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Geopolitics, (re)territorialisation, and China's patriotic tourism in the South China Sea

ABSTRACT:

This study interrogates the geopolitical nature of China's Xisha tourism, and unravels the territorial politics played out in tourism, while examining the complex interplay between tourism and territorialisation. It demonstrates that Xisha tourism is inherently geopolitical and integral to China's comprehensive territorialisation strategy in the South China Sea (SCS). It reveals that Xisha tourism is politically oriented, highly regimented, and performatively constituted. Tourism and territorialisation are found to be mutually constituted and interdependent. The main argument of this study is that tourism should be conceptualised as a constitutive dimension of geopolitical restructuring processes in the SCS, and an essential part of the performative and discursive assemblage that sustains the state's will to claim territorial possession of the SCS.

KEY WORDS: Tourism and Geopolitics, (re)territorialisation, China's patriotic tourism, South China Sea

Introduction

Despite often being perceived as an economically-driven and pleasure-seeking activity, tourism is never apolitical (Richter 1989). In fact, tourism is closely intertwined with politics, and widely harnessed by states to serve various political ends all throughout the world (Hall 1994). However, politicising tourism has never been risk-free. Previous studies have revealed the disruption and subversion of tourism to states' political intentions (Su and Teo 2009; Rowen 2014), which suggests that the ultimate effect of tourism may largely contradict the inchoate purposes of states. As such, when it has been dragooned to service the state power, tourism is far from being a passive leisure activity, under the thumb of whichever sovereign state it is intended to serve. Rather, it has grown to be a significant political and social force, greatly influencing and shaping global spatial, political, social and economic orderings (Franklin 2004).

These dynamics are increasingly evident in the conjoined processes of the territorial consolidation of the South China Sea (SCS) by the Chinese state, and the expansion of state-directed tourism operations into this disputed maritime zone. The maritime territorial dispute in the SCS is regarded as Asia's most potentially dangerous flashpoint of conflict (Womack 2011), given its significant scope, the number of disputants it engages, and its intractable nature. Almost all countries surrounding the SCS, as well as many external larger powers, have been involved in fierce territorial rows over the SCS's natural resources, international trade and regional geostrategy (Rolf and Agnew 2016). Among others, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is the biggest claimant to sovereignty ownership of the SCS. China's claims are based on its 'nine-dash line' evidence. This cartographical line is a discontinuous U-shape, which was initially presented in a published map of the Republic of China in 1947, and subsequently claimed by PRC as an indication of its traditional maritime boundary in the SCS

(Fravel 2011). However, the legitimacy of this line has been rejected by international law and therefore China's claims over the SCS remain in dispute.

These disputes are mostly animated by a state-centric perspective on territoriality. Accordingly, attention to this region has been almost exclusively devoted to the 'hard power' dimensions of the territorial rivalry between nation-states. This has left the important social, economic and geographical dynamics that are unfolding as part of state-territorialisation largely precluded from political analysis. Tourism, we contend, is such a dimension of territorialisation that is being neglected in the literature on the politics of the SCS.

Tourism ought to be thought of as entwined with contemporary forms of state-territorialisation and geopolitical restructuring in the SCS. As a non-military approach, tourism was first utilised by Malaysia to serve its geopolitical ends for occupying and legitimising contested territories in the SCS (Hall 1994). In more recent years, China, Vietnam and the Philippines have also commenced their tourism operations in this region. By doing so, tourism in this region has gradually become an arena of outstretched territorial contention, and a proxy for state territorialisation (Mostafanezhad 2018). However, despite the increasingly prominent role tourism plays in the territorial practices of those SCS littoral states, it has not received sustained attention in academic research. How this kind of shift in the modality of state-territorialisation – from hard military expansion to mixed hard and soft competition among nation-states – may affect the current and future political dynamics of SCS, and beyond, continues to be unknown. It has been suggested that tourism can be a cause of conflict. Tourism has created tensions in the communities, precipitated protests in the cities and soured relations between states (Timothy 2002; Farmaki 2017). As such, whether tourism may necessarily catalyse conflicts in the SCS deserves serious attention. Responding to these research lacunas, this study, taking China's SCS tourism as a case, examines how tourism is organised, practiced

and performed to achieve China's geopolitical and maritime ambitions, and the dynamic nexus between tourism and geopolitical territorialisation.

