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# The Everyday Chinese Framing of Africa: A Perspective of Tourism-geopolitical Encounter

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## ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a discourse analysis of Chinese tourist writings about Africa on the most popular Chinese online tourist forum, *Mafengwo* (hornet's nest). By examining 2,950 travelogues collected online, our research finds that Chinese tourists' conceptions of Africa are mainly built through 5 frames, including the *exotic* frame, the *adventurous* frame, the *poverty* frame, the *China's engagement* frame, and the *affection* frame that describe Africa as a remote, exotic, adventurous, dangerous, miserable, and backward place compared to a modern China that strongly supports Africa's development. Much tourist writing corresponds with the official Chinese geopolitical narrative of China-Africa relations that perceives China itself as a peacefully rising power who would also like to help developing others like Africa. However, we also find that some Chinese tourists' descriptions of Africa fit uneasily into the official Chinese geopolitical conceptions, in which they demonstrate affection for Africa, but only in regard to its Western aspects, e.g., architecture, food, activities. One contribution of this study is providing a bottom-up Chinese citizenry discourses and cultural experiences of Africa, and with this empirical analysis it updates theories of everyday Chinese geopolitics of tourism. We think this study is unique in that we have broadened the understanding of both official and citizenry Chinese geopolitical conceptions and their (dis)connections, in particular from the everyday encounter between geopolitics and tourism, which also sets a frame for comprehending Chinese citizenry geopolitical conceptions of the outside 'other'.

## Introduction

The linkage between China and Africa is an important factor in understanding contemporary Chinese geopolitical thinking and practice, as Africa has been playing an increasingly important role for China's overseas geopolitical strategy over the past few decades. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), China provided Africa with a considerable amount of assistance, mainly in agriculture, medical care, and infrastructure construction, in order

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to gain support from Africa in enhancing international community's recognition of the PRC's sole sovereignty legitimacy (Yu 1988). This alliance between China and Africa, in Chinese official rhetoric, is described as an equal relationship under the banner of anti-colonialism, anti-hegemony and common development that seeks Africa's self-reliance rather than perpetual superior-inferior tutelage by drawing on China's development path (Strauss 2009). This geopolitical tie has been further consolidated since the 21st century. Since the open and reform policy, China's rapid economic growth, especially its increasing demand for raw materials, energy and markets, has made it important to develop its relationship with overseas developing countries as part of its foreign policy (Harnisch, Bersick, and Gottwald 2015). In this geopolitical context, Africa has become an important destination for China's overseas development (Pannell 2008). As of 2019, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has been held for nearly 20 years, making China the largest trade and cooperation partner in Africa (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2018). Although many historical rhetoric (such as non-interference and common development) continues to be used in current time, the Chinese official discourse has been continuously polishing the China-Africa relations packaged in the FOCAC which describes China as a rising power that tries to help developing countries like in Africa in a harmonious way (Strauss 2009).

Noteworthy here is that, as a rising power, China's overseas geopolitical appeal is not only exercised through diplomacy and economy, but also through the everyday interpersonal communications such as tourism. For example, in the mid-2000s, the Chinese authorities began to realize that the uncivilized phenomena of citizens travelling abroad (such as spitting, speaking loudly and scribbling in public places) would harm China's national image, so they began to advocate for civilized outbound tourism and set up an uncivilized tourism blacklist aiming to import national ideology into the field of tourism (Pearce, Wu, and Osmond 2013). Moreover, considering Chinese government's outbound tourism policy, such as by granting or not granting foreign countries Approved Destination Status (ADS) to encouraging or discouraging tourists from travelling to a country to achieve its diplomatic goals, the Chinese tourism industry is also gradually seen as a space for geopolitical wrestling (Tse 2013). More relative to the topic in this paper, in a study discussing China's outbound tourism to Africa, Chen and Duggan (2016) argue that there are more and more African countries on the Chinese government's ADS list, but according to their point of view, China's tourism policy for Africa is unlikely to lead to mutual benefit in the tourism market, rather to enhance China's attractiveness; that is, by using outbound tourism policy China expects itself to be seen as a peacefully rising power who is willing to help weaker and developing countries.

