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ARTICLE



## Tourism studies is a geopolitical instrument: Conferences, Confucius Institutes, and 'the Chinese Dream'

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### ABSTRACT

Tourism scholarship can advance the multifarious geopolitical projects of state actors and aligned commercial entities. Such effects are achieved not only through tourism itself, but through the production and circulation of politically-inflected forms of knowledge. Such work is conducted by tourism scholars and allied industry and state actors. A first-person account of a 2017 tourism studies conference held at an Australian university demonstrates the argument by examining the ways in which scholars, industry, and state actors navigated and facilitated the geopolitical and geoeconomic agendas of not only domestic but potentially contentious international regimes. The conference received financial and administrative support from state, industry, and academic agencies from both Australia and China. Hosted by the Griffith Institute for Tourism (GIFT) and the Griffith University's Tourism Confucius Institute (TCI), the conference was the third in a series of 'East-West Dialogues on Tourism and the Chinese Dream'. By actively positioning the international collaboration within the rhetorical bounds of the 'Chinese Dream', and by conducting the conference in collaboration with the Tourism Confucius Institute, a quasi-educational operation directly managed by the Chinese party-state, the Australian and international tourism academy implicitly supported the geopolitical designs of the Chinese Communist Party. Renewed attention to academic ethics and increased areal expertise are a necessary response, especially in a time of global geopolitical instability and structural economic transformation in the academy.

### 摘要

旅游学术可以促进国家行为者和结盟的商业实体的多种多样的地缘政治项目。这种影响不仅通过旅游业本身,而且通过具有政治影响的知识生产和流通来实现。这些工作是由旅游学者、相关产业和国家行动者运作的。本文以第一人称叙述了澳大利亚一所大学举行的2017年旅游研究会议,表明学者、行业人士和国家行动者在引导和推动地缘政治和地缘经济议程方面的方式,不仅包括国内的,还包括潜在的有争议的国际制度。会议得到了来自澳大利亚和中国的国家、行业和学术机构的财政和行政支持。此次会议由格里菲斯旅游学院(GIFT)和格里菲斯大学旅游孔子学院(TCI)共同主办,是旅游与中国梦的东西方对话'系列活动的第三次会议。通过积极定位修辞色彩的国际合作的'中国梦',并与旅游孔子学院合作运作这个旅游会议,直接由中国党政,澳大利亚及国际旅游研究院运作准教育运作暗中支持中国共产党的地缘政治设计。重新

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### 关键词

旅游研究; 地缘政治; 中国; 中国梦; 孔子学院; 澳大利亚; 中澳关系; 旅游地缘政治; 知识生产

重视学术道德和增加领域专业知识是一种必要的反应,特别是在该学院全球地缘政治不稳定和经济结构转型之际。

## Introduction

Tourism scholarship can advance the multifarious geopolitical projects of state actors and aligned commercial entities. This owes not only to tourism's intrinsic political potency, but to its development and promotion by tourism scholars and allied industry and state actors via the production and circulation of knowledge. To theorize this point, this article builds on past research that treats tourism as a technology of state territorialization—i.e. as a mode of social and spatial ordering that produces tourists and state territory as effects of power—to take a further reflexive step to argue that the transnational knowledge production and circulation conducted by tourism *scholars* plays a key part in such practices. In so doing, scholars, intentionally or not, can implicitly and explicitly advance the various territorial and 'soft power' projects of state actors and aligned commercial entities.

As a case study, I analyze a tourism studies conference held in 2017 by an Australian university in collaboration with Chinese researchers and funding agencies. This conference received financial and administrative support from state, industry, and academic agencies from both countries. Hosted by the Griffith Institute for Tourism (GIFT) and the Griffith University's Tourism Confucius Institute (TCI), this conference was the third in a series of 'East-West Dialogues on Tourism and the Chinese Dream'. The first round was held in Griffith University in 2014 and the second at Shanghai Normal University in 2016. In addition to providing a platform research presentations and panels, these occasions were, like many academic conferences, also an opportunity for business and political networking. To gather thick ethnographic data on this event, I participated as a regular attendee. Needless to say, like all ethnographically-informed articles, this is an account of one particular person's experience of an event, among many other possible interpretive approaches. In addition to presenting my own paper on a conference-appropriate topic, I conducted both formal and informal interviews with 16 organizers, scholars, industry representatives, and government officials, as well as volunteers, staff, and other attendees. In line with the research protocol reviewed in advance by my university ethics board, I disclosed my interest in researching the conference itself as an example of 'international collaboration' to informants as part of my interview process. Depending on their personal preferences and the relative publicness of the spaces in which data was collected, some informants are quoted by name, while others are anonymized.

The article begins with a discussion of the geopolitical instrumentality of tourism studies in general, before providing a genealogy of the 'Chinese Dream' discourse and its embedding in tourism studies. It then turns to an analysis of the conference itself and of its organizing bodies, before considering the broader political implications and questions raised by this and similar international collaborations. Ultimately, I argue that by actively positioning the research collaboration within the rhetorical bounds of the 'Chinese Dream' and by conducting the conference together with a quasi-

educational organization directly overseen by Chinese party-state organizations, the international tourism academy's participation directly supported the geopolitical designs of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This raises broader intellectual, political, and ethical questions about researcher reflexivity and positionality that have yet to be adequately addressed by the global tourism academy, and that are likely to assume increasing importance as the CCP accelerates its involvement in and funding of international academic research.

### The geopolitics of tourism studies and the 'Chinese Dream'

Geopolitics is a small but growing focus of scholarship conducted under the flag of 'tourism studies'. Over the years, it has received increasing attention in both tourism journal and book publications (Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019; Hall, 1994; Hannam, 2013; Kim, Prideaux, & Timothy, 2016; Rowen, 2014, 2016; Timothy, 2004). The geopolitics of tourism has also been addressed in adjacent social science and area studies forums (Gillen, 2014; Mathews, 1975; Norum, Mostafanezhad, & Sebro, 2016; Park, 2005; Richter, 1983). Such work has directly addressed the impact of violence (or peace-making) and borders on tourist flows and vice versa (Becken & Carmignani, 2016; D'Amore, 1988; Farmaki, 2017; Jafari, 1989; Litvin, 1998), as well as the international political economy of tourism more generally (Britton, 1991; Salazar, 2005). Although these are useful contributions, what has received little attention is *the geopolitical work conducted by tourism scholars* themselves, whether intentionally, implicitly, or unwittingly, and *the geopolitical effects of tourism scholarship* in general.