Tourism and Geopolitics

Tourism and geopolitics are inherently related. For one thing, tourism, especially international tourism, is highly susceptible to the vagaries of the wider geopolitical climate (Hall 2017). Secondly, tourism encounters and tourist experiences are invariably mediated by, and consist of, geopolitical discourse and practices (Gillena and Mostafanezhad 2019); at the same time, they also constitute geopolitical assemblages (Dittmer 2014). Obviously, being the world's largest industry, tourism has evolved to be one of the most far-reaching geopolitical practices in the contemporary era (Mostafanezhad 2018), and is intimately intertwined with other broader geopolitical issues such as migration, inequality, and climate change (Hannam, Butler and Paris 2014). On a micro scale, everyday geopolitics is regularly reflected and enacted by tourism (Dittmer 2010). That is, everyday discourse and practices of diplomacy, sovereignty, and nation building are reshaped and acted out through tourism. Despite the close entanglement of tourism and geopolitics, attentiveness to their intersection, especially to tourism's role in the shifting geopolitical landscape, is just beginning to emerge as an area of interest and concern. Indeed, it is important to develop new knowledge on the engagement of the two, because the ordinary, quotidian and seemingly banal processes, practices and experiences that make up tourism writ large are deeply enmeshed with geopolitics (Lisle 2016).

In the context of mainstream tourism scholarships, attention has been mainly dedicated to investigating the influence of geopolitical reality, and in particular geopolitical instability, on tourist experience (Weaver and Tang 2018), tourism flow (Hannam 2013; Webster and Ivanov 2014), as well as on the implementation or development of particular tourism projects, and the tourism industry as a whole (Bhandari 2019; Ram et al. 2017; Weaver 2010). Sanctions are a particular form of geopolitical intervention. Their adverse effects on tourism in the target

country have recently been identified and investigated (Seyfi and Hall 2019a, 2019b). Geopolitics, in this strand of research, is usually employed as a simple term, denoting the political relationship between nation-states, and often factored as a variable, in most situations as a constraint, influencing specific tourism elements. Most works in this stream fall short of further exploring the geopolitical implications of tourism practice beyond these parameters, and have done little to further theorise the relationship between tourism and geopolitics. Consequently, tourism is merely taken as incidental to geopolitics, unilaterally subject to the outcomes of geopolitical powers, rather than a force that is able to remould or reconfigure geopolitical processes. This is surprising, given that the influence of tourism in economic, social, cultural and environmental fields has been widely acknowledged (Weaver 2010).

An exception to this trend is the work of David B. Weaver (2015; see also Weaver and Becken 2015). Weaver conceptualises the relationship between tourism and Chinese geopolitics by emphasising the importance of state-led grand political narrative - the “Chinese Dream”. The “Chinese Dream” is a visionary concept or a slogan put forward by President Xi Jinping in 2012 which entails a set of national and personal aspirations, the most prominent of which is to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Wang 2014). Weaver argues that tourism has the capacity to function as a manifestation, facilitator and inhibitor of the attainment of this Dream. For the manifestation function, he refers to tourism as being an indicator of measuring whether this Dream is achieved in individuals. As to the facilitator and inhibitor functions, they denote the ability of tourism in assisting or dissuading certain state goals. However, this conceptualisation is not sufficiently grounded theoretically or empirically.

The other strand of research focusing on this topic emerges at the intersections of political geography, political science, and critical tourism research, wherein most works appreciate the geopolitical importance of tourism and widely analyze the seemingly contradictory but inextricable couplings of mundane travel practice and geopolitics. The foci

of these studies range from classic geopolitics to critical geopolitics, incorporating various themes, such as: borders, territory, and tourism (Hazbun 2004; Rowen 2014; Zelenskaya 2018; Zhang 2013); militarism, securitisation, and tourism (Lisle 2016; Ojeda 2013); popular and embodied geopolitics and tourism (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Miller and Del Casino 2018; Mostafanezhad and Promburom 2018), geopolitical constructions with tourism (Hall 2017), and tourism as a means of state soft power projection (Chen and Duggan 2016; Kwek, Wang and Weaver 2014). Among most studies, the quotidian power of tourism in shaping multi-scalar geopolitical relations is critically interrogated. Mostafanezhad (2018, 343) contends, for example, that bringing the tourism perspective into geopolitics “helps to illustrate how the ‘geo’ is ‘graphed’”. However, in practical terms, this usually manifests through the utilisation of tourism as a way of framing specific geopolitical issues, or as a backdrop where geopolitical powers and relations play out. Furthermore, some of these studies develop their analysis by accounting only for representational/discursive elements, and exploring how tourism reproduces, reinforces, contradicts, or sabotages certain geopolitical discourses or state policies, while leaving the non-discursive aspects of tourism relatively under-explored. As such, tourism is trivialised as a site only for reproducing, circulating, and legitimating hegemonic discourses and geopolitical imaginaries, rather than as a site of geopolitics in of itself.