Despite the increasing diversity of perspectives on China-Africa relations and in particular from the lens of everyday tourism (Chen and Duggan 2016; Tse 2013), the current focus on China-Africa relations from a tourism perspective seems to pay more attention to visions of the state, for example by drawing on issues of policymaking, while the observation from the citizenry perspective is still an underdeveloped continent. In fact, it would be very helpful to understand Chinese geopolitical thinking and practice by examining Chinese citizenry geopolitical framings on Africa, as it could provide a way to explore how and to what extent Chinese official rhetoric on China-Africa linkage is contextualized for its national audience within China. In this regard, this paper aims to conduct a discourse analysis on Chinese tourist's writings about Africa on the most popular Chinese online tourist forum, *Mafengwo*. *Mafengwo* is a free social network and big data-based travel service platform in which tourists or potential tourists can upload and download their travel experiences in the form of 'travelogues'. In speaking to its popularity, *Mafengwo* is regarded as China's single most influential online travel forum, with over 600,000 travel notes on over 60,000 tourist destinations uploaded, and more than 760,000,000 downloads.<sup>1</sup> *Mafengwo* is widely considered as China's 'Travel Bible' by the younger generation. There are thousands of travelogues uploaded by Chinese tourists travelling to Africa on this forum (which we will illustrate in detail in the methodology section) – we can take this opportunity to investigate whether Chinese tourists who travelled to Africa have been and if so, to what extent contextualized by Chinese official discourses on Africa, in particular with respect to China's tourism geopolitical strategy towards Africa. By centring this paper in the frame of Chinese tourist conceptions of Africa, we aim to (1) update theories of everyday geopolitics of tourism to include the test of official geopolitical discourses on tourist geopolitical imaginaries, (2) explore to what extent Chinese official geopolitical discourses on China-Africa relations impact upon Chinese tourist's perceptions of Africa, and (3) extend a wider geopolitical mechanism about how Chinese citizens establish their imaginaries of foreign others. The next section provides a conceptual and theoretical framework that bridges tourism as a geopolitical framing. Thereafter, we discuss methods underpinning the study. Then, the five main sections of the paper comprise a discourse analysis of Chinese tourists' perceptions of Africa supported by data. Rounding out the paper is a discussion of our revised understanding of Chinese citizenry geopolitical views of Africa, and widely the outside world.

### **Tourism as a Geopolitical Framing**

The conceptual approach in this study stems from recent discussions on everyday geopolitics of tourism (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019). On the one hand, under the influence of western critical geography theory, especially

post-structuralist geography theories, political geographers are increasingly concerned about the geopolitical dimension in the everyday arena (Dittmer 2010). For example, geopolitical studies represented by popular geopolitics has begun to focus increasingly on the roles of texts, emotions, practices, and performativity in the everyday arena and discuss how they become part of the coproduction of geopolitical assemblages (Dittmer and Gray 2010). Despite the increasing focus on the everyday in geopolitical studies, the analysis of geopolitics from a tourism perspective is still an underexplored topic. On the other hand, as one of the most common everyday practices, tourist activities have rarely been linked with political seriousness for the reason of their nature of entertainment and leisure, and therefore have long been ignored by political geographers. In a sense, it is because of the lack of political sensitivity of political geographers or tourism researchers to the tourism industry that results in the mismatch between tourism studies and geopolitical studies. It was not until recent years when the discussions on transnational tourism (Hannam 2013), borderland tourism (Gao et al. 2019), and voluntarily tourism (Griffiths and Brown 2017) have become hot topics in social sciences that this mismatch has just begun to be slowly bridged together.

Stated briefly, the theoretical value of the conceptual approach treating tourism as a geopolitical framing is mainly reflected in two aspects. The first is about encounter. According to statistics, billions of people around the world annually encounter new places and populations through tourist activities (Hall and Page 2017). As a site of everyday encounter at various scales (e.g. tourists-residents and tourists-tourists encounter at local, national and global scales), tourism has never been apolitical for political geographers, but instead it constitutes of the co-production of socio-political, economic, cultural and geopolitical assemblages (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019). This viewpoint is more obvious for mobility geographers' observations who argued that tourism, as a fluid event, has actively participated in the (re)production of spatial knowledge at various scales (King 2015; Sheller and Urry 2006). Therefore, tourism to a notable extent can provide embodied evidence to intensify or challenge the pre-existing geographical imaginations of certain places or people (Crouch, Aronsson, and Wahlstrom 2001). Meanwhile, it can also provide a path to understand how differences are imagined, discussed, and unfolded outside of the official government policymaking (Agnew 2003). In this sense, this conceptual approach could be advisably used to investigate how and to what extent the official geopolitical ideas are contextualized in the most mundane dimensions.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that this tourism geopolitics conceptual approach is structural and state-centred. Apart from observing how the geopolitical ideology is embedded in tourism system, this conceptual approach is also very concerned about how tourists as an independent agency participate in or challenge existing geopolitical contexts via their own tourism and

cultural experiences. So, the second theoretical value of the conceptual approach used in this article lies in its decentralization. This is consistent with the recent discussions of geopolitical assemblage that highlights that individual agency is capable of working in concert to create geopolitical systems with their own complex behaviour (Dittmer 2014). Here, the assemblage theory regards the geopolitical systems as always complex, dynamic and interacting so that any attempt to model the systems would be defied, among which some individual elements might resonate with other elements and results in new and maybe unexpected geopolitical outcomes or meanings (Dittmer 2014). With this regard, to examine tourism practices through the lens of geopolitics may productively retheorize the everyday geopolitics theory by including the exploration of geopolitical implications of intersubjectivity such as race and identity (Figueroa-Domecq et al. 2015).