The work of tourism scholarship—including its capacity to conjure, consolidate, and propagate territorial demarcations and social, cultural, and political categories—has proven useful to a wide array of state and market actors, as attested to by the proliferation of academic tourism research centers, public-private partnerships, and corporate consultancies. Some tourism scholars have periodically engaged in disciplinary self-evaluations and indulged in programmatic calls for, among other things, 'post-disciplinary' or postcolonial inquiry (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007; Coles, Hall, & Duval, 2006; Michael Hall & Tucker, 2004), but there has been little systematic research on the geopolitical implications of some of tourism studies' most fundamental geographical assumptions and practices, let alone the broader political commitments and practices of particular scholars or institutions.

Although tourism's potential social and environmental risks have certainly received scholarly attention, prompting the emergence of various cautionary approaches (Jafari, 2001) to promoting well-being or 'sustainability', tourism scholars have had relatively little to say about the geopolitical implications of their work. Indeed, some of tourism studies' most basic, yet unavoidably geopolitical, practices include the reification of divisions between domestic and international spaces, and the segmentation of markets based on sending or receiving states or ethnic groups which are themselves often contested categories.

Tourism studies' general lack of geopolitical reflexivity, with a few notable exceptions, is all the more striking when the field is compared to other social science and area studies communities, which have grappled with such issues for decades. For

example, within anthropology and geography, particularly contentious and widely debated issues have included ideological and technical support for colonial projects and other forms of geopolitical violence. Many participating scholars, both past and contemporary, have received intense scrutiny and even censure from within their own disciplinary communities. Such criticism and soul-searching, part of what has been more broadly called the 'critical' or 'reflexive' turns, attends to both conceptual and ethical dimensions.

A full interrogation of the geopolitical problematics of tourism theory is beyond the conceptual scope of this article, but their salience should signal caution especially for scholars attempting to do not only theoretical work, but well-informed empirical work about regions with which they are unfamiliar. It is impossible for a single scholar to have a firm grasp of not only a body of theory and method, but of their possible applications across a world of cultural, social, and political difference. Therefore, research collaborations between area specialists and funding bodies, and theoretically or methodologically sophisticated (or simply well-placed and widely-published) tourism scholars are an understandably common way to compensate. However, these diverse actors' personal, political, and intellectual agendas may not be entirely visible, let alone convergent, which demands careful attention to the ethical and intellectual implications and trade-offs of such collaborations. For example, a senior Chinese tourism scholar once told me that advocacy for the political unification of mainland China and Taiwan was a 'precondition' to our pursuing any collaborative work on tourism between the two polities. However, I am uncertain if this scholar's many previous co-authors had been explicitly informed of such an agenda, especially those who were not area specialists and therefore possibly inattentive to the institutional or ideological imperatives that can drive such research projects.

With this in mind, I now turn to the history, geopolitical underpinnings and agenda of the 'Tourism and the Chinese Dream' project, as a case study conjoining tourism and areal studies, before presenting an ethnographically-informed analysis of the conference, its geopolitical effects, and its wider context. I will begin first by examining the broader history and geopolitical instrumentality of the 'Chinese Dream' itself, before tracing its transit into tourism studies. As such, it is necessary to explore not only the ambiguities of the 'Chinese Dream' and the soft power potential of tourism and tourism studies as constituting geopolitical resources in their own right, but also to consider the particular actors facilitating their cross-fertilization, who in this case include international scholars and the Confucius Institute.

### ***The geopolitical instrumentality of the 'Chinese Dream'***

International Anglophone tourism scholarship effectively incorporated the language of the 'Chinese Dream' via publications spawned by several conferences that specifically preceded and enabled the conference spotlighted in this article's case study (Weaver, 2015; Weaver et al., 2015). These publications would have both benefitted from and been problematized by greater attention to the historical conditions and political resources that Chinese leader Xi Jinping has drawn upon in the proclamation of the

Dream as a 'master narrative' to pursue his policy agenda both within and beyond China (Mahoney, 2014).

'The Chinese Dream' was first announced by Xi during his first month as the chairman of the Communist Chinese Party, in November 2012. Although the phrase had already been formulated by Chinese intellectuals and policy makers in the years prior, its embrace by the head of state repositioned it as a discursive resource with major implications for national redefinition, and domestic and foreign policy (Callahan, 2015b, p. 222). Xi's Chinese Dream, as he elaborated later, calls for the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', which requires China and its partners to 'to make the country prosperous and strong, rejuvenate the nation, and make the people happy' (Xi, 2014, p. 6).

While 'The Chinese Dream' points positively to prosperity and greatness, international relations scholar William Callahan has argued that it also has a negative aspect implicitly intended to criticize the countervailing ideals of other sorts of dreams: 'The point of China Dream policy ... is not only to tell people what they can dream, but more importantly, what they cannot dream: the negative soft power strategy ... serves to exclude many individual dreams, the constitutional dream, the American dream and so on' (Callahan, 2015b, p. 224). This dual quality is evident from Xi's choice of sites for the announcement of the 'Dream': the 'Road to Rejuvenation' exhibit of China's National History Museum, a site which showcases China's purported, '5,000 years of glorious civilization, but also its 170 years of humiliation where 'capitalist imperialist powers invaded and plundered China', and where Xi said he 'learned deep historical lessons'. Xi's interpretation consistently emphasizes the role and destiny of the nation over that of the individual: 'History informs us that each person's future and destiny are closely linked to those of their country and nation. One can do well only when one's country and nation do well' (Xi, 2014, p. 4). Alternative visions of the China Dream—for example, the Guangzhou-based Southern Weekly newspaper 2013 New Year editorial 'dream for freedom and constitutional government'—were forcibly censored and re-written into calls for greater party-state centralization (Yuen, 2013).

