of 'subjectivity' in tourism studies with 'reflexivity' in Archer's RST. In essence, tourist experience is not solely

about tourists; rather, it emerges from the broader context, including tourists themselves, the destination and its images, the surrounding environment, and the interactions among these elements.

Section 6.2 has examined key properties across the structural, cultural, and agential domains. Economical enablers and socio-political prohibitors align with established research relating to income (Jin and Wang, 2016; Lin et al., 2015), visa restrictions (Sparks and Pan, 2009; Wang and Davidson, 2010), and media restrictions (Li et al., 2011; Tse and Hobson, 2008). However, this study's findings did not support other structural mechanisms proposed by Xie and Tveterås (2020) and Hall (1994), such as high price sensitivity, exchange rate fluctuations, living costs in China, or positive political relationships.

Within the cultural domain, this study has identified cultural differences and sociocultural patterns as key properties. It argues that cultural differences function as the main 'complementary' factor influencing tourist experience at the CS level, despite the presence of other 'contradiction' factors such as food, accommodation, and transportation. Sociocultural patterns have been shown to shape tourists' thinking at both the CS and S-C levels, aligning with the 'contradiction' and 'complementary' concepts in Archer's RST.

The agential domain highlights cognition as one of the primary factors influencing tourist experience. The findings indicate that 'curiosity' and 'confirmation' are the central variables within cognition, rather than the broader motivational categories used in existing literature (Cajiao et al., 2022; Sundbo and Dixit, 2020). Identity emerges as the main form of 'reasoning', playing an irreducible role across the entire experience process by underpinning agents' evaluative judgements throughout the journey. In addition, social identity postdates but outweighs personal identity due to the importance of 'face' ('Mianzi').

Section 6.3 has unpacked realist mechanisms at the structural cultural level and within the agency domain, conceptualised as *relationship a* and *relationship b*. At the structural cultural level, Archer's 'double morphogenesis' is evident: cultural differences are transformed into new 'sayings', while economical structural enablers, socio-political prohibitors, and sociocultural patterns are reproduced. Within *relationship b*, agential mechanisms operate through four interconnected processes: cognition as a continuously

updated 'container'; emotions as an 'attachment' linking reflexivity and identity; reflexivity as the 'bridge' through which evaluation occurs; and identity as an ongoing formation shaping thought and behaviour.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion and Future Steps

### 7.1 Summary of the Study

This research has investigated the influential properties on the tourist experience, and how these properties operated to generate this social phenomenon, that is, the mechanism on the emergence of the tourist experience. It has redefined tourists' experience from a critical realist perspective as "*a social phenomenon of the interplay between the tourist's subjective interpretations of the observable events, and the underlying structures that shape these interactions.*" Following Archer's analytical dualism concept, three domains (structural, cultural and agency) have been analysed separately. The data was collected from two angles, i.e. Chinese travel websites (19 documents), interviews (30 participants). On this basis, this study has identified a set of influential properties from three domains, i.e. economical structural enablers and socio-political prohibitors at the structural domain; cultural differences and sociocultural patterns at the cultural domain; cognition, reflexivity, emotions and identity/ties at the agential domain.

In relation to Research Question 1 – "What are the structural-cultural factors and the personal (agential cultural) factors that affect tourist experience before, during and after the trip?" - the study has shown that tourist experience is shaped by a configuration of structural, cultural and agential properties across the whole travel trajectory. At the structural domain, economic structural enablers (income, affordability) and socio-political prohibitors (visa regimes, media restrictions) condition the possibility and form of travel before the trip, and continue to influence mobility, access and perceived security during the trip. At the cultural domain, cultural differences between China and the UK, and sociocultural patterns (cultural learning, rooted cultural values, 'Mianzi' and 'Guanxi') frame how tourists interpret the destination, shape motivation and perceptions prior to departure, observe and interact with surroundings during and after the journey. At the agential domain, cognition, reflexivity, emotions and identity/ties are identified as key personal (agential cultural) factors that affect how tourists make sense of and evaluate their experiences. Cognition captures tourists' interpretations and knowledge before, during and after travel; reflexivity refers to their ongoing internal deliberations about whether, how and why to travel and how to evaluate events; emotions accompany and colour these cognitive and reflexive processes; and

identity/ties, encompassing both personal identity and social identity, underpin these evaluations across all stages of the journey. As a result, these findings conclusively answer Research Question 1 by specifying which structural-cultural and agential-cultural properties affect the tourist experience and demonstrating that they are at work before, during and after the trip.

Regarding to Research Question 2 – “How do these factors operate to generate (i.e. processes) the form of tourist experience?” – the study has demonstrated that these identified properties operate as mechanisms that bring about the lived tourist experience through their interplay across the structural, cultural and agential domains. Structural properties enable/prohibit tourists’ actions by allowing/constraining possibilities for travel, while tourists can in turn reproduce/transform social structures through their agential properties when they participate in the social context. Cultural properties function as the ‘sayings’ and ‘meanings’ that interact with both structure and agency: information emerging from the structural domain is first encountered as ‘sayings’ to agents and is then ‘digested’ by individual tourists based on their own cognitive frameworks, reflexive concerns, emotions and identities, becoming ‘meanings’ for them. These ‘sayings’ and ‘meanings’ may or may not be transformed during travel; for example, tourists’ sharing behaviours online or offline can convert personal ‘meanings’ into new ‘sayings’ for other potential tourists, thereby feeding back into the cultural and structural contexts. Within this overall process, agential mechanisms are shown to be particularly central: a) cognitions operate as a ‘container’ that is continuously updated through identity, reflexivity and emotions; b) emotions act as an ‘attachment’ that becomes intertwined with reflexive evaluations and identity along the journey; c) reflexivity functions as a ‘bridge’ through which tourists evaluate structural and cultural conditions and decide how to act; d) identity is shown to be a continuous formation that underpins tourists’ thinking and behaviours.

Among these, this study argues that identity is a remarkable property at the agency domain that provides the “real” explanation for the emergence of tourist experience, beyond superficial factors from previous studies such as destination infrastructures or natural environment (Aybek and Özdemir, 2022; Lee et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2021). To be more specific, personal identity predates social identity and ‘push’ tourists to visit the destination. Social identities outweigh personal identity, as they allow tourists to evaluate differently from their normal standard, i.e. ‘being a tourist’,

‘proud of being a Chinese’, further shape tourists’ reflexivity, emotions and cognition. Following this logic, identity is also key to explaining the conflicted emotions that emerge along the tourist journey, which also resonates with several existing literature (Chen and Huang, 2021; Yang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). Archer’s analytical dualism has contributed to unpack how each domain operates, but the study also emphasises that structural, cultural and agential domains (SAC) are always intertwined and interact as a whole through a critical realist lens. Therefore, the study extends Archer’s analytical dualism and RST into the field of tourism studies, offering a more nuanced account of how structure, culture and agency co-create the lived experiences of outbound Chinese tourists to the UK. This integrative understanding not only consolidates the study’s contribution to debates on tourist experience and critical realism in tourism but also establishes a clear foundation for the subsequent discussion of theoretical, methodological and practical implications.

## **7.2 Contributions and Implications**

This research offers significant contributions at both theoretical and methodological levels to the fields of tourism studies and Critical Realism (CR). It also generates practical implications for destination management, particularly for how destinations can construct and communicate their images to attract specific tourist markets.

### **7.2.1 Theoretical Contributions**

Theoretically, this study advances current knowledge by providing a critical realist explanation for the emergence of the tourist experience. Existing tourist experience studies have largely focused on identifying influential factors yet have explained how these factors operate and interact to generate the tourist experience. By adopting CR and Archer’s Realist Social Theory (RST), this study moves beyond surface-level descriptions to uncover the underlying causal mechanisms shaping the tourist experience.