The conceptual approach described above is of great value for understanding the tourism geopolitics in current China. Specifically, with the improvement of China's socioeconomics conditions, the scale of China's outbound tourism market has expanded dramatically in the past few decades (Arlt and Burns 2013), so tourism activities and phenomena involving geopolitical issues in recent China have also become very common. In this context, there is also a growing discussion on the phenomenon of Chinese tourism geopolitics (e.g. Hannam 2013; Huang and Suliman 2020; Rowen 2016, 2017, 2019; Tse 2013; Weaver et al. 2015). However, most of the existing literature discusses how Chinese authorities make articles around tourism industry and tourism activities, such as achieving the diplomatic goals via the adjustment of tourism policies, while there is very little discussion of how tourists as relatively independent individuals participate in the creation of geopolitical system from the bottom-up universes of discourses and cultural experiences. For example, in Rowen's (2016) analysis on the geopolitical issues of mainland Chinese tourists travelling in Hong Kong and Taiwan, he explained how tourists are unreflexively acting as agents of the Chinese state, claiming China's territoriality and building China's national identity. Albeit coated by analyses of mundane tourism experiences and practices, his argument is decidedly state-centred, devoid of analytical flexibility that allows decentred agencies and emergent possibilities of tourism engagements.

Therefore, this study intends to take the conceptual approach of treating tourism as a geopolitical framing as an analytical method, and takes China-Africa relations from the lens of tourism as a research object to examine Chinese tourist writing of Africa and compare such citizenry geopolitical discourse with Chinese official rhetoric on China-Africa relations. By doing so, this study aims to examine the role of individual Chinese tourists in the coproduction of China-Africa relations as a geopolitical system. Findings of this study could contribute to the literature of everyday geopolitics of tourism by empirically identifying the convergence and divergence between state-

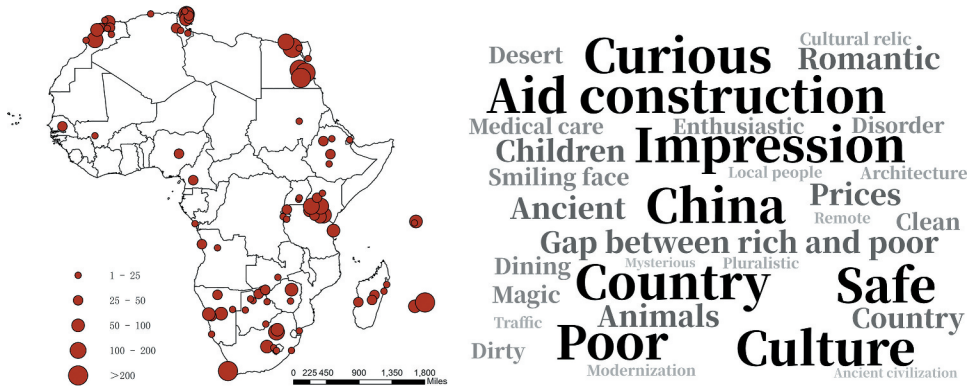
centred geopolitical discourse and decentralized individual geopolitical writings. The contribution of this study is also empirical, as it could provide a much more complicated way to observe Chinese tourism phenomenon and activities related to geopolitical issues and thus provide an alternative lens to understand it.

## Methods

The main method of this article is to examine Chinese tourists' perceptions of Africa by reading their Africa-related travelogues on *Mafengwo*. The travelogue is actually a very complicated expression space where authors not only describe the details of their actual journeys, but also create a platform to express their perceptions of the tourist sites (Tavares and Brosseau 2006). Nevertheless, such perceptions in travelogues are not necessarily merely for the pleasure of sharing observations and experiences. In some cases, travel writings were used to achieve certain economic or political benefits, for example, to establish an ideal tourist destination for attracting tourists (Garcia-Fuentes 2016). In other cases, travelogues aimed to add to the mosaic of the geopolitical pattern among certain countries so as to create a commonsense geopolitical understanding (Bender, Gidlow, and Fisher 2013). The knitting of travel texts for certain purposes to a noteworthy extent can be read as a kind of 'geographical imagination' that highlights the subjectivity in the varieties of knowledge production (Gregory 1994; Said 1978).

In this paper, we used "Africa" (as well as names of 54 African countries) as key words to search for travelogues on *Mafengwo* relating to Chinese tourists travelling to Africa. We have collected 2,950 items of Chinese travelogues from January 2006 (the founding of *Mafengwo*) to May 2019, with details of travellers' observations of Africa. Regarding the analysis method, we applied the method of discourse analysis to analyse the narrative strategy and narrative structure of the collected texts, so as to discuss how the African image as a tourist destination is established by the Chinese tourists who can provide a scope beyond Chinese official narrations. To help us better understand the trait of this discourse, we have also attempted to visualise the contents of this discourse in *Mafengwo*. The first is to draw a map about Chinese tourists' choice of destinations in Africa based on the geographical locations identified in the travelogues, from which we observe that visitors often choose Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco in the north, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia in the east, and South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Madagascar, and Mauritius in the south (Figure 1, left). Nearly all of these regions have excellent tourism resources. Secondly, we did a semantic analysis of the collected travelogues, extracting the words, and subsequently to count and visualise word frequency: the darker the colour of the words and the larger the size of the words, the higher the frequency of its appearance in travelogues, and vice versa (Figure 2,





**Figure 1.** Most-visited African tourist destinations on *Mafengwo* (left) and the word frequency appearing in *Mafengwo* African travelogues (right).

right). Noteworthy here is that these two visualisations are only used as an aid to support the discourse analysis.