The 'Chinese Dream' draws both on the reconstruction of ancient Chinese traditions of 'harmony' favored by his predecessor, Hu Jintao, as well as the more modern nationalist calls of Mao Zedong for China to surpass the US in economic strength. Although its imaginative scope is vast, and its recognizably parallel structure with a globally-recognized confection like the 'American Dream' gives it an uncanny appeal, historical reviews suggest that the 'Chinese Dream' is but one more slogan in a series of 'master narratives' designed to legitimize and promote the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As put by political scientist Zheng Wang, 'Xi's Chinese Dream narrative is like an old wine in a new bottle with the dream's name replacing [past leaders] Jiang and Hu's national rejuvenation, Deng's invigoration of China, and Mao's realization of socialism and communism'. While the exact wording has changed, there is continuity in these iterations: '... the most important message of these narratives from different periods is the same: the Party wants its people to believe that only under the leadership of the CCP can the dream of a better life be realized' (Wang, 2014, p. 7).

This uneasy transnational blend of old and new slogans, in parallel with the assumed continuity of party-state rule, has considerable ideological implications for

both domestic and foreign policy, seen clearly through the international promotion of the 'Chinese Dream'. Repeated at home and abroad, this phrase has become a signature slogan of his administration. Xi's official book on the Chinese Dream suggests that it 'not only enriches the Chinese people, but also benefits the people of the world'. Foreign Minister Wang Yi presented the China Dream as Xi Jinping's 'key conceptual innovation in foreign affairs, which led to a successful year for Chinese diplomacy in 2013'. Influential Chinese public intellectuals, some of whom had already advocated for similar stance, have also been quick to embrace this formulation, calling for a 'China dream/world dream', with 'China leading the rise of the Global South against the West' in which it will "'leap forward" to overtake the United States in a "great reversal" of power in which "American hegemony" will be replaced by a World of Great Harmony controlled by the Global South' (Callahan, 2015a, pp. 15–16). As a 'master narrative', it articulates both domestic and global ambitions and subsumes them under an ethno-national flag that can be marshaled by the Chinese Communist Party and its organs. China's former ambassador to the United Kingdom, Ma Zhengang, declared, 'China's dream is the world's dream', a claim that was echoed uncannily throughout the Tourism Studies and the Chinese Dream conference.

### ***The [tourism] Confucius Institute as vehicle of 'the Chinese Dream'***

Strikingly, 'The Chinese Dream' has been introduced to international tourism scholarship not by Chinese scholars or China area specialists, but by international scholars who have pursued collaborations with China-based scholars and funding agencies. These scholars have also collaborated with the Tourism Confucius Institute (TCI) at Griffith University, one of a growing network of PRC-administered language training and cultural influence centers based in universities across the globe. Together, Griffith University scholars and the TCI hosted the conference of this case study.

Although Griffith University's Tourism Confucius Institute is the first tourism-themed Confucius Institute, it is but one of many arms of the Confucius Institutes (CI), the 'brightest brand of China's soft power', in the words of its founding director-general, Vice-minister Xu Lin (Callahan, 2015b, p. 225). First established in 2004, the CIs have been depicted by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins as 'an instrument of the party state operating as an international pedagogical organization' (Sahlins, 2013). They have since been further rearticulated as key sites for the promotion of the 'Chinese Dream'. In words of CI council chairperson, Liu Yandong, a Politburo member and Vice Premier of the State Council of China, 'The Confucius Institute, as an effective vehicle for cultural exchanges and important platform for reinforcing international friendships, is where the China Dream, the dreams of all countries and the world dream come to convergence' (quoted in Lahtinen, 2015, p. 212).

Nominally a cultural and educational promotion agency, the CI is supervised by party officials, however variably implemented in practice. Although the CI parent organization, Guojia Hanban (state management of Chinese), is affiliated with the Ministry of Education, it is managed by a council comprised of officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Council Information Office (also known as the Office of Overseas Propaganda), and ten other ministries and commissions (Lahtinen,



2015). This forms a major cultural arm for the implementation of political initiatives, is backed with a significant financial budget (US\$189 million as early as 2009), and is aimed at a variety of targets (Link, 2017). In the words of CCP Politburo Member and Minister of Propaganda, Liu Yunshan, to his staff in a talk on 'cultural battlegrounds' in 2010, 'We should actively carry out international propaganda battles on issues such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, human rights, and Falun Gong. Our strategy is to proactively take our culture abroad... We should do well in establishing and operating overseas cultural centers and Confucius Institutes' (Sahlins, 2015, p. 6).

Distinct from the cultural promotion strategies of the UK's British Council or Germany's Goethe Institute, which set up outposts in urban centers outside of universities, the CIs are almost always incorporated within foreign educational institutions, where they run classes (sometimes for university course credit), and conduct a variety of activities in collaboration with staff and faculty. The CIs' placements within international public and private universities have turned them into lightning rods for controversy about China's soft power campaigns. Critics have expressed fears that CIs may be used for direct surveillance or other explicitly nefarious activities. Evidence for this remains largely anecdotal, but self-censorship of sensitive topics is a much likelier outcome for affiliated or affected scholars—as implied by Minister Liu's quote above, discussions of challenging issues like Tibet, Taiwan, or 'democracy' and 'human rights' is spun in a 'politically correct' fashion, if not forbidden outright (Dirlik, 2014). As part of its declared activities, CIs 'monitor content in everything from language textbooks to lectures and cultural programs' and 'shape the views of foreigners, especially young foreigners, by introducing them to China—its language, its traditional civilization, and, seamlessly, a version of its modern life that the Communist Party wishes to put forward' (Link, 2017, pp. 166–167).

Despite the concerns and criticisms of some prominent scholars, Hanban's offer of free Chinese language tuition and university access to other Chinese political and commercial networks and resources has proven appealing to many international institutions. Chinese universities have likewise been enticed by the opportunity to set up a foothold and send faculty and staff to run CIs in international universities, which has led to a long application queue that can be expedited by demonstrating the strategic value of a particular partnership arrangement. This has led to the creation of themed CIs, including the Tourism Confucius Institute, based at the Griffith's Gold Coast campus, where tourism research was promoted as one of the university's strengths.