From a CR perspective, social reality is conceptualised as an open system, which allow multiple causes to ‘make things happen’. Archer’s RST and the principle of analytical dualism—which analytically separates structure, culture, and agency (SAC)—enable the identification of domain-specific properties that contribute to the generation of tourist experience. Through this approach, this study identifies a set of structural, cultural, and agential properties consistent with existing literature (Jin and Wang, 2016;

Li et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2015; Sparks and Pan, 2009; Tse and Hobson, 2008; Wang and Davidson, 2010) on influential factors. However, its unique theoretical contribution lies in explaining the underpinning reasons behind these influences—that is, the mechanisms that operate within and across the SAC domains.

A key advancement concerns the conceptualisation of identity/ties. This study emphasises identity (both personal and social) as ‘central reasoning’ to explain tourists’ thought operations, shaping and shaped by reflexivity, emotions and cognitions. By foregrounding identity and its interactions with other agential properties, this research enriches the CR concept of the ‘self’ (Bandura, 1991; Craib, 1998; Sayer, 2011) and contributes to the ongoing discussion on subjectivity in tourist experience research, which generates new theoretical insights that are valuable to both tourism and CR studies.

In relation to mechanisms, this study proffers a realist explanation on the manifestation of the tourist experience across the three SAC domains. It offers an explanatory account of how domain-specific properties interact dynamically through the process of travelling—before, during and after the trip. The theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3 (Figure 11), integrating Archer’s morphogenesis/morphostasis (M/M) approach with Leiper’s (1979) and Cooper’s (2023) tourism system model, is tested and demonstrated as a feasible and robust conceptual tool (Figure 15) for examining tourist experience across different temporal stages. This framework not only clarifies the mechanisms at work within each domain but also explains how interactions between domains unfold across the entire travel trajectory. In addition, although not the central focus, the study reveals patterns of morphogenesis and morphostasis within each domain through the concept of double morphogenesis, further contributing to theoretical discussions in CR.

Therefore, these insights offer a mechanism-based perspective for investigating tourist experience, which contribute a valuable conceptual model to both tourism theory and CR literature.

### **7.2.2 Methodological Contributions**

Methodologically, this study bridges tourism studies and CR by introducing CR’s intensive research approach within a tourism context. It applies abduction, retrodiction and retrodiction inferences to investigate the social reality, which provides a new

analytical process to tourism research. This study successfully implements the model proposed by Danermark et al., (2019) on explaining the tourist experience step by step, i.e. moving from empirical domain to the real domain (through abduction and retrodiction), and returning to the empirical domain through retrodiction. This methodological strategy demonstrates how CR logic can be applied to identify underlying properties, explain their causal powers, and account for the generative mechanisms operating behind observable tourist experiences.

Furthermore, this study contributes a feasible and replicable methodological model for exploring complex social phenomena in tourism and beyond. Specifically, abduction helps researchers to redescribe the tourist experience (a phenomenon in a wider context) through theoretical recontextualization. Retrodiction explores the properties and identifies the conditions that must exist to ‘make things happen’, then retrodiction reveals the interplay of properties across domains to operate the social phenomenon, known as real mechanisms. Thus, the research advances methodological debates in both CR and tourism studies, offering a structured pathway for future research seeking to explain—not merely describe—social experiences.

### **7.2.3 Practical Implications**

This study offers several practical implications for non-academic stakeholders in the UK tourism sector, particularly policy makers, travel agencies, as well as the relevant tourism and hospitality businesses. Through uncovering the ‘real mechanisms’ across SAC domains, the findings move beyond descriptive accounts and provide insights that can be directly applied in industry practice.

At the macro/national level, this study offers implications for policy makers who are responsible for national tourism strategies, visa and mobility regimes. The findings illustrate that Chinese tourists’ experiences are shaped by structural cultural conditions, i.e. infrastructural accessibility, perceived safety, visibility of cultural differences, so policy makers can intervene as an essential role in enabling/constraining positive experience mechanisms. For example, national and local authorities can invest more in infrastructures, such as express trains from airports, WIFI on tubes etc. It can also be beneficial to have Mandarin-language signage and information points in airports, railway stations and major transport hubs. Furthermore, the simplification and clearer communication in several procedures can be helpful, i.e. improvements in visa processes, tax-refund procedures, even Chinese digital payment systems in main

shopping areas. These actions can reduce cognitive strain and uncertainty for first-time Chinese tourists, which further reduce the ‘unsafety’ emerged from reflexivity. In addition, policy makers can work closely with destination marketing organisations (DMOs) to ensure the authoritative, culturally contextualised content about destinations in the UK, for example, using emotions selling point (ESP) to deliver information which connected with Chinese tourists.

Moreover, closely connected to these policy-level actors, online travel agencies (OTAs) and destination marketing organisations (DMOs) are equally concrete. Due to the policies in China, Chinese tourists rely heavily on limited digital information from online applications, travel agencies and word-of-mouth, Chinese OTAs and DMOs can use this as an opportunity, for example, work closely with the UK ones so that the information can be up-to-dated. This study’s findings also suggest that outbound Chinese tourists do not simply respond to generic images of attractions; instead, they interpret destination messages through ongoing reflexive projects concerning who they are and who wish to become, which are highly relevant to their identities (both personal and social identities). Thus, DMOs can move beyond attraction-based promotion and frame the UK as a space for enacting particular identity projects, for example, destinations can emphasis its cultural capital and high education experiences, which allow young professionals and parents to have educational opportunities for themselves or their children.

Furthermore, OTAs can focus more on FIT (flexible independent travel) travelling recommendations as FIT has become a trend for outbound Chinese tourists, either with their friends or family members. They can act as an intermediary to provide more local services instead of arranging tour bus for tour groups. For instance, OTAs can consider developing a system or platform to provide more local services, such as helping Chinese tourists to find local guides/tour operators. This is because most outbound Chinese tourists have a clear idea where they want to visit, but lack the accessibility to get to the destinations, and they also want their own time and space for visiting because of ‘Mianzi’ and ‘Guanxi’. Therefore, private hire drivers/guides might be a popular choice for outbound Chinese tourists, and OTAs can easily meet this requirement.

In addition, cultural differences can be both a source of attraction and a source of anxiety based on the findings, DMOs can use this insight to produce pre-departure digital content in Mandarin that explains everyday norms and practices in the UK, as

well as stories of how other Chinese tourists experienced identity transformation, emotional engagement and personal growth in the UK.

At the micro level, local tourism and hospitality businesses, i.e. hotels, visitor attractions, retailers and cultural venues, can also draw on this study's findings to refine their marketing services. The analysis finds that interactions and observations can trigger strong emotional and reflexivity, which further shape outbound Chinese tourists' cognitions, thus, frontline staff training may need to go beyond generic 'cultural awareness' to focus on recognising and responding to tourists' identity and emotions. In other words, it would be helpful if staff are able to identify and respond clearly when there is a sign of uncertainty or hesitation related to language barriers or unfamiliar procedures. This kind of supportive communication can foster feelings of competence and recognition rather than embarrassment.

Furthermore, physical and informational environments can be designed to build a 'cultural bridge' related to outbound Chinese tourists' identities. For instance, local tourism and hospitality businesses can build in-store bilingual signage, QR codes linking to Mandarin explanations of rules and procedures, especially clear information about services such as tax-free shopping, opening times, queueing systems etc. In addition, all participants in this study who have visited the British Museum were all satisfied with the audio guides in Mandarin, so it will be beneficial if other museums and heritage sites replicate this method.

Therefore, these implications show that the critical realist framework employed in this thesis is not merely of theoretical interest but can be used as a diagnostic tool by a range of non-academic stakeholders.

### **7.3 Limitations and Future Studies**

In the course of the study, several limitations should be acknowledged to clarify the conditions for future studies. These limitations are primarily methodological, data-related and theoretical realist explanations, which are consistent with the qualitative, critical realist and case study design adopted.