### An exotic Africa Scripted by Chinese Tourists

We used the keywords obtained from semantic analysis and the core plots adopted in travelogues as the basis for identifying Chinese tourists' frames describing Africa. For example, those travelogues that apply novels and movies as motivations travelling to Africa, or those that frequently appear in vocabularies such as 'Romantic', 'Ancient', 'Culture', 'Smiling face', and 'Remote', adopt an *exotic* frame. Besides the exotic frame, we have also identified four other frames which we will discuss later one by one. Of these frames, we find that describing Africa as an exotic place is the most common Chinese tourist perception of Africa. Through semantic analysis we have noticed that the words 'Romantic', 'Ancient', 'Culture', 'Smiling face', and 'Remote' constituted sensitive feelings and have occupied a considerable proportion of the descriptors, with an average number of occurrences of this word per article reached 27, 27, 33, 25, and 5, respectively.

In this exotic frame, many Chinese tourists travelling to Africa are motivated by the idealised portrayals of the continent in novels and films. In fact, many literary works about Africa, whether translated or original, like Achebe's (2009) *Things Fall Apart*, Chen (Sanmao)'s (1976) *Sahara's Story*, and Thiong'o's (2012) *A Grain of Wheat*, have gripped the Chinese imagination. Especially the works of Taiwanese writer, Sanmao have stimulated immense interest in Africa. Sanmao and her husband (a Spaniard) settled in the Spanish Sahara in the 1970s, during which time she wrote many novels about her love story and African life. Considering the popularity of Sanmao in China today (in the 1980s and 1990s, nearly everyone who was literate read Sanmao), her work has played a decisive role in



developing the African image in Chinese society. Films too, have profoundly shaped how Chinese people imagine Africa (Dodds 2008). A few international and Chinese popular films either with some scenes of Africa or with central plots connected to Africa have influenced Chinese ways of thinking about Africa; they include, but are not limited to, *Casablanca* (1942), *Death on the Nile* (1978), *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), *I Dreamed of Africa* (2000), *The Mummy Returns* (2001), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *Madagascar* (2005), *Blood Diamond* (2006), *Babel* (2006), and *Wolf Warriors* (2017).

The literary and cinematic depictions mentioned above convey a mysterious, ancient, and romantic African image, far away from modernity, which has inspired many Chinese to visit. For example, a young Chinese traveller wrote in her travelogue “*Going into the Colourful Country, Leaving the Joy to the Sahara, and Leaving the Missing into the Atlantic*” (February 2018) that it was precisely because of Sanmao’s romantic writings on North Africa that she formed a reason to travel to Morocco. In this part of Chinese tourists’ travelling writings, Africa’s image is portrayed as a geographically remote space from China, beyond the reach of noisy cities and honking traffic. We can see that it is exactly the perception of remoteness and mythology gleaned from African writings that has attracted Chinese tourists to the Continent to revisit the world they encountered virtually in novels and films.

An exotic image of Africa is the result of an iterative process of romanticising and re-romanticising. Tourists were motivated to travel to Africa after having read romantic texts about Africa, and in retrospect, the travellers themselves have become the new text producers by re-romanticising Africa. Their ‘Africa’ in this sense seems to exist in another time and place, with a ‘distant’ and ‘exotic’ style, but without the insights and descriptions of what the ‘real’ Africa is like.

### **An adventurous Africa Written by Chinese Tourists**

The second important frame identified from Chinese tourists’ travelogues on Mafengwo is an adventurous frame. In this frame, many Chinese tourists are attracted by the ‘wildness’ of Africa, so they embark on adventures seeking excitement not at all like their own routines and humdrum daily lives. The deserts, grasslands, animal worlds, and uncertainty of Africa seem to largely fulfill these tourists’ aspirations. In their eyes, Africa is the opposite of China’s peace and tranquillity and, most importantly, their trips offer the thrilling game of survival which plays out every single day, in accordance with their expectations. Chinese tourists who hunt out of curiosity and a need for adventure, are eager to feel the wild beauty here, even though they are also fully aware that Africa is a ‘dangerous place’.

The adventurous discourse seen in tourists' African travelogues primarily reflects the aim to observe the beauty of Africa's wild nature. For example, many tourists expressed the desire to avoid the busy and bustling city and instead get closer to nature, especially the most primitive nature possible. As a couple who spent their "*Exploration Journey*" in Marseilles, South Africa (May 2019) described in their travelogues that they saw rhinoceros running in the early morning, hippos crouching in the river, crocodiles in foraging, bulls screaming on the river bank, antelopes that are hopping, and lions that are sleeping. For them, all these vibrant and authentic lives are the purest landscapes of primitive nature, which exactly constituted their reasons for travelling to Africa. In addition, tourists who have sought out the beauty of nature's wildness often render their experiences of camping in the wild. For instance, in some travelogues many tourists have described the hum of the hippopotamus and other unnamed animal screams they heard in the night while camping in the wild. In this situation, travellers often highlight how this is something that urban dwellers simply cannot experience.