With respect to the relationship between tourism and state territorialisation, critical tourism scholars have long noticed the geopolitical use of tourism as a tool for territorial claims in the SCS and the polar regions (Hall and Saarinen 2010; Timothy 2002). However, beyond stressing tourism as an economic expression of territorial occupation, these scholars neither fully conceptualise the interplay of tourism and state territorialisation, nor offer grounded accounts of how tourism is specifically engaged in the territorialisation strategy of a certain state. Hazburn (2004) is arguably the forerunner of theorising tourism in relation to territorialisation. He maintains that international tourism facilitates re-territorialisation

processes, increasing states' control over territorial assets, as tourism is a locational economy that values the particularity of places. Notably, Rowen (2014) makes an important theoretical contribution in this respect, and insightfully conceptualises tourism to be a technology of state territorialisation. He indicates that China's tourism to Taiwan is precisely a territorialisation strategy for ultimately annexing Taiwan. However, in Rowen's argument, this is more of a problematic geopolitical tactic, as tourism has unintentionally produced distinct territorial identities and contradictory sensations of 'stateness' between Chinese tourists and Taiwanese hosts. This is partly due to the regimented structure of Chinese group tourism, and the uneven economic benefits of tourism to Taiwan's public. Although such tourism seems unsuccessful in terms of integrating national identity, it has to be admitted that it is at least effective in reinforcing Taiwan's economic dependence on mainland tourism. As Rowen suggests elsewhere, the power of China's tourism is still very remarkable across the greater China region which is "profoundly affecting spatial, social, political, and economic order throughout the wider region, reconfiguring leisure spaces and economies, transportation infrastructure, popular political discourse, and geopolitical imaginaries" (Rowen 2016, 386). Our study seeks to build on these insights and focus on tourism's multiple roles, powers and effects in shaping the state territorialisation process in the maritime context.

The geopolitical attributes of China's tourism are widely noted across the literature canvassed above. This is not surprising given China's status as a global tourism superpower (UNWTO 2019) and its ever-increasing geopolitical prominence, with its reputation for frequently applying tourism as a geopolitical weapon. Many studies have recorded China's weaponization of tourism, such as, to sanction against Japan and the Philippines for Diaoyu and Huangyan Island territorial disputes respectively (Tse 2013), to punish South Korea for its deployment of the THAAD missile system (Juan, Choi, et al. 2017), as well as more recently

to increase pressure on the Tsai administration of Taiwan through banning individual travel of Chinese citizens to Taiwan (Jansen 2019).

On the face of it, the Chinese government has been successful in utilising tourism as a political vehicle to negotiate political interest and achieve geopolitical objectives. Therefore, some scholars contend that tourism should be viewed as one of China's most influential weapons in its arsenal of state power (Tse 2013). Nevertheless, when it comes to the case of China's tourism ventures in the SCS, the political efficacy of tourism should not be taken for granted, nor should it be seen as an inevitable expression of the state's will to expand or maintain its territorial borders. Rather than being solely an instrument of state territorialisation projects, we suggest that tourism is a significant geopolitical force that both compliments and complicates the will to claim sovereign possession of the SCS.

Tourism and Territorialisation

The territories claimed by nation-states have never been stable, and are in a process of constant change, flux and development. They are historically contingent, contested, and shaped by forces not limited to the nation-state. Territory is, after all, a situational and performative process that entail social practices and discourses that enact, maintain and police as well as subvert, challenge and transform (Paasi 1998, 2008). As far as attempts by nation-states to territorialise maritime space are concerned, making and maintaining maritime territories and borders have always been more difficult, because of the flowing and formless characteristics of the ocean. While it is (relatively) easy to draw lines across nautical maps and inscribe national maritime territories in international law, the production and maintenance of these dynamic and voluminous spaces as exclusively national relies on the regimes of performativity and structures of meanings. As Philip Steinberg notes,

... the history of the ocean is filled with attempts to mark off its spaces, if not as claimable territory then at least as zones where certain activities, by certain actors, are permitted and

other are prohibited. And yet, even when the locations of the lines are clear and well communicated (which, in fact, is often not the case), their meanings are worked out only through social practices (Steinberg 2013: 161-162).