From the methodological aspect, it would be beneficial to have more varied data. As stated in Chapter 6, it was not an easy process to find participants at the first stage due to the restrictions during the pandemic (Covid-19). The researcher had to use the snow-ball method to collect interview data, and it was more time consuming than planned.

Thus, the data was limited because of the researcher's social networks. Furthermore, the interview process had to be completed online due to political restrictions (lockdown during the Covid-19). It can be argued the quality of the interviews were not good enough as the online interviews were not able to show the body language of interviewees, as well as the data depth (Li et al., 2024), so the researcher only had information from conversations. However, this research used narrative analysis and thematic analysis, which helped to grab information from conversations, so it might be acceptable to avoid investigating interviewees' body language or other discourses.

From the theoretical aspect, the explanations that are provided by this study may not be the only manifestation. From a critical realist perspective, human knowledge can be fallible and finite, which requires researchers to keep exploring and updating their knowledge, so as to explain the social phenomenon efficiently. The reality is not simple to investigate even when the researchers have identified the mechanisms because a) it can have various causal pathways which is opposite to the laboratory experiments with only the 'right' formulation, and human knowledge are limited (Archer, 2013; Bhaskar, 2008); b) the reality is linked to three levels, so any social context or agential mechanisms can lead to a different explanatory account about the reality (Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2011). Nevertheless, Danermark et al. (2019) argue that researchers still need to provide the most possible explanatory account to understand the social phenomenon even though it is limited.

This study has provided an insightful explanation which fits both CR and tourism studies based on the available data. However, this study made an attempt to explain the tourist experience based on CR, and this 'real' explanation is a closed explanation based on the limited data. It indicates that the 'real' structural, cultural and agential mechanisms may/may not be the same as this study's findings. Case study is another reason that can cause this limitation, as the focal point of the study were two countries, which may not cover all tourists from different cultural backgrounds. Nonetheless, this study has provided a feasible theoretical framework to investigate and possibly explain the tourist experience, based on the data with different cultural backgrounds. Philosophical debate,

Acknowledging these limitations does not undermine the contribution of the study; rather, it clarifies the conditions under which the findings hold and delineates the boundaries of their applicability. It also highlights the need for further research to test,

refine and extend the proposed mechanisms in other contexts and under changing structural and cultural conditions. There are two potential fruitful lines of inquiry for future research. Firstly, the future study can focus on the depth of explanation on the tourist experience. To be more specific, it is still a new field to bridge tourism with CR studies, so it might need more in depth understanding of the tourist experience theoretically, i.e. the consensus definition of the tourist experience through a critical realist lens. Secondly, researchers may consider adopting more case studies that involve different cultural backgrounds to test the explained mechanisms in this research, for example, British tourists visiting China or Spain. As stated in Chapter 5, diverse case studies can explore more causal powers, especially for research that involves diverse cultural backgrounds, which resonates with the open system in CR. Apart from examining the identified influential properties, adopting different cases may investigate more other emerging properties, which enrich/reshape the knowledge on explaining the mechanisms. It should be reminded that critical realists may need to reflect their positions as a researcher, as human knowledge are finite, and it can be a long journey to explore the ‘real’ mechanisms in social reality. Therefore, the outcome might not always have the results for explaining the ‘real’ world, but each effort contributes to human knowledge, which at least helps to understand more about the social world.

## **7.4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has drawn together the main strands of the thesis by revisiting the aims and research questions, synthesising the empirical and theoretical insights, and clarifying the study’s contributions, implications, limitations and directions for future research. The study has adopted a critical realist perspective from Archer’s analytical dualism, to investigate (1) the structural-cultural and personal (agential cultural) factors that affect tourist experience before, during and after the trip, and (2) how these factors operate to generate the form of tourist experience. Through the analysis of Chinese online travel agencies (OTAs) narratives and primary interviews with outbound Chinese tourists to the UK, the study has identified a constellation of properties across the structural (economical enablers, socio-political prohibitors), cultural (cultural differences, sociocultural patterns) and agential (cognition, reflexivity, emotions, identity/ties) domains. It has demonstrated that tourist experience is an emergent social phenomenon arising from the interplay of these properties over time, and argued that identity (both personal and social) plays a particularly central role in underpinning

reflexivity, shaping emotions and cognition, and explaining variations and tensions in tourists lived experiences.

On this basis, the chapter has offered several contributions and implications. Theoretically, it has extended critical realism and Archer's SAC framework into tourism studies, offering a 'real' explanatory account of tourist experience that goes beyond superficial level of factors and repositions identity as a key mechanism linking structure, culture and agency. Methodologically, it has showed the value of combining narrative and thematic analysis with a critical realist, mechanism-oriented logic of inquiry, and demonstrated how online secondary data and interview data can be integrated to trace 'sayings' and 'meanings' across domains. Practically, it has outlined how policy makers, destination marketing organisations (DMOs), online travel agencies (OTAs), and tourism and hospitality businesses can utilise the identified mechanisms to design more enabling structural conditions, more resonant identity-based marketing, and more culturally supportive services for outbound Chinese tourists. The chapter also acknowledged important limitations related to online interview method, and the inferential nature of mechanism identification, emphasising that the explanations offered are analytically robust yet necessarily partial and context bound. Finally, it has proposed avenues for future research, including the application and testing of the proposed theoretical framework in other origin–destination pairs, and the examination of post-pandemic shifts in structural conditions, cultural meanings and agential concerns.

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## Appendix 1 Overview of Experience Definitions

Author (Year)	Definition	Field
<b>Kang and Gretzel (2012)</b>	“A constant flow of thoughts and feelings during moments of consciousness (Carlson, 1997) which occur through highly complex psychological, sociological, and cognitive interaction processes” (p.442).	Tourism
<b>Kim et al. (2011)</b>	A memorable tourism experience is ‘a tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred	Tourism
<b>Tung and Ritchie (2011)</b>	‘An individual’s subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e., affective, cognitive and behavioural of events related to his/her tourists’ activities which begins before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection).	Tourism
<b>Chen and Chen (2010)</b>	‘An individual’s subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e., affective, cognitive and behavioural of events related to his/her tourists’ activities which begins before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection).	Tourism
<b>Ismail (2010)</b>	‘An individual’s subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e., affective, cognitive and behavioural of events related to his/her tourists’ activities which begins before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection).	Marketing/ Tourism

<b>Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009)</b>	“Tourism experience is derived from the tension between everyday life and other realities which is to be experienced most obviously as a result of changes in habitual temporal and spatial structures”	Marketing
<b>Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009)</b>	The tourist experience is a socially word which combines the multiple meanings of environment, social or activity dimensions of the experience.	Tourism
<b>Volo (2009)</b>	“A tourist experience can be defined as any occurrence that happens to a person outside the “usual environment” and the “contracted time” for which a sequence of the following events happens: energy reflecting the state of the environment impinges on sensory organs, the energy pattern is transmitted centrally and is interpreted and categorized according to one’s knowledge acquired through time and is integrated and may be stored in the form of memory under some conditions (and thus some learning will occur)” (pp.119-120).	Tourism
<b>Ek et al. (2008)</b>	A dynamic experience is a constant status that reshapes the emotions and sensations through the activities (before, during and after). As a noun experience is defined as the “observation and spatial participation in an event”	Marketing
<b>Andersson (2007)</b>	Tourist experience emerges when tourism consumption and tourism productions meet, it is the moment resources are consumed and the value is created.	Tourism
<b>Boswijk et al. (2007)</b>	Experience is a status that makes impressions and creates value for the individuals in a specific situation, it emerges immediately and autonomy with a complex of emotions.	Marketing
<b>Gentile et al. (2007)</b>	“A set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its	Marketing