According to interviews with several senior current and past Griffith professors, the university's establishment of its TCI was neither smooth nor obvious. Although Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou had a longstanding relationship with Griffith, its efforts in the 2000s to establish a Confucius Institute had been quashed by Griffith's then vice-chancellor, who was concerned about the reputational risk of what was already viewed as a politically-suspect initiative. According to interviews with several involved faculty, conditions changed after Ian O'Connor was appointed as vice-Chancellor and President and set greater engagement with China as a university-wide strategic direction.<sup>1</sup> Enrollment of Chinese students soared, as happened in many Australian universities.

As part of its China-focused development strategy, Griffith looked to establish a Confucius Institute, but had difficulty finding a candidate Chinese partner university that would not have to wait in a long queue for approval from Chinese officials. The



impasse was solved by the personal involvement of the director of a major China-focused consulting company which provides services to Griffith and many other Australian universities. The company director, who had a strong personal connection to the China University of Mining and Technology (CUMT), reasoned that Australia's significant tourism assets and Griffith's tourism studies strengths would provide unique appeal to the leader of Hanban, the ministry that oversees the Confucius Institute, and approached CUMT's president. The tactic proved successful and the TCI was set up soon after, despite the unlikely pairing of mining and tourism faculties. The TCI's strategic importance was highlighted at its groundlaying ceremony by the participation of an unusually high-level political visitor, Jia Qingling, a member of the CCP's Standing Committee. The TCI's inaugural director was Colin Mackerras, a scholar of Chinese theater who was personally thanked in Australia's Parliament by Xi Jinping for his many years supporting Australia-China relations. He was succeeded after one year by Leong Liew, a political economist originally from Malaysia. CUMT has sent two of its own professors as partner directors, while the acting head of the institute, tourism scholar Ding Peiyi, has been involved since its inception.

The opening of the TCI was followed by the establishment of GIFT, also at Griffith's Gold Coast Campus, which was established in 2014 with Susanne Becken as its inaugural director. Featuring its own roster of researchers as well as affiliated faculty from other departments, GIFT drew additional staff from an older tourism-focused unit at the university. Outbound Chinese tourism was a research focus from GIFT's inception, while the rest of its strategic orientation was partially determined by an advisory board chaired by 'tourism industry heavyweight' and Griffith University lecturer, Don Morris (Ausleisure, 2014). On its homepage, in addition to claiming a commitment to the 'triple bottom line' concept of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, GIFT also listed 'Soft power, travel and the Chinese Dream' as an 'Area of Expertise' throughout 2017 and 2018.

Based on interviews with several participating scholars, the initial idea to link tourism with the 'Chinese Dream' arose either independently or during conversations between GIFT scholars, TCI deputy director Ding Peiyi, and David Weaver, a full professor in Griffith's Department of Tourism, Hotel, Leisure, and Sports Management, which is located down the hall from GIFT's office. According to an emailed communication from Weaver, 'In 2013 or 2014 I started to think about the obvious connections between the 'Chinese Dream' and tourism, and came to realise that no one had linked them before. It therefore seemed to be a good theme for GIFT's first international tourism conference. That event, and an early article on the subject I wrote, attracted attention in China, and led to a number of speaking invitations. I think that many of my Chinese colleagues find it interesting that it was a Westerner who made this link. Since then I've switching my research focus increasingly to China, where I've been developing a good working relationship with colleagues who are eager to publish in top tier English language journals to improve their international academic standing. They can benefit and learn from my long years of experience as a tourism researcher, while I am gaining a lot of knowledge about the Chinese research and cultural environments. In 2017 I was very fortunate to be awarded a Yangtze River Scholarship, China's top academic award, and this has allowed me to become even more embedded as a researcher of Chinese tourism. This is especially relevant since

President Xi's keynote speech at the recent 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of China late last year, which prioritises a better quality of life for the Chinese people through poverty alleviation and development of an "eco-civilization", all of which can be facilitated by sustainable tourism'.

In November 2014, GIFT and the TCI hosted the 'G20 First East-West Dialogue on Tourism and the Chinese Dream', which coincide with the G20 Summit in Brisbane. Based on this, TCI organized Weaver and several collaborators at Griffith soon published reports on the conferences and advanced the 'Chinese Dream' as a 'framework for engagement' in two flagship journals, the *Annals of Tourism Research* (Weaver, 2015) and the *Journal of Travel Research* (Weaver et al., 2015). The following conference round, in September 2016, was titled 'Second East-West Dialogue on Tourism and Chinese Dream'. It was hosted by Shanghai Normal University in collaboration with Griffith, TCI, the China Tourism Academy, and the China Academy of Natural Resources, among other agencies. The Call for Papers began by asserting that, 'The initiation of 'Chinese dream' by Chinese President Xi Jinping accelerated the construction of an ecologically sustainable society'. These two conferences and their published outcomes enabled the 3<sup>rd</sup> conference in November 2017, on which the remainder of this paper will focus.

### **Articulating tourism with the 'Chinese Dream': analysis of the conference**

The 2017 'Third East West-Dialogue on Tourism and the Chinese Dream', subtitled 'Eco-civilisation: Managing tourism for sustainable growth', was announced by conference co-convenors, GIFT Director Susanne Becken and Tourism Confucius Institute Deputy Director Ding Peiyi. The organizers' welcome letter, which was released well in advance of the conference, positioned the event's themes in line with national and international discourses of sustainability and harmony, the temporal imaginaries of non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations, and uniquely state-driven imaginaries such as 'eco-civilization' and the 'China Dream'. Building on the work of the previous two conferences, it aimed specifically to link 'Sustainable Tourism for Development with the Chinese Government's efforts towards becoming an "Eco-Civilisation"'. The Call for Papers framed the conference themes and location as follows:

...This year's conference is especially important for two reasons. Firstly, the United Nations have declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors in the world, and has the potential to stimulate economic growth, create decent jobs, help preserve ecosystems, contribute to protecting cultural heritage, and support the peace building process. Secondly, 2017 is the China-Australia Year of Tourism, celebrating the close relationship between China and Australia and recognising the importance of the China market for Australia's tourism economy.