Moreover, in our analysis of the travelogues, we find that the fascination of Chinese tourists for the wild beauty of Africa is also reflected in the human geography aspect, which shows Africa as an 'unsafe place,' according to Chinese tourists, but which is nevertheless an important reason for some tourists to travel there: in search of stimulation and excitement through so-called adventures. For example, we find that in many travelogues on *Mafengwo*, tourists have described in minute detail their experiences of being robbed or extorted during their trip in Africa, despite being aware of the risk. Depictions of dangerous encounters are not like verbal records given at the police station, but on the contrary, are often written in a relaxed and humorous tone. For this segment of tourists, the potential danger is also part of the attraction to the tour. As Derry (a Chinese tourist) sighs in his travel writing (May 2018): "Good and bad, beauty and ugliness, peace and danger all constitute the story of travel."

### **Africa as a poverty Continent Depicted by Chinese Tourists**

The third important frame is a *poverty* frame which can be identified both from the semantic analysis and plot analysis of Chinese tourists' travelogues on *Mafengwo*. On the one hand, many Chinese tourists give detailed descriptions of poverty in Africa in their travelogues which could be evidenced by the extracted vocabulary frequency from *Mafengwo* (Figure 1, right). For instance, a number of poverty-related words, such as 'Poor' (42), 'Price' (29), 'Dirty' (19), 'Disorder' (18), and 'Medical care' (17), have become high-frequency words in travelogues on *Mafengwo*, and the numbers in the parentheses are the average number of times that the word appears per article. On the other hand, in terms of plot, many Chinese tourists described Africa's poverty by

illustrating its high unemployment, poor infrastructure, dirty living environments, lack of health care, and low material living standards. As a Chinese tourist (September 2011) described in his self-described 'only' travel note on South Sudan on *Mafengwo* within which he described South Sudan as no different than the scene in rural China 50 years ago, where there were full of simple houses stacked by iron sheets, no separate toilets, frequently blackouts, scarce water supply, and everywhere garbage. In another example, a visitor to the Victoria Fall recorded in his travelogue that up to 90% of the people in that area is unemployed, and a large number of them are even threatened by hunger, although the majority might be better educated because they speak and read English in addition to their native language ("*Travelling in Zimbabwe: Its Poverty, Violence and Colour*", August 2018).

Nevertheless, for tourists as observers, the description of Africa's poverty is not a hindrance or a deterrence to their travel, but rather, poverty is exactly a kind of motivation to visit Africa. Many tourists have commented in their travelogues that their travels in Africa were intentionally a 'bitter trip'; they wanted to see the so-called 'poverty and backwardness' in Africa and harvest the hardships and, most importantly, exercise their will in the journey. In the opinion of this segment of tourists, Africa is seen as an economically underdeveloped place where disease is raging, turmoil flares up, terrorism is rampant, and material wellbeing for families is extremely scarce. 'Poverty tourism' could pose strong challenges to the tourists for whom such exposure to hardships is believed to improve their personal qualities.

For the most part, we observe that most tourists in *Mafengwo* have adopted the exotic, adventurous, and poverty frames to record their travelling experience in Africa, describing the Continent as a remote, exotic, adventurous, dangerous, poor, and backward place away from modernity. This African view, to a notable extent, is never a beautification of Africa, but in contrast, resembles the Orientalism characterised by a sense of European superiority over the perceived Oriental backwardness (Said 1978). In our consideration of the homology and continuity within Chinese culture, in this paper we attribute Chinese tourists' understanding of Africa as a reflection of the inheritance of traditional Chinese binary geopolitical conceptions. By this we mean the Chinese binary ideology that concerns itself with economic, political and cultural (here mainly referring to the economic dimension in current time) superiority over foreigners who are outside of the Chinese perception of civilisation. Within this framework China is an advanced civilisation while the 'others' are barbaric, backward and marginalised. From *Mafengwo*'s travelogues we can also confirm that tourist descriptions of Africa are often set in contrast with China in a descriptive approach that often goes like this: "The social order here is chaotic, the poor are not covered, and most of the phenomena are in sharp contrast with China." Africa is portrayed as uncivilised, lacking in modernity, and much different from China.

## The Observation of China's Engagement with Africa

In addition to the three frames adopted by Chinese tourists to script their travelling experience in Africa as laid forth, another important frame for Chinese tourists is to record China's engagement with Africa in their African travelogues. In Figure 2 (right), which identifies the high-frequency words extracted from *Mafengwo's* African travelogues, we notice that 'China' and 'Aid construction' are among the core words, the average occurrence number per article of which are both 60, the highest of almost all high-frequency words. Specifically, in our sample of African travelogues, we find that tourists often tell stories about Chinese migrants and Chinese projects taking place there, which is quite different from the description of travelling to hunt romance, excitement, and hardship, as mentioned above. Comparably, this segment of Chinese tourists has paid closer attention to how China (and Chinese people) participate in local production and consumption activities. In the context of Chinese government's emphasis of geopolitical aspirations on the African continent under the banner of FOCAC, such observations by tourists have great value with regard to understanding the social foundations of Chinese governmental policy-making.