	organization, which provoke a reaction. This experience is strictly individual and implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical and spiritual). Its evaluation depends on the comparison between a customer's expectations and the stimuli coming from the interaction with the company and its offering in correspondence of the different moments of contacts or touchpoints" (p.397)	
<b>Larsen (2007)</b>	A tourist experience could be viewed as "a function of individual psychological processes. Such a perspective implies that the concept of tourist experience presupposes the individual" and "A past-travel related event which was significant enough to be stored in long-term memory" (p.15).	Tourism
<b>O'Dell (2007)</b>	Tourist experiences can be more than a simple continuation of everyday life, physically affecting us and leaving us with the perception that we have just participated in something extraordinary. And this aspect of the production, consumption, and staging of experiences needs to be understood (p.41).  Experiences are highly subjective, intangible, continuous and highly personal phenomena (p.38)	Tourism
<b>Selstad (2007)</b>	"The tourist experience can be described as a combination of novelty and familiarity" (p.20).	Social anthropology
<b>O'Dell (2005)</b>	Experiences occur "in an endless array of specific places, such as stores, museums, cities, sporting arenas, shopping centres, neighbourhood parks and well-known tourist	Tourism

	attractions. At the same time, they do not need to be limited to any single place” (p.15).	
<b>Uriely (2005)</b>	The tourist experience is defined as a phenomenon which is obscure and diverse, and it is mostly integrated by individual consumers.	Tourism
<b>Quan and Wang (2004)</b>	Tourist experience is a kind of experience which sharply contrasts or opposite to the daily experience.	Tourism
<b>Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003)</b>	“Experience emerges from the interaction between destinations and tourists—with destinations as ‘theatres’ at which experience takes place, and tourists as ‘actors’ who have to play their own role (depending on the extent of their immersion)” (p.41).	Tourism
<b>Robinette et al. (2002)</b>	Experience is the moment that companies and customers interact with each other through the sensation, information, and emotion (p.60).	Marketing
<b>Aho (2001)</b>	Experience can be understood to cover all kind of things that a person has passed through, regardless of their mental, emotional, or other relevance.	Tourism
<b>Gupta and Vajic (2000)</b>	Experiences are the moments when customers gaining any sensation or knowledge contributed from the interactions with different elements created by a service provider. “Experience is an emergent phenomenon. It is the outcome of participation in a set of activities within a social context” (p.33).	Marketing
<b>Ryan (2000)</b>	“Tourist experiences are ‘messy’ they are messy at the place of delivery, they may be unclear in meaning when located within the totality of any individual's experiences, and are all the more messy because, paradoxically, tourist experiences can be rich, enriching	Tourism

	and cathartic” (p.122).	
<b>Pine and Gilmore (1999)</b>	Experience emerges when “a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event” (p.11). Experiences are events which could engage individuals to some extent (p.12)	Marketing
<b>Carlson (1997)</b>	Experience can be defined as a constant flow of thoughts and feelings that occur during moments of consciousness.	Psychology
<b>Botterill and Crompton (1996)</b>	“A person's experience or thoughts about reality are regarded as tentative hypotheses that may or may not be true” (p.59).	Tourism
<b>Otto and Ritchie (1996)</b>	Experience is a subjective mental state which is created by participants during a service encounter.	Marketing/ Tourism
<b>Wearing and Wearing (1996)</b>	“The reality of the tourist experience is the interaction that the tourist has within the tourist space, that is the tourist destination and the meaning that the tourist gives to this interaction” (p.237).	Tourism
<b>Lee et al. (1994)</b>	Leisure experiences are characterized as being multidimensional, transitory and multi-phased constructs.	Tourism
<b>Carbone and Haeckel (1994)</b>	“The take-away impression formed by people’s encounters with products, services, and businesses, a perception produced when humans consolidate sensory information” (p 8).	Marketing
<b>Arnould and Price (1993)</b>	Extraordinary experiences are characterized by high levels of emotional intensity and triggered by an unusual event.	Tourism

<b>Csikszentmihalyi (1990b)</b>	Flow is the optimal experience that keeps one motivated. This feeling often involves painful, risky or difficult efforts that stretch the person’s capacity as well as an element of novelty and discovery. Flow is an almost effortless yet highly focused state of consciousness and yet the descriptions do not vary much by culture, gender, or age.	Psychology
<b>Mannell (1984)</b>	Experience is a state of mind, involves individual and the quality of leisure in our lives.	Psychology
<b>Cohen (1979)</b>	“Tourist experience as either something essentially spurious and superficial, an extension of an alienated world, or as a serious search for authenticity, an effort to escape from an alienated world” (p.179).	Tourism
<b>Csikszentmihalyi (1977)</b>	“A unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in a control of his actions and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, between past, present and future” (p.36).	Psychology
<b>MacCannell (1973)</b>	An active response to the issues of modern life as tourists are in search of authentic experiences.	Sociology
<b>Maslow (1968)</b>	“Moments of the highest happiness and fulfilment. We feel more powerful than usual and experience unusual focus, joy, intensity, creativity, in other words being more fully human” (pp.72-73).	Marketing
<b>Boorstin (1964)</b>	Experience can be recognised as a popular act of consumption, and a contrived, prefabricated experience of mass tourism.	Sociology

(cited in Neuhofer-Rainoldi, 2014, pp. 29-33)

## Appendix 2 Interview Schedule

<b>Section 1: Demographic Information</b>
1. Please indicate your gender by ticking one of the following options.
<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
2. Please indicate your age by ticking one of the following options.
<input type="checkbox"/> 18~25 <input type="checkbox"/> 26~35 <input type="checkbox"/> 36~45 <input type="checkbox"/> 45~60 <input type="checkbox"/> Over 60
3. Which city and province do you live: _____
4. What is your occupation? _____
5. Please indicate your annual income by ticking one of the following options.
<input type="checkbox"/> ¥10,000~ 30,000 <input type="checkbox"/> ¥30,000~ 50,000 <input type="checkbox"/> ¥50,000~100,000
<input type="checkbox"/> ¥100,000~300,000 <input type="checkbox"/> ¥300,000~500,000 <input type="checkbox"/> ¥ 500,000 +
<input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say <input type="checkbox"/> no income
<b>Section 2: Tourist experience</b>
6. Could you please tell me about your previous visit(s) to the UK? (destination(s) visited, time visited UK, with whom etc.)

7. Why did you choose the destination(s) to visit?
8. How do you feel about this experience in general?
9. Could you please tell me about one experience when you were in the UK that is very memorable to you? And why is it memorable to you?
10. Before your trip, how did you gather information that was needed in your preparation for the trip? (i.e. travel information from travel agents, websites, social media, or friends).
11. What was your impression of the destination(s) before your trip? (it could be from any sources, such as social media, friends etc.)
12. What was your impression of the UK before your trip?
13. What was your expectation of that trip before your trip?
14. During your visit in the UK, what did you think about the places that you were visiting?
15. After your trip, what was your overall impression of the UK? And what was your impression of the places you visited?
16. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, holiday to the UK has not been possible. From your last visit to the country up till now, many things have taken place, what is your impression of the UK now as a tourism destination?
17. Do you see yourself visiting the UK for holidays in the near future? And why?
18. Will you share your experience in the UK with others? If yes, how to share?
19. Is there anything you would like to add?