The procedural and constructive nature of territory has long been seen as the preserve of 'high politics', relating to such matters as national security, war, and surveillance. Yet, the role of banal tourism in promoting and maintaining such territorialisation processes remains under-recognised. It is argued here that our understanding of the performative regime of territorialisation should be extended to incorporate tourism. That is to say, tourism should be conceptualised as constitutive of state territorialisation, rather than a by-product of the state's will to territorialise. It is, thus, an essential part of the performative and discursive assemblage that sustains the will to claim territorial possession of the SCS through recourse to sovereign right.

From the perspective of the state, tourism in the SCS is a sovereignty-asserting and territory-producing performance performed by the state in an elaborate dance with industry operators and civilian tourists. Operating tourism allows the state to establish a civilian presence, and perform effective jurisdiction and administration. Essentially, by enacting tourism over the sea, the territorial facts in relation to the state's sovereignty and ownership are constantly (re)inscribed and (re)written on representations, discourses, materialities and individual (tourist) bodies. During this process, new landscapes are tangibly configured, new leisure economies are developed, and new territorial narratives and popular geopolitical discourses are shaped and broadly circulated by various tourism actors. With the passage of time, as long as tourism gradually becomes the routine performance of the state over the sea, the *fait accompli* of territorial entitlement is realised, and the state's occupation on disputed lands and water is ultimately legitimated. In this way, tourism performatively produces the SCS space to be nationalised territories.

However, this monological and instrumental account of ‘tourism territorialisation’ is complicated by a more relational analysis of the performativity of SCS tourism. By performance, tourism can surely be seen as a choreographed political performance staged in the state’s claimed territory to project national power, propaganda territorial ideology and engineer nationalist affect (Chubby 2017; Rowen 2018). However, as any performative practice harbours the possibility of failure (Butler 1993), when tourism is performed to produce territorial facts, it does not necessarily guarantee the effect. Instead, it may challenge and subvert the state plan. It is through these relational performativities that we can understand how the SCS is constantly being remade through tourism.

Methods

China’s SCS tourism was launched in the Xisha chain of islands (Paracel Archipelago) via cruise tourism in 2013. Currently, it is exclusively operated by two state-owned companies: the Hainan Strait Shipping Co Ltd (HNSS), which runs the *Princess Changle* ship, and the Nanhai Cruise Enterprise (NHC), operating the *Nanhai Dream* vessel. Fieldwork was undertaken by the first author in the Xisha Islands and the Phoenix Island International Port of Sanya City, the departure site of Xisha cruise ships, from early December 2018 to the end of January 2019. Throughout the article, ‘I’ represents the lead author’s field experiences, while ‘we’ is used to acknowledge that this study is a collective effort.

The lead author’s positionality is a young Chinese female, studying for a PhD degree in tourism at an Australian university. Her national identity as a Chinese citizen here becomes a critical asset allowing her to access the field and to conduct this ethnographic research, as this tourism is open only for Chinese nationals. During the period of the fieldwork, she undertook two cruise voyages by the two ships respectively, in order to gain an immersive experience of being a tourist and better understand the tourism proceedings.

Despite being (in some senses) an ‘insider’, the lead author still did not have unfettered access to all tourism processes. Because of her overseas student identification, when applying for doing research on the ship, the NHC which is centrally administered by the state, directly rejected her intention, even though it had hosted many domestic Chinese students for academic objectives. The lead author was merely allowed to board its vessel as a tourist, since “it is the right granted by (her) nationality”, according to the manager of NHC. Yet, the boundary between being a tourist and a researcher on the ship was not specified but blurred, as they did not prevent her from approaching their hospitality staff nor interviewing other tourists.

By contrast, the attitude of the HNSS, which is mainly controlled by the local Hainan Provincial Government, was relatively forthcoming. Nevertheless, such a welcome was only limited to the non-political talking. As long as it was relevant to the political aspect of the tourism, the lead author was still largely treated as an outsider. As such, the lead author was simultaneously an insider and outsider throughout the fieldwork. However, such a position was not necessarily a methodological impediment, but a resource. The interplay between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, and also between tourist and researcher afforded her an ability to ‘relate’ and ‘reflect’ to this tourism from more than one perspective (Navaro-Yashin 2012).