The conference addresses the challenging topic of 'Managing Tourism for Sustainable Growth'. President Xi Jinping introduced the concept of the 'China Dream' to highlight the aspirations of the Chinese people, and 'Eco-civilisation' as a form of development, an ethic, or blueprint for an environmentally harmonious compatible society. Given the increasing importance of Chinese outbound tourism around the world, the success of sustainable tourism is shaped by Chinese tourism trends. Thus, conference dialogue will link Sustainable Tourism for Development with the Chinese Government's efforts towards becoming an 'Eco-Civilisation'.

This conference provides a platform for tackling challenges and opportunities that arise from rapid tourism growth with a particular focus on the Asia Pacific region, and the China-Australia relationship. Building on the first two successful conferences, this event will further strengthen and broaden the connections between the academic and business communities in Australia and China, and within the region, through creating opportunities for intellectual, business, and cultural dialogues. This will enhance mutual understanding and engagement between the two countries at a time when geopolitical interests are creating divisions.

The Gold Coast is the perfect location for this conference. It receives almost half a million Chinese visitors per year. In a recent Ctrip survey, the Gold Coast was voted as the favourite Australian holiday destination by Chinese travellers, and the only Western destination to make the global top ten list. Eco-civilization, sustainable tourism development and China-Australia relations are topics of great importance to Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia and China ...

Such narrative framing directed the intellectual production of participating scholars, businesses, and institutions, partially determining the permissible language and political position of potential publications and other outcomes. The effectiveness of this framing is demonstrated in the following sub-sections, which examine the specific and contingent ways in which institutional and personal actors came together to reinforce old narratives and produce new ones.

These narratives were produced over took place over two days, largely inside the Gold Coast Surfers Paradise Marriott Hotel. The event featured presentations from leading Australian industry representatives, including the trade groups Tourism Australia, Gold Coast Tourism, Tourism Transport Forum, the Pacific Asia Travel Association and the Mantra Group; Chinese state actors including the PRC vice-consul; and a variety of academics and other actors that blur these distinctions, such as the head of the China National Tourism Academy, which is a party-state research agency.

To further trace these interactions and connections, the following account is divided into two headings: conference structure, and narratives and representations. The focus on conference structure, including a discussion of state-industry-academic interaction, is meant to identify and illuminate the specific actors and networks involved in the production of knowledge at this event. The succeeding focus on representation draws from the field of critical geopolitics, an approach to scholarship which casts a 'critical perspective on the force of fusions of geographical knowledge and systems of power' (Dalby & Tuathail, 1996, p. 452). This approach attends not only to representations of China as a nation-state or of Chinese people as an imagined community, but of specific state and party organs, such as the TCI. As geopolitical narratives are inherently unstable and shifting formations, and can take years to consolidate and materialize, the conclusions are somewhat tentative due to the timeline of the analysis, which was conducted shortly after the conference. This timeliness is all the more reason for further reflection on the tourism academy's role in the framing of such high-stake political narratives.

### **Conference structure**

The conference was held at the Marriott Hotel in Surfer's Paradise, itself a popular destination for Gold Coast holidaymakers, including inbound Chinese tourists. Close collaboration between state, industry, and academic actors was evident from the start.

Informal proceedings began with an opening party on the patio of the hotel's sprawling pool, hosted by Paul Donovan, the chair of Gold Coast Tourism, who declared that 'China is the size of the prize'. Praising the Tourism Confucius 'Center' [sic] as a 'great development', he said, 'We need to do more in Australia to promote China. People here don't understand the history, the culture, the warmth. We need to do more to promote China. That's one of the missions I have in life'. His opening toast, including an admission that he had studied Chinese language for 3 months before giving up, was capably translated into Mandarin by his office staff.

The conference's formal program began the next morning in the hotel's meeting rooms. Griffith University Vice-Chancellor Ian O'Connor, wearing a bright red tie, introduced 2017 as the year of Australia-China tourism and noted the large and growing financial sums circulated in the bilateral tourism trade. He observed that Griffith hosts the world's only Tourism Confucius Institute and that GIFT is a 'world-leading institution'. Following this introduction, Bob East, CEO of the Mantra Group and the new chair of trade association, Tourism Australia, used his keynote speech to explore ways of 'unlocking this amazing potential that is the Chinese market'.

The keynote was followed by an expression of thanks from the PRC Vice-Consul, who noted that that 2017 was not only the year of Australia-China tourism but of 'sustainability' and also of the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. The Vice-Consul was followed by greetings from Dai Bin, the head of the China National Tourism Academy, a central party think tank and policy institute, who said, 'Welcome, Australians, to a beautiful and strong China. The Chinese dream will not just be our dream. It will be everyone's dream. This idea does not belong to China. It belongs to all of the world'. This marked the end of the conference introductions.

The program continued with a panel on tourist dispersal, chaired by GIFT director Suzanne Becken, before splitting into separate tracks on business and sustainability, with the former proving far more popular for Chinese attendees. The full conference then reconvened for a session on Geopolitics, moderated by TCI head and Griffith Professor of political economy, Leong Liew, and featuring talks by Dai Bin, Griffith Professor and the inaugural head of the TCI, Colin Mackerras, and representatives from the Tourism Transport Forum and Pacific Asia Travel Association. The afternoon's academic sessions ended with a summary round-up from David Simmons, a professor at Lincoln University in Christchurch, New Zealand, and also Suzanne Becken's past PhD advisor.

Day turned to night and climaxed with a hotel banquet dinner, resplendent with red lanterns and Chinese knot decorations and dancing, *pipa* (Chinese lute) performances and other live entertainment provided by the TCI. The dinner also featured a talk by Tourism Australia stalwart Don Morris, who had been involved in the initial ADS negotiations and was credited for the hugely successful television campaign that featured actor 'Crocodile Dundee' actor Paul Hogan. Morris began by flattering China's 'Five thousand years of history and 230 years of modernity' before asking 'What is tourism?' and how can it be marketed to China, and included lively slide titles like, 'The killer fact about the Chinese middle class', 'An army of Chinese millennials is reshaping global travel', and 'Australian Tourism Tsunami'. He then noted, 'I've never once met a Chinese who wasn't an absolutely lovely person. They make lovely

Australians'. The event then featured a Chinese-style lucky draw and awards event, with gifts from China Southern Airlines and other sponsors.