### Appendix 3 The stages in explanatory research based on Critical Realism

<p>Stage 1: Descriptions</p>	<p>An explanatory social science usually starts in the concrete, in descriptions of the often-complex events, situations and activities we intend to study and explain. In this we make use of everyday concepts. An important part of this description is the interpretations of the persons involved and their way of understanding the activities. In the descriptions we make use of qualitative as well as quantitative methods.</p>
<p>Stage 2: Analytical resolution</p>	<p>In this phase we separate and dissolve the composite and complex by distinguishing the various components, aspects, dimensions and levels of analysis. It is never possible to study a phenomenon in all its different components. Therefore, we must in practice confine ourselves to studying certain components and aspects but not others. In this we also more precisely clarify what we aim to explain.</p>
<p>Stage 3: Abduction /theoretical redescription</p>	<p>Here, we interpret and redescribe components and aspects of a phenomena. Various theoretical interpretative frameworks are examined to both specify the phenomena to be explained and put it in a context of possible explanations. The original ideas of the objects of study are developed when we place them in new contexts of ideas. Various theoretical interpretations and explanations can be compared, evaluated, and possibly integrated</p>
<p>Stage 4: Retrodution</p>	<p>Here the different methodological strategies described above are employed. The purpose is for each one of the structures we have decided to focus on (and tentatively ascribe high explanatory power), to try to find the answers</p>

	<p>to questions like: What is fundamentally constitutive for the structures and what mechanisms are related to these structures? What properties must exist for X to be what X is? If, for example, the researcher focuses on norm structures the aim is to investigate what basically distinguishes these structures and how they operate. In the concrete research process, we have in many cases access to already established theories providing more or less satisfactory answers to questions of this type (there are many different theories about social norms). In research practice, stages 3 and 4 are closely related. Abduction provides ideas about relevant interpretative frameworks and theories whose causal mechanisms can be specified by retroduction. In retroduction, the abductive moments can, in turn, develop. Some studies focus on more complex explanations and include causal mechanisms at different levels of analysis. Other studies are more limited and focus on explanations at a certain level of analysis.</p>
<p>Stage 5: Retrodiction and contextualization</p>	<p>In this stage, we investigate the relationships between the various structures and causal mechanisms assumed to affect the phenomena to be explained. The explanatory power of different mechanisms is evaluated. Explanations can never include all relevant mechanisms, but we can strive to take the most significant into account. The investigations in this stage are theoretical as well as empirical. Existing theories are compared, developed, and in some cases integrated. Central to this moment is also to empirically investigate how structures and mechanism are manifest in concrete contexts. More or less temporary circumstances (social, cultural, political) can play a decisive role in triggering various mechanisms and above all how the mechanisms more specifically influence</p>

	events, activities, and processes. In explanations it is essential to distinguish between structural conditions and contextual circumstances
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Source: Danermark et al. (2019, p. 130)

## Appendix 4 Codebook of the Destination Image

### Attributes of the destination (culture features)

Name	Description	Files	References
Architecture	Descriptions of architecture styles	11	86
Films & Books	Tourists attracted by the films, movies, series, stories, and famous people	9	46
Historical Descriptions	The words been used about history, including time, event, people etc.	12	141
Idealisation	Creating the image of how tourists feel (impressions)	9	58
Residents' lifestyle	General introduction of the UK's residents' traditions, norms and values	6	19
Uniqueness	The words been used to describe the speciality of the destination	12	190

### Elements of the destination ('amalgams')

Name	Description	Files	References
Amenity	A feature or service that enhances comfort, convenience, and enjoyment for tourists during their stay at the destination (the UK).		
Entertainment	All the events and relevant leisure activities in the UK, that provide more leisure activities choices for Chinese tourist.		
Festival	Local festival events, celebrations etc.	7	38
Performance	Opera, theatre, football match	5	21
Shopping	Shopping mall and products introductions	8	83
Sports	Football as the most popular activity in the UK and it is famous that the residents love to watch football match.	3	10
Infrastructures	All the tourism services for physical needs, including public facilities and services.		
Food	Introduction of typical food, restaurants, and recommendations for 'Must-try' food.	7	34
Hospitality	Hotels, Airbnb with the characteristics and tips for staying.	5	11
Transportation	Detailed public transports, including trains, airports, tubes,	6	33

	buses and taxis.		
Attraction sites	Categorised from city level within the UK, to see these attraction sites been mentioned to attract Chinese tourists.		
Bath		2	8
Cambridge		3	17
Lake District		1	9
London		5	74
Northern Ireland		1	2
Oxford		3	18
Scotland		5	47

## Appendix 5 Coding References for Attributes of the Destination (Examples)

Name	References
<b>Architecture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“St. Paul's Cathedral is a representative of British classicist architecture and the second largest domed church in the world” (Mafengwo, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Westminster Abbey is located on the north bank of the River Thames, and the whole building is magnificent and splendid, and is considered a masterpiece of English Gothic architecture” (Mafengwo, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“In the centre of the square, a monument designed by William Rearton is erected, the main body of which is a round stone pillar about 56 meters high, on the top of which stands a bronze statue of Nelson more than 5 meters high, in full armor, made from bronze cannons captured at the Battle of Trafalgar, completed by the sculptor Bailey. Beneath the pillar are tall square pedestals and multiple steps, the walls of which are inlaid with bronze sculptures of the four famous battles commanded by Nelson during his lifetime; At the four corners, there are 4 large bronze lions” (Mafengwo, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Today's Bath still retains very well-preserved Romanesque and Georgian architecture. Bath Abbey is a Gothic church that is striking for its ornate architectural carvings and majestic layout. The Victorian Reception Hall at the entrance is ornate with a vaulted ceiling carved with the beauty of the four seasons” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The streets are lined with buildings from different eras and offer a taste of the Tudor, Stuart and Georgian periods. The buildings are mostly made of honey-coloured Cotswold stone, and the horse chestnut trees planted on both sides of the road are very beautiful” (Qyar, 2022).</i></li> </ul>
<b>Films &amp; Books</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“One of the most famous and popular of the many literati who lived in Bath, Jane Austen had a deep connection with Bath, spending two long vacations here and writing her famous Pride and Prejudice. In 1801, she settled here with her father, who had retired, and based on his experience living there, she wrote ‘Persuasion’ and ‘Northanger Abbey’” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“221B Baker Street in London is probably one of the most famous addresses in the world. The structure of the museum is almost</i></li> </ul>

	<p><i>identical to that described in the novel, with Holmes and Dr. Watson living on the second floor, with a study in the front and Sherlock Holmes' bedroom in the back. The study displays many of the novel's props, such as the magnifying glass that Sherlock Holmes used to look at the blood stains, the deer hunting hat he often carried, his pipes, and the gas lamps of the period. On the third and fourth floors of the museum, there are life-size wax figures that present well-known scenes from the novel” (Qyar, 2022).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“London King's Cross Railway Station: Adjacent to St Pancras railway station, there are trains to Cambridge, York, Edinburgh and more. It is also home to Platform 93/4 in Harry Potter, where there are carts and owl cages on the walls for book and movie fans to take photos” (Qyar, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Paddington, 2014. The scene in the film Paddington Bear where the bear is abducted by the wicked female museum director is set in the Natural History Museum. If you enjoy the film, you cannot miss Paddington train station and the Natural History Museum” (Qunar, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“There are countless celebrities from Cambridge, including Newton, Darwin, Hawking, etc., as well as 15 United Kingdom prime ministers and 25 heads of state of other countries, and many Chinese celebrities are also connected to it” (Qunar, 2022).</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Historical Descriptions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“The Tower of London is a castle that was originally a royal palace and has since been used for various purposes such as a fortress, armoury, execution ground, prison, etc., and was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1988” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Entering from the reception hall is a terrace overlooking the large baths, surrounded by Victorian statues dating back to 1894. The temperature of the natural spring water has been maintained at 46 degrees Celsius all year round for thousands of years” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The British Museum was founded in 1753 on the basis of a bequest of more than 70,000 pieces from a personal collection, Sir Han-s Sloane, a collector at the time. The British Museum opened its doors to the public on 15 January 1759 in what was then the Montague House, and since then it has expanded its collection to become the world's leading museum that visitors see</i></li> </ul>