Three techniques were adopted to collect empirical data, involving non-participatory and participatory observations, interviews, and gathering of official documents and statements in relation to Xisha tourism, as well as tourism marketing materials. In total, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff working on the two cruise vessels. To protect their privacy, all interviewees were de-identified. In the literature review section, we have suggested that existing studies tend to overlook the embodied physicality and materiality of geopolitical tourism processes. Given this, equal attention was given to materiality, discourses and practices of the travel in the data collection and analysis. Fieldwork data incorporating observation-note,

guides' commentaries and interview, was interpreted through thematic analysis, while government, and tourism materials were examined through discourse analysis.

China's tourism in the South China Sea

China deploys its SCS tourism in three non-military islands of the Xisha area. This area is still claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam, although after the Sino-Vietnam naval battle in 1974, it has been under the de facto control of China, and more specifically, the jurisdiction of the Sansha city of Hainan Province. The establishment of Sansha City in 2012, a prefectural-level city designated to administer the entire maritime space within the nine-dash line, was regarded as a sign of China's growing assertiveness in consolidating its grips in the SCS (Zhao 2013). Tourism plays a crucial role in the government work of Sansha, which envisages tourism as its economic engine, thereby to consolidate its administrative control over the region (The People's Government of Sansha City 2013).

In fact, the geopolitical objectives underpinning the development of Xisha tourism have never been disguised by China's central government. These ends were explicitly conveyed in a speech made by the former deputy director of China National Tourism Administration, Zhifa Wang, in 2012, the year that the Xisha tourism cruise took its trial voyage. Wang said, "developing Xisha tourism can be conducive to defending the border, declaring our sovereignty, and solving the problems of other islands in the South China Sea" (Ministry of Natural Resources of the PRC 2012). Wang did not further specify how operating Xisha tourism could help China to achieve these purposes. The mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the CCTV (China Central Television) and Huanqiu Shibao, gave explanations from two aspects when reporting Wang's speech. Firstly, tourism is believed to strengthen the legal position of China's presence in Xisha and the entire SCS, because according to international law, it represents an action of China practicing effective jurisdiction

and administration. Secondly, conducting tourism assists in boosting the territorial and sovereignty awareness of ordinary Chinese, and cultivates their patriotism (CCTV 2012, Huanqiu Shibao 2012). The political nature of Xisha tourism was also reflected in the direct and proactive involvement of several central government departments in the deployment and promotion of the tourism, such as the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. A page promoting the Xisha tour, for instance, was deliberately created by the Ministry of National Defense on their official website (Ministry of National Defense of the PRC 2016).

Importantly, China's tourism ambition is not limited to its present focus on Xisha, but will be extended to other places. In a policy paper issued by Beijing with respect to "Comprehensively Deepening the Reform and Opening up of Hainan Province", it suggested that "the development of the tourism resource in Xisha Islands should be orderly and vigorously boosted; simultaneously other places' and forms' island tourism in the SCS should also be steadily opened up in order to serve and guarantee the implementation of national grand strategies" (CCP Central Committee and State Council 2018). Indeed, the expansion to other islands in Xisha has been corroborated by cruise staff, among which the Zhaoshu and Jinqing Island have begun constructing tourism infrastructure.

Further afield, expansion to Nansha Islands (Spratly Islands), where the territorial dispute is more intense as more nations are involved, is also under design. The official tourism planning of Hainan Province has scheduled several schemes for tourism in Nansha (The People's Government of Hainan Province 2017). Interestingly, this official planning indicates that China would initiate its Nansha tourism in a special way – by cooperating with other SCS coastal countries. In this planning, tourism in the SCS was positioned as a basis for broader joint development with other SCS claimants, while the SCS was designed to be a cooperation zone for future ocean tourism. In light of the political complexities in the Nansha zone, this

collaborative approach to tourism development might be understood as a pragmatic strategy to balance China's territorial assertions and its actual capabilities to defend and advance such assertions. However, this cooperative modality indicates that China's territorial claims and sovereignty assertions are no longer exclusive, but shared with other SCS nations to some extent.