The conference's second and final day began with a talk to the full group about the new era of Chinese theme parks by Bao Jigang, the dean of the tourism program at Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, and the only other researcher besides David Weaver to have received a Yangtse River Scholarship. The conference then split into various sessions on everything from sustainability to destination marketing. My own paper, a critical look at the 'sustainability' of bilateral tourism and the conference itself, using the examples of China's tourism cuts to Taiwan and South Korea, was delivered during this period. Despite being the only paper to explicitly address geopolitical risk, it was scheduled in the 'sustainability' session alongside papers on land use planning. The conference ended with another summary session by David Simmons, who further rearticulated the Chinese Dream language into both indigenous New Zealand and global registers: 'We've all heard about the Chinese dream, but that shouldn't just be for China, the dream should be for the world. We should all be part of some idea of an ecocivilization. Can we borrow it and work on it as well?' He suggested that the idea complements a Maori term, 'kaitiake', which he glossed as 'stewardship'. He continued by talking about shared cultural affinities for food and 'bread-breaking', and concluded with a quote from former US Vice President and prominent environmentalist Al Gore.

The afternoon involved an optional field trip, at additional charge, to the Currumbin Wildlife Park, where participants could cavort with koalas and kangaroos. The group included myself and mostly Chinese academic delegates, and afforded an opportunity to conduct further informal interviews.

### ***Narratives and representations***

From start to finish, the conference recapitulated the conceptual connections between tourism, tourism studies and the 'Chinese Dream' narrative. By emphasizing the important links between tourism practices and tourism research, it consolidated discursive and social links that had been initiated by previous rounds of gatherings, research projects, and publications. This effect was primed and reinforced through the ideological framing of the 'Chinese Dream' discourse in the call for papers, the transnational circulation of the social, intellectual, and financial capital of conference participants and backers, and the creation of an affective atmosphere that celebrated China as a major outbound tourism market and unique 'eco-civilization'.

Such effects were achieved despite, or perhaps enhanced due to the fact that the majority of participating international scholars neither spoke Chinese nor had any significant research experience within China prior to this and previous rounds of 'Chinese Dream'-driven collaborations. As noted by political geographers Dalby and Tuathail, '[geopolitical] devices need not be very sophisticated to function in political discourse... repetition is an important facet of rendering particular understandings "common sense". The ideological production and reproduction of societies can, in part, be understood as the mundane repetition of particular geopolitical tropes which constrain the political imaginary' (Dalby & Tuathail, 1996, p. 452). Indeed, the mundane repetition of tropes, not just those of the 'Chinese Dream', but also of Australian

industry desire, such as 'China is the size of the prize', preceded and pervaded this conference. This latter phrase was repeated not only by Paul Donovan, of Gold Coast Tourism, but also by conference keynote speaker, Mantra CEO Bob East's, who observed asked, 'The macro tailwinds mean the size of the prize keeps growing... We in Australia are sitting in the heart of the world's new GDP center. We're in geographically fortunate place... We at Tourism Australia know China will be the biggest market for Australia. We know it already is in terms of spending. We know that the greatest migration in the world's history, China's urbanization, has unlocked the consumer class... This region, Gold Coast, is at the forefront of opening up the China market'.

Although some international tourism scholars had already advocated for the 'Chinese Dream' in well-regarded journals and subsequently received major fellowships in China, several Chinese scholars hesitated to frame their research in terms of the 'Chinese Dream', expressing privately to me that such rhetoric was unduly political. The prominent exception to this rule was Dai Bin, the head of the China Tourism Academy, a party official, who adopted the Chinese Dream rhetoric wholeheartedly. Dai's conference presentations followed the intellectual path blazed by David Weaver, the international scholar who had provided the most impactful intellectual advocacy for this position and had already received significant official accolades and research support in China following his previous work. Dai's approach makes sense, given his unique position as a scholar-official who presides over a government research and policy agency. This political sensibility was also reflected in the official register and cadence of his speech. In his introductory remarks, he said, 'We have to thank China, as tourism has become an important part of the Chinese dream. China's already become New Zealand's biggest market, and I hope one day it will also be the biggest for Australia. Welcome, Australians, to a beautiful and strong China. The Chinese dream will not just be our dream. It will be everyone's dream. This idea does not belong to China. It belongs to all of the world'.

Dai expanded on this theme later in the day during a session on Geopolitics, moderated by TCI head and Griffith Professor of political economy, Leong Liew, and also featuring presentations by Griffith Professor and the inaugural head of the TCI, Colin Mackerras, and representatives from the Tourism Transport Forum and Pacific Asia Travel Association. His talk was delivered in spoken Mandarin with English translations on projected slides, and began with a direct statement of the geopolitical foundations of bilateral tourism: 'China-Australia tourism cooperation is always delivered under the framework of comprehensive strategic partnership between the two Countries, and practical and in-depth tourism cooperation effectively stimulates the joint efforts for maintaining the partnership... the partnership has been strengthening in mutual respect and parallel advance while overcoming the differences in national situation and political system'.

Dai continued by pointing explicitly to the role of government officials, including himself, in directing tourism towards particular destinations: 'Chinese tourists' choice of destination would be immediately and detectably transformed when the Chinese government expressed the attitude toward the relevant event, or the People's Daily, CCTV, or the Xinhua News Agency had voices on the event... But the information search and demand would be quickly stimulated when the diplomatic relation

between China and the Destination Country or Region was improved, or when a high-level visit was effectively made. From this point, the most influential factor in Chinese tourist's choice of a destination is the strategic position of China's diplomatic relation with a destination Country or region: and the high-level mutual visit is the most profitable intellectual property (IP), the Key Opinion leader (KOL), or the 'Internet celebrity'. At this point, Dai went off-script (or at least off-slide) and said with a smile, 'So, with my coming here, people say China-Australia relations will improve'.