As stated at the beginning of this article, China's engagement with Africa has a long history, and this relationship has been further strengthened with the advancement of the FOCAC since the 21st century (Pannell 2008; Strauss 2009; Yu 1988). China's such engagement with Africa have certainly affected the landscape in Africa, and have captured the attention of Chinese tourists who have duly added descriptions in their African travelogues. In the travelogues about Africa on *Mafengwo*, we find numerous descriptions of China's presence there. In fact, some scholars have already conducted research on China's engagement with Africa, and some of it is strongly critical (e.g. Alves 2013; Tan-Mullins, Urban, and Mang 2017; Wegenast et al. 2019; Zhao 2014). For example, Alves (2013) examined China's use of infrastructure-for-resources policies, noting China's economic development was at the expense of Africa's development, although it did not deny the positive effect of such policies on Africa's development in the early stages. However, Chinese tourists' observations seem completely unaffected by this discourse, in particular those who are critical of China's engagement, instead they seem to be more clearly resonating with the official Chinese discourse on China-Africa relations; that is, China expects itself to be seen as a harmoniously rising power who is also willing to help developing countries (Chen and Duggan 2016; Strauss 2009).

More specifically, Chinese tourists seem to focus more on China's contribution particularly in the form of aid projects; tourists sometimes describe this as a forerunner to the creation of a possibly glorious Africa. For example, a Chinese tourist referred to a Chinese aid project, the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, as the starting point for his trip to Africa and described it in a very

proud gesture in his travelogue (*“Chinese Knot on the African Continent”*, June 2017). He recorded that he can see every pedestal track of this railway is written with the “Made by People’s Republic of China” which has witnessed a solid friendship between China and Africa. Moreover, Chinese tourist observations also include comments on the impact of China’s ability to construct in a speedy fashion. Take for example, a Chinese tourist who discussed in his travelogue *“Chinese Model is Highly Praised in Africa”* (August 2018) how a local taxi driver in Ethiopia was amazed at the rapidity of China’s modernisation and construction.

In addition to the projects associated with China (e.g. “Aid by China”, “Made by China”, and “Constructed by China”, the social life of Chinese people, especially Chinese migrants in Africa, is also a significant topic of observation for Chinese tourists. We found three main kinds of viewpoints from the travelogues on this subject. The first relates to local material living standards in the eyes of Chinese migrants. In these travelogues Chinese tourists identified the lack of essential daily necessities (e.g., food, oil and potable water), and the low levels of education and health in many African countries. Despite poor living and working conditions (e.g., poor living conditions, unstable financial environment, and concern for security) identified by the Chinese migrants, in the eyes of tourists the Chinese here are regarded as diligent and hard-working. Their social status is therefore quite good (the second most important point extracted from travelogues describing Chinese migrants). For example, during their trip, some tourists were invited into the homes of Chinese migrants; they were surprised to discover that the social resources and social status of the Chinese migrants were more advantageous than back home in China. Some tourists were impressed by the Chinese migrants who had entered into the local upper class, including those living in the same community with the president and ministers of the African country.

The third aspect relates to China-Africa relations as the Chinese migrants understand it. Most Chinese migrants who spoke with tourists during their trip think that the locals have a good impression of China. Some migrants mentioned the atmosphere and enthusiasm of African people who want to learn Chinese, and how they (migrants) often meet friendly locals in the street who greet them enthusiastically in Mandarin.

Based on the sample texts illustrated above, we notice that Chinese tourists to Africa give detailed descriptions of China’s engagement with Africa; they describe the phenomenon in Africa of “Made by China”, “Constructed by China” and “Aid by China” in detail. When they saw the relevant projects themselves, they externalised their heartfelt patriotic feelings, expressed praise for these projects, showed a kind of pride as a Chinese, and talked about the economic benefits, political influence and the significance of China’s assistance to the local people. In the meantime, tourists’ descriptions of the daily lives of Chinese migrants convey positive images of the Chinese who had succeeded

through diligence and hard work, and who most importantly had gained recognition in the local community. These descriptions essentially portrayed a poor, backward and underdeveloped image of Africa that is supported by China and is getting better and better. When we compare tourist conceptions of Africa with Chinese mainstream discourse, e.g., the representation of Africa as an underdeveloped continent that is supported by the harmoniously rising China (Chen and Duggan 2016; Strauss 2009), we notice how the subtle variations among the many descriptions of visitors to Africa on the Chinese online forum (*Mafengwo*) largely reflect the influence of one country's increasing power and the country's official geopolitical aspirations.

### **The Description of Africa as a Westernised 'Other'**

In addition to the above four frames describing Africa as underdeveloped and supported by the peacefully rising China, we also find that Chinese tourists' travelogues expressing affection for Africa. However, the final frame of affection we found is neither established on the basis of romantic representations of Africa, nor linked with the China-African friendship framed in the geopolitical context of FOCAC. Instead, the affection frame we observed was mainly associated with how Chinese tourists perceive Africa as a Westernised 'other' and a contradictory 'other', having both ancient and modern, Eastern and Western elements. Interestingly, in a few of *Mafengwo* travelogues pointed up the Western contradictions observed in Africa, some tourists expressed an inexplicable sense of superiority.