The Xisha cruise liners depart several times a month from the Phoenix Island International Port of Sanya, Hainan Province, carrying several hundred passengers each time. It is worthwhile noting that the two cruise liners are far from archetypal cruise ships; both are retrofitted from mixed passenger-cargo vessels. Despite the inferior quality of the facilities of these cruise liners, the price is by no means cost-effective with fares ranging from 4,300 to 20,000 Yuan. By contrast, the lowest price of luxury cruises to Japan with the same itinerary only cost 2,000 Yuan (Ctrip 2019). However, although the Xisha cruise trip is more expensive and less modern than most, its route's uniqueness and exclusivity ensure it is never short of customers. The itineraries of the two cruise liners are identical, with three destination islands visited during a four-day-and-three-night voyage. Likewise, the onboard and onshore activities offered are broadly similar. The three destinations are Quanfu, Yagong and Yingyu Island. They are all quite small, of which Quanfu Island has the largest area, approximately 0.02 square kilometers, while the smallest is Yingyu with only 0.006 square kilometres¹. Among them, Quanfu Island is a totally uninhabited island possessing the most pristine landscape; the Yagong and Yingyu Island already have a civilian presence with more than one hundred fishermen dwelling there and two special residential committees have accordingly been established for the daily administrative governance of the two islands. Limited by the small size of the islands and also to protect the marine ecological environment, these islands are

¹ These island area figures are informed by the stewards, and in Yingyu Island there is a billboard illustrating the basic informing concerning the size of the island and the fishing community.

merely designed for sightseeing rather than offering a resort-style holiday with accommodation.

Enacting the Politics of Territory

This section primarily elaborates on the territorial politics played out on the ground. It begins with a presentation of the regulation and structure of Xisha tourism, followed by a rendering of the meaning of travel as defined by the government authorities and performed by the tour operators.

Regulating Tourism

Travelling to Xisha was politically-charged from the outset, reflected by its rigorous background check on tourists. It was a carefully qualification-restricted and vetted trip, solely open to upstanding mainland Chinese citizens without any criminal or illegal records. It prohibits the participation of citizens of Hong Kong and Macao, forbidding overseas Chinese and foreign passport holders. When booking the tour, potential tourists were required to submit a travel application with a copy of their ID cards. These application materials were then handed over by the tourism agencies to the Sansha government for political examination. Only after passing the vetting could tourists take the cruise. The content of the travel application, in addition to including the basic information of the applicant, contained background information on the individual traveller's family members. The most noticeable part of this application lay in a special requirement which demanded the travellers to acknowledge and state their territorial identities, duties and allegiances:

I personally understand that the Xisha Islands are the sacred and inalienable territory of China. I will abide by national laws and regulations, be responsible for my own words and deeds during my travel, and bear corresponding legal responsibilities if I conduct any inappropriate behaviour.

This restriction on travellers' eligibility seems understandable given entire Xisha Islands belong to military controlled area, and the three touristic islands are quite close to troop-stationed islands. As such, special restrictions are imposed on tourists taking photos, filming videos, recording and other actions with the possibility of disclosing military secrets. For instance, it prohibited any recording of military management areas, military equipment and military activities encountered during the voyage, and to carry aerial equipment, such as drones. All relevant restrictions and constraints were explicitly explained on the ticket and the ID cards of the cruise in a warning language which stated: "to protect national security and interest is everyone's responsibility".

The structure and management of Xisha tourism were highly regimented and disciplined. It was organised in a group tour pattern for better collective management, which is common in China's package tourism but quite rare in cruise travel. Before boarding, all tourists were grouped into teams with a butler or steward allocated to each team, whose task was to chaperone the team during the entire journey, introduce sites and direct activities. After being grouped, most touristic activities, especially offshore excursions to the islands proceeded in teams. Instead of traditional cruise hospitality staff, the steward took on political roles, in some way not dissimilar to 'government minders' as they were involved in disseminating territorial ideologies and monitoring the 'transgressive behavior' of tourists (Connell 2019).

During the four-day-three-night itinerary, two days were arranged to explore the three tiny islands in the morning and afternoon through taking inflatable boats. Because the island-visiting was only carried out at certain periods of time and along with commuting time, tourists' onshore time was actually quite limited, on the whole restricted to less than one and a half hours. After going ashore, the steward generally first led the group around the island, providing information concerning the islands, the fishing communities on the islands, and the historical and political situations of SCS. One of the most imperative points in every steward's narratives

was the interpretation of two territorial sovereignty signs — the stone markers inscribed with China’s rightful jurisdiction, and the national flag station — which together constituted the most prominent landscape on each island. Here, a meaning-laden patriotic ritual, the national flag-raising and oath-taking ceremony, was held to declare China’s national sovereignty over the SCS. Attending such a ceremony was strongly encouraged as it attested “our [tourists’] support to the territorial claim of our nation” (the steward of *Nanhai Dream*).