	<p>today” (Mafengwo, 2022).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Windsor Castle is the oldest and largest of the world's most inhabited castles. Originally built of timber around 1070 by William I, the castle was used as a defensive fortress and formed part of the fortress defence system in London. In its nearly 1,000-year history, it has been the birthplace of many kings and queens, but it has also been their burial place. Edward III was born here, hence the nickname "Edward of Windsor"; George III was confined here for nine years until his death; Queen Victoria lived at Windsor Castle for 40 years after her husband's death, earning her the nickname "The Widow of Windsor". In 1992, a 15-hour fire destroyed more than 100 rooms at Windsor Castle, and the subsequent reconstruction took five years. To this day, 39 monarchs have used Windsor Castle as their family home. Today United Kingdom Queen Elizabeth II also resides at Windsor Castle as one of the royal residences, and often uses the castle as a venue for state banquets and official receptions. When the queen resides in the castle, the royal flag is raised on the round tower. You can also watch the Changing of the Guard ceremony here” (Qyar, 2022).</li> <li>- “The world-famous Royal Greenwich Observatory of United Kingdom was built in 1675 in Greenwich Gardens in the south-eastern suburbs of London. When the Greenwich Observatory was first built, its purpose was to accurately observe the moon and stars, solve the problem of determining longitude at sea, and help the burgeoning nautical industry. After World War II, the Greenwich Observatory moved to Fort Herstmonstuo, Susekshire, and it has now developed into a comprehensive optical observatory in the United Kingdom” (Qyar, 2022).</li> </ul>
<b>Idealisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “At dusk, the London Eye slowly turns, and the River Thames and historic buildings at sunset make you encounter the most romantic scene in London” (Qyar, 2022).</li> <li>- “The Changing of the Royal Guard ceremony at the entrance of Buckingham Palace has always attracted visitors from all over the world. Amid the sound of military music, the guards wearing the uniforms of the Great Red Army and wearing bearskin top hats performed in various formations and raised their guns to salute each other, which was very grand and fancy” (Mafengwo,</li> </ul>

	<p>2022).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“The keys, the light, the stained-glass windows, adorn the Gothic church.....’ although this is the lyrics from Prague Square, it is a fitting description of Bath Abbey” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“If you soak in the hot springs in the evening, watch the night slowly fall, the clouds on the horizon turn from blue to red and then gradually soak in the night, and then the lights are on, and the Gothic church lights on the side illuminate the exterior wall, as if you have travelled back in time” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“At sunrise and sunset, many tourists come here to enjoy the scenery and often take beautiful photos. Head east along Princes Street to the end to Calton Hill. The mountain is not high, and you can walk up slowly, and you will see lush scenery all the way. When the weather is nice, many locals come here to bask in the sun or have a picnic on the lawn. From the top of the hill to the west, you can see the whole city, and in the distance stands the magnificent Edinburgh Castle. To the east, you can see the Forth Bay. To the south, there are the Scottish Parliament Building and the Palace of Holyrood House” (Qunar, 2022).</i></li> </ul>
<b>Residents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“When it comes to British, many people think of the word ‘gentleman’, and indeed, British usually pay attention to etiquette and appearance, and follow the rules. In addition, British are most proud of their unique sense of humour, which you can definitely feel if you have the opportunity to chat with them” (Qyar, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“However, compared with Europeans such as Italians and French, British are relatively conservative, and unfamiliar people usually do not hug casually. If you meet cute children, do not touch their heads or pinch their faces. Also, if you're gathering with friends, you should keep an eye out for people who are vegetarians because of their religious beliefs” (Qyar, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“British people do not like to talk about personal matters when they meet but love to talk about the weather. British have a strong sense of time. Be punctual on your scheduled appointments. It's rude to be late for no reason, and it's not necessary to arrive too early. When giving gifts, it's best to give lighter gifts such as fine chocolates, fine wines and flowers” (Mafengwo, 2022).</i></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“English afternoon tea is not just for the taste, but also the best way to immerse yourself in local life. In the Victorian era, men were required to wear tuxedos and women wore dresses for afternoon tea. Although it is not necessary to be so formal for afternoon tea in a hotel now, it is best not to dress too casually, behave modestly and keep conversation as low as possible” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“It is customary to have a cold meal such as bread and sandwiches at noon and a cooked meal in the evening, and traditional families cook a Sunday roast on Sunday” (Qunar, 2022).</i></li> </ul>
<b>Uniqueness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“Tower Bridge is one of London's landmarks and a symbol of London” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Windsor Castle is the family castle of the Windsor dynasty of the United Kingdom royal family, and it is also one of the largest and oldest castles still inhabited in the world” (Ctrip, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The round Radcliffe Rotunda is the library's collection of medical and scientific books, built in 1749 and this beautiful Baroque building has become one of Oxford's landmarks” (Qunar, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace is not as majestic as the parade in front of Tiananmen Square, but it is something travellers don't want to miss – nothing beats the changing of the guard in red uniforms and bearskin hats to the sound of military music in the United Kingdom” (Qyar, 2022).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Westminster Abbey is not only one of the highest status churches in the United Kingdom, but also the place where successive United Kingdom kings were crowned, buried and married” (Mafengwo, 2022).</i></li> </ul>

## Appendix 6 Codebook of Interviews

### Before the trip (T<sup>1</sup>)

Themes / Subthemes	Descriptions	Files	References
<b>Cognition 1</b>	Tourists' knowledge before the trip, including their perceptions or impressions, and why they wanted to visit the UK.		
<u>Motivation</u>	The underlying psychological reasons why tourists travel and what matters to them.	30	102
Confirmation	Tourists confirm with the knowledge they have already known, including books, films, arts and music etc.	21	45
Curiosity	Tourists explore with the knowledge they are not sure about, or only know the superficial side, which makes them want to dig in more.	24	34
<u>Perceptions</u>	The process of receiving and interpreting information through various senses, personal experiences, and accounts provided by third parties	30	121
<b>Emotion 1</b>	Tourists' emotions before the trip	30	39
<b>Identity 1</b>	Tourists' identity before the trip	30	51

### During the trip (T<sup>2</sup> – T<sup>3</sup>)

Themes / Subthemes	Descriptions	Files	References
<b>Cognition 2</b>	Observation & Interactions	0	0
<u>Interacting</u>	Tourists interact with the surroundings at the destination, which including participating within the social context	0	0
Attractions	Tourists' conversations about their impressed attractions, which focuses on how they demonstrated in interviews as below.	22	44
<i>(a) Architecture</i>	Tourists' focal point on describing the architectures they see.	20	34
<i>(b) History, cultural heritage</i>	History stories, history learnings, cultural sites including museums, art galleries etc.	20	41
<i>(c) Natural Environment</i>	Weather, General landscape.	27	54
Infrastructure	Accessibility to the sites, transportation (trains, tubes, buses, taxis etc.); Food; Hotels and accommodations.	30	131
Social Environment	Tourists' social activities within the social context.	0	0
<i>(a) Local quality of life</i>	Costs of living, exchange rates, "expensive" vs. "cheap".	21	49
<i>(b) Residents</i>	British residents & their lifestyle	23	63

<i>(c) Shopping</i>	Shopping activities including descriptions on shopping malls, products and services.	17	25
<u>Observing</u>	Excluding participating	26	54
<b>Emotion 2</b>	Tourists' emotions during the trip when interacting and observing at the destination.	30	68
<b>Identity 2</b>	Tourists' identity during the trip when interacting and observing at the destination.	30	57
<b>Reflexivity</b>	Tourists' evaluative process upon the surroundings, that contributes to their understanding of the world.	30	142
<u>Comparison to Cognition 1</u>	Consistent / inconsistent knowledge from Cognition 1. Tourists' comparisons from their perceptions/impressions.		
Consistent	Same/similar as their perceptions before the trip.	21	37
Inconsistent	Not same/opposite to their perceptions before the trip.	23	47
<u>Comparison to destinations</u>	Comparisons to other destinations, including cities between the UK and other countries.		
Between UK	Comparing and evaluating cities within the UK (e.g. London vs. Edinburgh)	21	32
China	Comparing and evaluating between the UK and China.	26	69
Other countries	Comparing and evaluating between the UK and other countries, where they travelled before.	10	17