Although many travelogues describe Africa as a place far from modernity, Africa is not a single country with a monolithic culture. A sample of the tourists' travelogues also mention the modern side of different African countries. However, their choice of words does not mention 'original Africa' or 'African style', but rather, 'Western style' (*xishi*) and 'European style' (*oushi*), as in '*the European town along the Garden Avenue*', '*the Western-styled elegant atmosphere*', '*the thick European city style*', '*like a European city*', and '*the Victorian-style church*'. On the basis of our study, it seems that in the eyes of a certain segment of Chinese tourists, the beautiful, neat and orderly appearance of African places reminds them of Europe or the Western world, and most descriptions relate to perceptions and descriptions of appearances. The less beautiful and orderly, i.e., the authentic Africa, was not highlighted. In this sense we can see that, although they had travelled to Africa, most tourists recognised, commented on, and yearned for, Western elements.

Descriptions of Chinese tourists' affection for Africa in our study were not only made manifest at the physical landscape level (e.g., city and architectural styles), but also at the level of the tourist experience of everyday activities in Africa. For example, Chinese tourists often made plans and reservations to participate in typical local life (e.g. wine tasting, dining, and shopping) during

their tours. The travelogues of many tourists on *Mafengwo* describe their modern and unforgettable experiences. For instance, they describe dining in English speaking restaurants in African countries, and often highlight that the delicious foods they tried are usually not available in domestic China, or even in the West because much of the foodstuffs are grown in Africa. In another travelogue (“*Travelling in Zimbabwe: Its Poverty, Violence and Colour*”, August 2018), a Chinese tourist discusses his shopping experience in Zimbabwe at a silverware shop of an English-Zimbabwean family, in which he asserted that this company has its flagship store in London and is a supplier to the British royal family. This detail demonstrates how some Chinese tourists have delved deeply into contemporary, albeit wealthy, African life.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that Chinese tourists’ affection for Africa shown in the travelogues, whether about physical landscapes or daily life, is actually affection for the Western lifestyle, especially the architecture built during Africa’s colonial period and the social heritage of the colonial history. We reach this conclusion based on the description of some of the tourist travelogues. Although one might interpret the comments as a defence of colonialism, it is more likely that tourist affection arises from a naïve approach not based on historical events, but rather on aesthetic appeal. We were surprised to find that some travelogues mention the impact of European colonial history on the current African landscape. In her note on Cape Town (“*Cape Town is Surprisingly Like This*”, May 2017) the tourist wrote that as the earliest European colony in South Africa, Cape Town looks like a developed European city with neat streets, Victorian-style churches, modern shopping centres, and colourful living, which in any case is quite different from the imaginings of a wild Africa.

When we consider the evolution of the conception of Chinese politics, and interpret the above descriptions written by *Chinese* tourists, we are able to better understand this phenomenon as a psychological inferiority in Chinese society if compared to Western culture. In particular, from the perspective of Chinese historical view of the foreign, it has undergone a relatively huge transformation in Ching Dynasty, which has profoundly affected the Chinese conception of the foreign in current Chinese society. Specifically, in the long history in ancient China, Chinese conception of the foreign has been dominated by Sino-centrism ideology that is deeply embedded into the Confucian thinking, within which China is conceived as a ‘*celestial empire and superior state (tianchao shangguo)*’ with the most advanced civilisation, while the foreign is imagined as barbaric, backward and marginalised, and subordinates to China (Chen 2015, 70). However, this Sino-centric geopolitical perspective had been facing fierce challenges from frequent east-west encounters in the military, political, economic, and cultural realms in the Ching Dynasty, especially from China’s humiliation from the failure of two Opium Wars (in 1839 and 1842, respectively) and the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 (also known as Jiawu Sea Warfare). Since then, the Sino-centric



geopolitical concept began to collapse and even reverse dramatically in all areas of Chinese society. The impact of such a reversal on the geopolitical views in Chinese society reminds us of the concept of self-*Orientalism*, which proposes that Orientalism is not simply autonomous discourse by the West, but rather it is the Orient itself (e.g. Chinese society) which participates in its own construction, reinforcement and circulation (Said 1994). Stated briefly, there is a social psychology in Chinese society which asserts that what is derived from other countries (in particular, the Western) is superior, while derivations from the motherland are inferior. An idiom in the Chinese-language known as *chongyang meiwai* (xenophilia: over affection) is used to describe this psychology. Noteworthy here is that, despite current Chinese society has gone through several cultural movements which on the large-scale excluded Chinese traditional culture from Western culture, it is undeniable that this historical conception of the foreign is still affecting the everyday Chinese framing of the foreign; this could be interpreted as a continuation and a historical reason of China's obsession with the West at current times. In this sense, in this paper the Chinese tourists' unwarranted affection for an Africa where Western architecture, everyday life, and influence are praised largely might refract an inferior historical-geopolitical psychology.