After the ceremony and the stewards’ island interpretation, there were no more collective activities arranged by tourism operators. Tourists were left free to explore by themselves. However, on these tiny islands, the tourists could do nothing more than visit fishing villages to do shopping or dining, take photographs, experience the scenery or swim in a small enclosed sea area. Among these activities, taking photographs was usually the most recommended practice, in particular posing for photographs with the Chinese national flag in hand as well as with the two aforementioned sovereignty-iconic signs which were depicted as the “must-be” photographed scenes and the embodiment of the meaning of Xisha tourism, as shown in figure 1. A photograph wall covered with elaborately selected “classic tourist photos” representing Xisha, was especially created in the cruise ship to direct tourists’ gaze and guide them to better capture and visually consume Xisha. By doing so, the Xisha tourism operators encourage the tourists to be complicit actors in the ‘circle of representation’ of territorial facts (Jenkins 2003). Hence, both of them collaborate in (re)producing and (re)defining territorial facts and ultimately perpetuate it.

Anything else in addition to these mentioned actions were discouraged, even forbidden and declared unsafe. A special security sector was set up to supervise and deter tourists from engaging in any ‘out of place’ behaviour in tandem with their responsibility for tourist safety. As such, under the omnipresent surveillance, and the subtle direction and control of guides and

guards, tourists were regulated to act in a normative, proper manner, whilst their mobilities were confined to a circumscribed space.

When it came to onboard arrangements, most leisure entertainments and performance shows revolved around China's territorial ideology and patriotism. For example, almost all films in the cruise movie house were relevant to China's revolution and warfare victories. Particularly, the 1974 China-Vietnam naval battle documentary was organised to be watched collectively. A CCP membership learning centre was even established to provide Party materials for tourists to study while on the cruise. As a result, the cruise space was purposely transformed into a propaganda stage.



Figure 1. Tourist posing with the Chinese national flag

(Source: photograph by the author)

Investing Travel with Territorial Meaning

The meaning of Xisha tourism was largely defined by the fierce and ongoing geopolitical contentions of the SCS. Travelling to Xisha was officially sanctioned as a form of patriotic

tourism. This patriotic orientation was uniformly represented and circulated in both online and offline tourism marketing, and repeatedly performed on the actual journey. The marketing message presented on the website of Hainan International Tourism Agency, a state-owned tourism agency, is exemplary, as illustrated in figure 2. Accompanied with an evocative picture pertaining to the national flag and a patriotic declaration written on it, taking Xisha tourism was depicted as a way to “demonstrate [tourists’] patriotism to our homeland and uphold China’s sovereignty over the Xisha region” (Hainan International Tourism Agency 2019). The similar content with subtle variations pervaded literally each and every corner of the travel industry. As such, the governmental authorities hegemonically controlled the definition and representation of this travel, thereby shaping individuals’ touristic and geopolitical imaginations long before they actually set foot on the Xisha destination.



Figure 2. The Promotion of Xisha Tourism in the Hainan International Tourism Agency

Articulating and performing the geopolitical meaning of Xisha travel also constituted a key part of the narratives of tourism operators. In the actual Xisha tour, it was explained as “an absolutely special domestic tourism since it represents our deep love for this land, for this great country” (the emcee of the night performance on *Changle*). The geopolitical significance of taking this travel was particularly elaborated at the national flag-raising ceremony. The *Changle’s master of ceremonies* exclaimed in a well-rehearsed and well-scripted language:

As we all know, there have been many disputes in Xisha and the South China Sea. Today we raising the national flag here is to declare our sovereignty over this sea, to let the world know who the South China Sea belongs to. Today, as the identity of tourists, we tell the world with our might and in our manner that the South China Sea belongs to [us] China. This ceremony shows not only the unstoppable persistence of Xisha tourism since it opened, but also a way to express our gratitude to our great homeland and to the soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for the peace of Xisha. Let us use our voices and actions to appreciate our great nation, okay?