**After the trip (T<sup>3</sup> - T<sup>4</sup>)**

Themes / Subthemes	Descriptions	Files	References
<b>Cognition 3</b>	Tourists generated new knowledge based on Cognition 1 & 2, as well as acknowledgement after returning to China, this included their overviews for this trip and future planning for next trip, which concluded as Cognition 3.	30	55
<u>Future planning</u>	Expecting to re-visit and some new places in the UK	30	38
<u>Sharing (Structural change)</u>	Word of mouth and social media sharing.	30	36
<b>Emotion 3</b>	Tourists' emotions after the trip when they returned to the home country.	30	45
<b>Identity 3</b>	Tourists' identity after the trip when they returned to the home country.	30	38

*Note: For the clarity of the data, each colour set for different themes, the same theme and subthemes is marked with the level of the colour, from darker to lighter.*

## **Appendix 7 Coding References for Cognition**

### **Cognition 1**

Theme Name	Subthemes (category)	Codes (examples)
Motivations	Curiosity ('look')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“The main thing is to go abroad to see. Just look around to see scenery and cultural things” (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Just to see what's going on now in another country, I was going just for experiencing it” (Anna).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I should say that I was just curious about its history. Well, it's an old colonial country. What does it look like exactly? And the Industrial Revolution was relatively early, right? Painters, musicians, operas, whatever, it has got a lot of them, right? There are a lot of writers, so I knew some history, in fact, I was very curious about this country” (Ruth).</i></li> </ul>
	Confirmation (films, books, stories, arts and museums, future educational purposes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“We all love Harry Potter! One friend is also a fan of Sherlock Holmes, so we also went to his and his spots. Sherlock Holmes attractions in Fall London” (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>“We knew museums and art galleries in London were very famous, and these cultural relics, so we wanted to see and learn something” (Jennie).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Me and my wife have been many countries in Europe such as Austria, Hungary, where have lots of castles. We heard the UK has lots of castles as well, so we wanted to see differences” (Gary).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I always want to study in the UK in the future, I felt it might be better to be familiar with the environment in advance, so I went to travel first” (Oliver).</i></li> </ul>
Perceptions	Destination attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“Before arriving in United Kingdom, I felt that the whole country was rainy a lot, a bit dark” (Anna).</i></li> </ul>

<p>(Architecture, food, weather)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I think it is a country with a long history, I have seen the scenery of United Kingdom in films, and the main impression of United Kingdom's scenery and cities is classical, with many castles and gorgeous buildings” (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Fish &amp; Chips”; ‘Burger and lobster” (Cathy).</i></li> </ul>
<p>Local characteristics (British people, accent, traditions, monarchy)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“The first impression must be gentlemen and British accent, because our education is American accent, so it feels different and British accent sound serious” (Ella).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The first impression includes royal family like they have the queen, aristocrats, gentlemen, feels they are traditional” (Jordie).</i></li> <li>- <i>“British people are very polite, but I felt that they are also cold and distanced” (Zoe).</i></li> <li>- <i>“My impression is that men have to wear big hats, and they have to carry an umbrella all the time, while ladies’ hats are more elaborate. If you don't wear a hat, you can't participate in normal activities. The general feeling is that the United Kingdom is a more gentlemanly country” (Harry).</i></li> </ul>
<p>World-famous institutions (arts, museums, sports, education)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“London! BIG CITY!” (Mary).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Famous education, it is a place that all students yearn for” (Edward).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The UK has a nickname as ‘the empire on which the sun never sets’” (Gary) (Jack).</i></li> <li>- <i>“British museum is world famous” (Grace)</i></li> <li>- <i>“Football is also a typical the UK’s culture. For example, Manchester United football club is famous” (Jodie).</i></li> </ul>

## Cognition 2

	Theme Name	Subthemes (Category)	Codes (Examples)
<b>Interacting</b>	Attractions	Architecture (shape, ancient buildings, size, designs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I remember the Oxford library and its building looks so pretty” (Cathy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I think Bath and Oxford can quite reflect the British culture in my impressions. It's just that he has a lot of ancient buildings” (Grace).</i></li> <li>- <i>“First of all, I think buildings were nice on Regent Street, it is beautiful, it feels like I was in a movie scene” (Grace).</i></li> <li>- <i>“...and its level of finesse is surprised, it doesn't just pile bricks and bricks like this. Rather there are many carving designs on these buildings, and I like them very much” (Jonny).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Oh! And the architectures, it was different style from Chinese ones, and I think it was so nice” (Oliver).</i></li> </ul>
		History & Cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I think the most interesting place is the British Museum, because I love Egypt culture very much, and in the Egypt section of the museum, I saw mummies and cuneiform” (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Coupled with his whole historical atmosphere, it makes people feel particularly shocked. I do feel that this is very rare in China” (Edward).</i></li> <li>- <i>“One is an international metropolis, which is orderly, and the other is that it still has a lot of history and culture. Including this British Museum, and then these few churches, you will be able to make you linger and forget” (Harry).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Its historical accumulation is different from other cities. Because it is a city with a very strong academic atmosphere” (Jack).</i></li> </ul>

		Natural environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>"It's very comfortable, because Shanghai has more than 40 degrees in summer, and United Kingdom is actually not so hot at that time" (Cathy).</i></li> <li>- <i>"I remember we walked around Buckingham Palace; the air is very fresh, the sky is very blue, really good environment" (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>"I think it rained a lot when I was in London and Oxford, and I think it's very foggy in London, so I didn't really see the blue sky" (Grace).</i></li> <li>- <i>"I think the UK has a characteristic, that is, the city and nature are relatively integrated. There are a lot of pigeons and seagulls in cities, and then in big cities like London, there are big parks as well" (Ruth).</i></li> </ul>
	Infrastructures	Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>"I will talk about the food first. Emm...I don't have anything to say about the food, I don't like it" (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>"It is honestly not tasty at all, and their food do not have many choices" (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>"We tried for a week, then we cannot bear it, so we bought from supermarkets and cooked in Airbnb" (Jack)</i></li> <li>- <i>"It was okay, but I can only have it when I stayed there, I cannot get used to it" (Jasmine).</i></li> <li>- <i>"They served with chips every meal! I got PTSD for chips when I got back to China!" (Cathy).</i></li> <li>- <i>"We had to look for Chinese restaurants, but even Chinese restaurants were not authentic in the UK" (Oliver).</i></li> <li>- <i>"I think it's a bit different, and a lot of food are foreign. Fish and chips, which everyone will definitely try. But maybe eat it once or twice, and that's it. And then the rest may be Asian, maybe after a few days, I will still want to find small restaurant that meets the Asian taste" (Mike).</i></li> </ul>

		Hotels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I remember their hotels were not equipped with any air conditioning. I was very surprised; I went to the reception to ask them, and they were friendly saying it was quite cold at night” (Cathy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I think the accommodation conditions were good, and the price is not very expensive.” (Peter).</i></li> <li>- <i>“For example, I stayed in an Airbnb, and it doesn’t have air conditioning. It was very hot in the summer; and it was very torturous” (Jonny).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The hotel I lived at that time, any detail of the creation, you can actually learn from it. It was the kind of influence that can penetrate into the bone marrow. It had that kind of design, which was the big floor-to-ceiling window, and then you could see the scenery outside at a glance, and the kind of plants outside, including the pruning, all felt like the kind of exquisiteness of the withered guest, that is, it was very fresh, and some small details were obtained very carefully” (Kelly).</i></li> <li>- <i>“They are not as perfect as those in China. For example, their hotels don’t provide slippers, neither of these toiletries” (Oliver).</i></li> <li>- <i>“It was overall comfortable, we had two families in a group, so we booked for a whole house, it was comfortable stay” (Luke).</i></li> </ul>
		Transportations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“Their trains were old, not as quick as our ones in China” (Sherry).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Apart from the subway, we were shocked by their train’s delays. I don’t know why their concept of time is wrong. Anyway, it is very inaccurate. It’s just that all their traffic is not very punctual” (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I think overall was convenient, I didn’t encounter any delays or anything” (Jasmine).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I think the tubes in London was okay. Basically, I remember there is a tube line in London called</i></li> </ul>