## Conclusions

At the Beijing Summit of the FOCAC in September 2018, leaders of 53 African countries (54 in total) came to Beijing to attend this meeting, which marked a much closer socio-political and economic relationship between China and the African continent. Of course, China's geopolitical/geo-economic engagement with Africa is not entirely maintained through hard power, such as economy, but also soft power like tourism. On many occasions, Chinese official and non-official institutions have expressed their desire to deepen people-to-people exchanges with African countries, mainly including tourism. For example, the list of African countries on the ADS countries granted by Chinese government is getting longer and longer (Tse 2013), and in 2017 China participated in Madagascar's International Tourism Fair as a guest-holder. Similarly, African countries, whether official or non-official tourism agencies, are trying to provide priority to fight for the Chinese tourism market. In the eyes of some scholars, Chinese government's such close tourism links with African countries is not aimed for economic interests, as Africa is a relatively underdeveloped region which makes it very difficult to achieve reciprocity with China at the tourism market level, but instead they are more inclined to think such links to be Chinese governmental cultural strategies to whitewash China's increasing engagement with Africa; that is, to perceive China itself in Africa as a harmoniously rising power who would also like to help weaker others (Chen and Duggan 2016).

Nevertheless, drawing on existing literature of Chinese tourism geopolitics, there are still unresolved issues to explore whether and if so to what extent Chinese official rhetoric on China-Africa linkage contextualises Chinese audience for their citizenry geopolitical perceptions of Africa. Even though there is an increasing number of studies that have focused on the geopolitical aspects of Chinese tourism activities from the mundane tourism experiences and practices (see: Hannam 2013; Huang and Suliman 2020; Rowen 2016, 2017, 2019; Tse 2013; Weaver et al. 2015), some of them (see Rowen 2016 example) have apparently underestimated the creativity of individual tourist in the coproduction of geopolitical meaning by regarding tourists simply as agents of the state. Moreover, the existing literature also lacks an empirical discussion on the tourism-geopolitical encounter with regard to China-Africa linkage. In this regard, this study has adopted the method of discourse analysis to examine Chinese tourists' travelogues of Africa on *Mafengwo*, and by doing so to explore Chinese tourists' travelling experience in Africa and importantly to investigate how they have framed their conceptions of Africa.

Our research finds that Chinese tourists' conceptions of Africa are mainly built through 5 frames. They include the *exotic* frame, the *adventurous* frame, the *poverty* frame, the *China's engagement* frame, and the *affection* frame that describe Africa as a remote, exotic, adventurous, dangerous, miserable, and backward place away from modernity but supported by China and therefore improving dramatically. Chinese tourists' such an approach could largely be understood as being resonating with the official Chinese geopolitical narrative of China-Africa relations, given the fact that China's arising international influence is increasingly contextualised within Chinese society and that the mainstream geopolitical discourse about China-Africa relations is increasingly exercised via the most mundane and everyday practices such as tourism. However, our study results also showed some Chinese tourist descriptions of Africa that match uneasily with the geopolitical perception advocated by the official Chinese voices. The *affection* frame identified from Chinese tourists' travelogues in this paper demonstrated their deep affection for Africa, even if their notes expressed affection for Western styles rather than the authentic cultural attributes of Africa. This shows that the current Chinese citizenry geopolitical conceptions are also embedded in a profound historical context. Here then lies the complexity of contemporary Chinese citizenry geopolitical perceptions. Based on our study of the views of everyday folk, it is very difficult to strictly categorise contemporary Chinese citizenry geopolitical thought; it can neither be explained simply by resonating with Chinese official geopolitical ideology along with China's increasing international influence nor the collapse of traditional Chinese geopolitical values influenced by Western ideologies. Instead, China's citizenry geopolitical perception, especially in the daily sphere, seems to be constantly changing in conjunction with China's social structure, historic context, and intersubjectivity.

Our study is unique in that we have broadened the understanding of both official and citizenry Chinese geopolitical conceptions and their (dis)connections, especially from the perspective of the everyday geopolitics of tourism. Existing studies have discussed the Chinese official geopolitical rhetoric on China-Africa linkage (Strauss 2009), and also explored how the official geopolitical ideology is embedded into the everyday arena such as tourism (Chen and Duggan 2016; Tse 2013). However, the bottom-up citizenry perspective on this issue has still been underdiscussed, let alone its (dis)connections with official geopolitical discourse. In this regard, one contribution of this study is providing a bottom-up Chinese citizenry discourses and cultural experiences of Africa, and with this empirical analysis it also updates theories of Chinese everyday geopolitics of tourism. In this sense the discussion of the travelogue as an analytical method is of great value in the aim to better understand the geopolitics of a certain polity (especially China as an under-explored object) in a broader sense, in particular the analysis of its governmental geopolitical aspirations, and how these conceptions embed into the public will. The second contribution of this study has been to establish a frame for comprehending Chinese citizenry geopolitical conceptions of the 'other'. The extant literature on Chinese geopolitics has attempted to theorise China's geopolitical ideas (An 2019; An, Liu, and Zhu 2016; Bennett 2015; Liu, An, and Zhu 2015; Sidaway and Woon 2017; Woon 2018), but most have focused on the analysis of mainstream Chinese discourse (e.g. *People's Daily* or government files). Until now there has been a lack of bottom-up structures that explore how the *everyday* Chinese society is perceiving the outside world; this, we think, is a paramount geopolitical issue. The present study has also shed light on how public opinion has strong reference value for the government in its formulation of geopolitical strategies and implementation of geopolitical movements.

## Note

1. Source from the official webpage of *Mafengwo*, see: <http://www.Mafengwo.cn>.

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