Dai then reiterated the language of the Chinese Dream: 'In less than five years, China will achieve the first 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary goal of the Chinese dream. This is to say that China will realize the dream of building a well-off society in all-round way. This is a great dream that will be recorded in history. And it means that Chinese people will pursuit [sic] better life and have more budget and time for enjoying high-quality tourism, including outbound tourism. The latest forecast of China Tourism Academy suggests in the coming five years China will generate as many as 700 million outbound tourists who will have 800 billion US dollar spending in the outbound tourist destinations. Looking into the future, the joint efforts will advance the comprehensive strategic partnership, people at both sides will have better impression of each other, and the degree of popularity of tourist attractions will be increased. Those always make me have an optimistic prediction on China-Australia tourism exchanges ... China has become the world's second-largest economy, the quality of economic growth and the level of social development and people's life are getting better, and we would also like to attract more tourists from all over the world. Chinese dream has become the most powerful impetus to all-round recovery and growth of Chinese inbound tourism; and to international tourists, it is also more attractive than the natural historical, and cultural resources ...' Dai gestured towards potential challenges before breezily citing a quote from a 2014 speech at the Australian Parliament by Xi Jinping, There is an Australian saying, 'Keep your eyes on the sun and you will not see the shadows', a proverb with which few Australians actually seemed familiar (Stokes, 2014).

Dai continued, 'Australia has become a model or sample of Chinese outbound tourist destination. And Australia has frequent interactions with China tourism industry and would not have direction that is unfavorable for mutual tourism exchanges. It is my hope that in near future our two sides could make strategic communication and technical negotiation as soon as possible on relevant topics such as the destination status agreement plus (ADS+) and free trading area (FTA)'. He went on to mention particular enterprises, including travel booking engine Ctrip, and China Southern Airlines (also a sponsor of the conference), before closing by reaffirming his agency's cooperations with Griffith, Tourism Australia, and Tourism Research Australia.

The subsequent speakers from the Tourism Transport Forum and the Pacific Asia Travel Association talked triumphantly about the boom in bilateral tourism. The mood turned more severe when Colin Mackerras addressed bilateral relations more broadly: 'I agree that our tourism relationship with China is good. [But] this year China-Australia relations are actually not good. Yesterday a [Australian government ministry] white paper gave a bleak assessment of China, suggested it's a threat. This idea is not gone forever ... Maybe I'm too bleak but I think recent [Prime Minister] Turnbull decisions over the South China Sea ... have not been helpful to our China relationship ...



I think this FTA is good and it's the future but I'm worried in the short term. Also I want to raise the question of Australian impressions of China, of fears of a rising China. [There was a] report that Chinese students are being incited by their government to undermine Australian values ... Most students I know are just trying to get on. Will tourism solve them [the problems]? I hope and think so. First, tourism influences images. Australians go to China get impression of China and vice versa. On holiday, people usually get good impressions. I think it helps. China has a wonderful culture and scenery and friendly people .... But I find it extraordinary that things are getting less politically favorable. I don't dispute aviation growth [but] I see tensions getting worse, nationalisms competing, I wish I could be more optimistic. The US president seems to be very inconsistent ... As for politics, will tourism improve it? I hope so. Tourism is economic. It's also social. I'm optimistic but don't think that tourism has been directly involved in improving images'.

The following Q&A session with the panelists provided one of the entire conference's only mention of the potential risk of overreliance on Chinese tourism under shifting geopolitical conditions. This consideration was prompted by a question from moderator Leong Liew, who noted the same recent foreign policy paper, as well as China's ongoing politically-motivated tourism cuts to South Korea and Taiwan. The panelists were generally sanguine about this possibility, although Mackerras suggested that Australia 'shouldn't put all its eggs in one basket ... I think politics does matter. In the 60s, we had bad relations and no tourists. Now it has momentum and would be hard to change. The basic central fact about this country: China matters for us'.

Remarks from other participants clarified that Chinese tourism not only matters for Australia's geopolitical and geoeconomic opportunities, but for its domestic electoral politics, as well. For example, after Mantra CEO Bob East's mentioned economic benefits from China, he observed the political might of the tourism industry. 'There's an election tomorrow [in Queensland]. Every single district has at least 5000 tourism workers, so we can bring our weight to the process'. Likewise, the PRC vice-consul's noted in his welcome remarks that, 'The Chinese dream is the aspiration of Chinese people to a better life ... Travelling around is part of that dream. Tomorrow, there will be an election here. I can see that the Chinese dream is shared not only by Australian but by Queenslanders. The Chinese dream closely connects with the dream of the Australian people. The dream is beautiful but we can't take it for granted. We have to work hard and work together. That's why I think today's conference so vital'.

The conference was also occasion for PRC officials to link the Chinese Dream and notions of eco-civilization with the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. For example, after the PRC vice-consul noted that 2017 was not only the year of Australia-China tourism but of 'sustainability' and also of the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. With the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, said the vice-consul, 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new phase and will bring new benefits to the China Australia relationship ...'

The productive polysemy of the Chinese Dream was demonstrated by the comments of a representative of Tourism Australia, a government agency which has been targeting China since 1999. He noted that Australia was one of the first countries to which China granted Approved Destination Status, which accelerated the development of group tourism, and said, 'I'd say the Chinese dream is now a reality'. This revealed a

rather different understanding of the 'Chinese Dream'—one based more on the value of renminbi than of Xi Jinping Thought.

The first day's summary session, provided by David Simmons, provided yet another take on the 'Chinese Dream'. Simmons projected a few preliminary schematic charts about the role of industry and academia in promoting 'The Chinese Dream' and 'Eco-Civilization' in China, Australia, and New Zealand. He then noted that New Zealand scholars were particularly interested in reducing carbon outputs to mitigate climate change, although this issue was getting less attention elsewhere. He then adopted the Chinese Dream rhetoric, asking on his slide, 'Are these the first steps on the pathway to the Chinese Dream? Chinese green growth ... and understanding of Chinese themselves as 'global citizens'?' Such a conclusion was remarkable given how much more active Chinese conference participation was in the business than in the sustainability sessions. The second day's summary session, also by Simmons, further rearticulated the Chinese Dream language into both indigenous New Zealand and global registers, citing a Maori term for co-existence, and then exclaiming, 'We've all heard about the Chinese dream, but that shouldn't just be for China, the dream should be for the world. We should all be part of some idea of an ecocivilization. Can we borrow it and work on it as well?'