		<p><i>Jubilee that it can go all the famous attractions. Of course, its subway is very old, and I think the signal is not good, and it is not particularly convenient” (Oliver).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“Same as their tubes that they do not have air conditioning. It was the World Cup, and there is no signal that what the situation was like to check on the tubes in the live World Cup” (Jonny).</i></li> </ul>
Social Environment	Local quality of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“And their tubes don’t have security check, which made me feel scary and unsafe” (Anna).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I think it was quite expensive for food in the UK, especially London” (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The stuff in the supermarkets looked good conditions, their vegetables were expensive, but their milk were cheap” (Edward).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I particularly like their market, and I can really find a lot of little antiques that you can't see from the outside, and then it's fun, but it feels very old. I don't know if it's real or fake, but I was quite happy when I bought it” (Jasmine).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Most things are more expensive than in China, but if measure in pound, it was actually ok, because the exchange rate for the British pounds were too high” (Jordie).</i></li> </ul>
	Residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“They were nice; they would talk to you even you don’t speak English” (Anna).</i></li> <li>- <i>“And I liked Bath a lot. There's a square next to that church, and then there's actually a lot of street performers over there, I just love that atmosphere. Spent an afternoon sitting in that square, and a coffee shop” (Cathy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“We lived in a house, that host was very welcoming, he invited us to see his garden views” (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“British people were very welcoming, because we cannot speak English, but we used gestures to ask for directions, they were also very glad to answer and help us. Especially, they would smile and</i></li> </ul>

			<p><i>say hi to you on the way as well” (Harry).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I have been helped by British people lots of times during the trip. When I was in York, we took the bus to the Lake District, and the luggage I was carrying was very heavy, and the bus driver offered to carry the luggage for me” (Jennie).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Before the trip, I was actually quite nervous, and I felt that I was not familiar with their life, whether everyone was not very enthusiastic. But in fact, I found that British were really welcoming, and they would smile at you and said hi when they walk on the road” (Zoe).</i></li> </ul>
		Shopping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“Bicester Village is the first shopping place that recommended” (Edward).</i></li> <li>- <i>“You know, Burberry is very famous, and the UK is famous for its tartan. So, I bought several Scottish scarves for gifts” (Zoe).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Shopping in London could be very interesting, and I can spend whole day doing that. It was quite the same as the New York feel. The price was also good, the shopping experience was also good, there were many small shops that can be visited, and there are also many top luxury shopping malls” (Jennie).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I bought a couple of sweatshirts in the UK. I also bought the classic scarf, because I think that the tartan is a symbol for the UK” (Jasmine).</i></li> <li>- <i>“We went to the shopping mall called Selfridges, they had sales who could speak Chinese, so it was a good experience to shopping in the UK, as there is no language barriers” (Grace).</i></li> </ul>

<b>Observing</b>	<b>Natural Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“The city and streets were quite dirty and messy, with birds’ poo everywhere” (Gary).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I went on Christmas time; it was a good impression of their streets and every decoration” (Mary).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The view is beautiful and relaxing, and sometimes even if you don't do anything, just sitting by the river or in the park feels very laid-back. There are many attractions that have been seen in some movies or photos, but the actual experience is still very different, and the reality is even more shocking” (Oliver).</i></li> <li>- <i>“The sky was very blue, and the air was fresh, feels like a very good natural environment” (Ruth).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I like their parks; it was green and river besides, and swans etc. it was just a very beautiful scene like in a movie” (Zoe).</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Social Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“I was impressed that it was very common to see British not using umbrella even was raining heavily” (Anna).</i></li> <li>- <i>“But I prefer their pace of life. When we were in London, we could see a lot of people having afternoon tea at 3 p.m. You can feel their relax life” (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“You see some of them drink in the bar at noon or night almost anytime. And then there were lots of people on Saturday and Sunday out for shopping, enjoying the sunshine drinking coffed. It feels that their work is very comfortable. You don't have to work overtime on weekends like we do” (Edward).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I was impressed to see how a harmony society about people and pets, they treat dogs as their babies not just pets. And dogs are also very good to people, they don't bark or hurt people. Also, some shops have prepared water and biscuits for dogs, that was honestly so good” (Ella).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I found British people followed rules very strictly in mind, which is very good. For example, the traffic light, they would wait until green lights even there was no cars” (Jack).</i></li> <li>- <i>“They were actually called gentleman; their speaking volume are low and not speaking a lot” (Penny).</i></li> </ul>

### Cognition 3

Theme Name	Codes (Examples)
Future Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“Yes, it was a really comfortable journey, relaxing and chill, I would want to go back to Bath again” (Anna).</i></li> <li>- <i>“If I have chance to revisit, I would like to stay longer to get more involved in local life” (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I didn’t have chance to visit many places, I want to revisit after Covid-19, for these cities in the south of the UK” (Cindy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I can revisit after I got retired, taking my grandchildren and families” (Jack).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I want to stay in the UK after retired!” (Cathy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I mean it is a good place for visit, but we cannot stay there for long, I don’t think we can get involved in their life. You know, it’s just different. But I would like to visit as a tourist” (Sherry).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Of course, I would love to see more nice views. I heard there is lots of private gardens and cute towns, like Downton Abbey, Cotswold etc. I want to see those” (Vicky).</i></li> </ul>
Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“Yes, we shared with friends about all the experiences, both positive and negative. We didn’t write any blogs or anything, just talked in conversations” (Betty).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I like taking photos with my camera, so I shared on the social media and people asked me where it is etc” (Cathy).</i></li> <li>- <i>“No, I don’t share on media. You know, managers cannot show too much about their private life, so I just talked to friends, not showing off” (Jack).</i></li> <li>- <i>“You know, if you post a lot on media or talked too much about it, people just think you are showing off, so I didn’t post any. Also, I am not young generation now, just talk to good friends is enough” (Ruth).</i></li> <li>- <i>“I tried to talk about it to people, but some didn’t even believe it, they said I was being exaggerated, so I only talked when people asked for suggestions” (Penny).</i></li> <li>- <i>“Yes, I made Vlog to friends, family and some on media as well” (Zoe).</i></li> </ul>

## **Appendix 8 Relevant Publication & Awards**

### **Publication**

Conference Proceedings: “*Unpacking Tourist Experience: A Case Study of Chinese Tourists Visiting the UK.*” World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology. URL: <https://publications.waset.org/social-and-business-sciences>.

### **Awards**

#### **Jun 2024 Prize for Communication, PhD Showcase Competition**

PhD showcase competition offers an opportunity for PhD candidates share their creative pieces and present on their research.

My topic is ‘A realist investigation of mechanisms in tourist experience: A case of outbound Chinese tourists to the UK’. My creative poster was an idea from travel magazine cover. I was awarded both the Prize for Communication and People’s Choice.

#### **Jun 2023 Winner, 3MT Competition**

3MT competition increases PhD researchers’ capacity to effectively explain their research in three minutes, in a language appropriate to a non-specialist audience.

My presentation topic is ‘A realist investigation of mechanisms in tourist experience: A case of outbound Chinese tourists to the UK.’ I was awarded both the Winner and People’s Choice.

#### **May 2023 Best Presentation Award, International Conference on tourism and Hospitality Studies**

Presentation title: ‘Unpacking Tourist Experience: A Case Study of Chinese Tourists Visiting the UK’.