Considering these various accounts together, 'The Chinese Dream' served as a polysemic rhetorical device in multiple registers that articulated in various ways depending on the speaker's positionality. For PRC officials such as the pro-consul and Dai Bin, it pointed to the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party and an advantageous relationship with the Australian state. For sustainability-minded scholars such as David Simmons, it was an occasion to invoke ecological notions. For Australian state officials or industry representatives, it gestured more towards dreams of industry growth, and may be facilitated by supportive voters. Although likely only the first of these groups is cognizant of the overriding political imperatives of 'Chinese Dream' language, spoken and written repetition served to further consolidate and extend its presence and potency in all registers.

This event was the culmination of two previous rounds of international conferences, as well as several jointly-authored papers. As such, major shifts in the Australia-China relationship notwithstanding, it is likely to continue shaping industry, state, and academic collaborations. Although the Chinese Dream language was wielded uncritically by a number of international scholars, as well as Chinese political officials, it earned mixed reviews from Chinese scholars. For example, during the bus ride and walks to Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, I individually queried several participants about their feelings about the Chinese Dream framing of the conference. Said one, 'The Chinese dream is not really used in academic discourse, at least not for us. But hearing it from a foreigner, sure it sounds familiar and comfortable'. Another said, 'Chinese Dream sounds kind of American to me and my friends in Beijing. Not too academic, really. I don't know if it's been picked up in Chinese tourism studies'. A senior scholar from southern China observed, 'We don't talk about the Chinese dream. We're academics and that's political talk'. However, he did quickly add that political considerations do constrain the bounds of acceptable academic discourse within China.

Beyond the anticipated outcomes of academic knowledge production and circulation, the conference may have yielded other fruit. On the final night, according to an

attendee, several of the high-level Chinese national and ethnic Chinese Australian delegates and organizers joined a small dinner hosted by a major Chinese real estate developer with multi-million dollar projects in Gold Coast, including a theme park. Several months later, this theme park was listed as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, Xi Jinping's signature geopolitical and geoeconomic program (Walsh & Xiao, 2018). While it is impossible to conclude that this particular meeting directly resulted in the listing, the timing is likely not insignificant.

## Conclusion

Tourism in, from, and to China is one the great stories of 21<sup>st</sup> century mobility. It is a story that encompasses not only millions of hosts and guests, but their storytellers as well. By promoting tourism as a component of the 'Chinese Dream', a discursive instrument devised and deployed to support the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, prominent international tourism scholars enrolled themselves into an ambiguous and ambitious geopolitical program that deserved more nuanced and critical examination. This account should serve as a cautionary tale for other credulous tourism scholars or geographers researchers building collaborations in regions beyond their initial expertise. Given the involvement of industry and government officials, it is not surprising that the presentations and publications of were framed in a celebratory rather than impartial fashion. Still, it would have behooved participants to take pause at such efforts and carefully evaluate their intellectual, ideological, and ethical implications.

As tourism scholars, industry practitioners, and government administrators in China, Australia, and elsewhere continue consolidating this 'meta-narrative' in the midst of shrinking university budgets, it is worth reflecting on the rationality of such behavior. China's soft power campaigns have not been uniformly successful (Callahan, 2015b). Yet, it is remarkable that at the very moment that China's soft power was being publicly questioned in a Australian government white paper (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017), its own tourism academy was channeling such soft power in collaboration with the Tourism Confucius Institute. One merely needs to trace the line between the claims of PRC diplomats and conference scholars that the Chinese Dream should be the world's dream to find evidence that such soft power campaigns had borne fruit, however belatedly, through as unlikely an academic realm as international tourism studies. This demonstrates the sticky power (Mead, 2009) of the institutional links and shared discourses developed through the previous rounds of tourism studies conferences and publications, and the likely value of this iteration to future such projects.

If the lessons of reflexive scholarship have taught us anything, it is that the conceptual (and, of course, national) flags under which we conduct our own research bear intellectual and ethical consequences. Indeed, this article is itself a kind of political intervention, even if it is one that calls for caution and critique. While its empirical target is cheerleading for the 'Chinese Dream', it should not be misread as a simple or single-minded attack on Chinese state aspirations, or an argument for other nations, whether competitive or collaborative, to get a free pass. Nationalist or jingoistic stances are questionable options for scholars who care to

engage critically with their or other nations or the world at large. Indeed, all states engage in violence. As a discursive device, ‘the Chinese Dream’ obscures its own potential for incipient violence no more or less than does ‘the American Dream’, a phrase which has been marshaled towards a variety of chauvinistic and imperialistic projects. While scholars have few if any straightforward or universally-accepted formulas for the determination of ethical conduct, what should be clear in our scholarship, especially in a time of global geopolitical uncertainty and financial and structural transformation in the academic industry, is the need for intellectual and ethical reflection that transcends the temporary allures of entrepreneurial outreach and national cheerleading.

If claims that tourism can engender peace and sustainable development and other laudable results are to be taken seriously, such possibilities owe precisely to the geopolitical instrumentality of tourism and tourism studies. Therefore, converse possibilities—that tourism can threaten economies and environments or aggravate geopolitical contention—must be considered as well. Such possibilities are better evaluated not by indulging in unsustainable if temporarily lucrative pipe dreams, but by waking up to a far more complicated geopolitical and intellectual reality.

## Note

1. In the Australian university management structure, “Vice-Chancellor” is the chief executive position, with the title of “Chancellor” reserved as an honorary and symbolic designation. Unusually, O’Connor was given the additional title of “President,” largely to clarify his executive role during personal negotiations with Chinese institutions, according to an interview with a Griffith faculty member who preferred to remain anonymous.

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