Far from merely asserting China’s sovereignty by using abstract slogans and empty rhetoric, Xisha tourism practitioners also employed a technique of politicising the temporality of territorial possession to materialise the legitimacy of these claims. This was done by narrating a teleological version of China’s history, and positioning China’s ownership of the SCS within this supposedly linear and inexorable history. In both cruise liners, a special program named “Xisha knowledge interpretation” was arranged to systematically detail China’s historical facts in the SCS. Presented in a chronological order and adopting a scientific approach by means of charts, graphs and statistics, numerous historical evidence in relation to China’s discovery, name, exploration and exploitation of this region, such as historical maps and relics, and ancient administration records, were listed to convince its audience that “Xisha Islands and the SCS have been China’s inherent territory since ancient times” (the program organisers of both cruises). From then on, the discursive performance of China’s historical legitimacy in the SCS permeated the entire travel. The history-as-territory rhetoric, such as: “the history holds the

truth. It will tell who the true master of this sea is”, was relentlessly articulated in various situations during the trip. Through the discursive performance and material presentation of temporal evidence, China’s ownership over the SCS was rendered ‘frozen’ without any historical and geographical shifts. Thereby, China’s SCS history and territorial sovereignty were geopolitically graphed (Norum and Mostafanezhad 2016).

Moreover, the present was also politicised to enhance tourists’ confidence in China’s capability to safeguard this land. This type of temporal politics was played out in the deliberate performance of China’s achievements in science, technology, military and diplomacy over the years. For example, in various situations, the scientific and technological progress and innovations of great significance made in recent years, such as the launch of China’s first domestic aircraft carrier and the completion and opening of Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, were expounded with passion.

Following the Rule of Tourism

This section reveals and discusses the transformative power of tourism, presenting how it has transformed – and is transforming – the SCS into attractions. Rather than seeing these processes as subsequent to state-led forms of territorialisation, we show that they are productive of the Chinese state’s (re)territorialisations of the SCS.

Tourism is a major contemporary force in (re)producing and (re)shaping places, politics and cultures, which is described as being a significant ‘world-making’ agency (Hollinshead, Ateljevic and Ali 2009). Similarly, Franklin contended that tourism should be regarded as an active order of modernity, as “it is remade or is in the process of remaking the world anew as a touristic world to be seen, felt, interpellated and travelled” (2004, 277). In this case, when these territorially disputed islands and waters of Xisha are open for visiting, tourism, using its own agency, is forcing the intermediaries to create more attractions and products for tourist

consumption, gradually turning these geopolitical spaces into touristic spaces. The mechanism through which tourism achieved such power is its market logic. Although the Xisha tour was geopolitically directed, both the cruise operators and employees were largely driven by the profit motive. At times, the practitioners adapted agendas to cater to tourists, instead of strictly adhering to official prescriptions. Consequently, deviations between state intention and the actual practices appeared. These gaps were embodied in two aspects of the practices of operators: revealing geopolitical sensitivities concerning the SCS, and fully exposing the ‘back-stage’ of the fishing community.

Xisha tourism is fashioned in the image of geopolitical concerns. Tourists were clearly aware of its political tenor and even motivated by it. The ongoing territorial dispute, as well as the limited accessibility to this region, form the most attractive points, and also render Xisha Islands distinct from other usual destinations. In view of that, providers often intentionally or unconsciously disclosed information regarding SCS territorial rivalries to satisfy tourists’ geopolitical imaginaries about this sea, and to demonstrate the uniqueness of this tour as well. For example, the special function of the cruise ships for military use was revealed. As aforementioned, all Xisha cruise ships were refitted from mixed passenger-cargo vessels. Such a characteristic was fully taken advantage of by the governmental authority to serve for logistics and transportation of the military and civilians, apart from its usual tourism usage. This dual function is commended by the government as a model of the “military-civilian joint construction” (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the PRC 2017). This disclosure was detailed by the steward of *Nanhai Dream* when interpreting the cruise history:

Does everybody know the South China Sea arbitration case of July 2016? Before that, there was a military exercise held in the SCS. At that time, because we were state-owned enterprises, the state requisitioned our ship to transport tanks and military supplies. When we take you to the third-floor tomorrow, you will see that there are some grooves on the deck, which were used to fix cars, boats and tanks. Now in peacetime, the cruise liner is

mainly used for transporting people and groceries, like government staff, fisherfolk, and soldiers.

Not limited to discursively interpret this extraordinary function of the cruise ships, there were a series of tangible objects to convince tourists that what they had embarked on was an exceptional ship serving national interests. In the cruise ship *Princess Changle*, a photograph concerning the ship undertaking the purportedly honorable task of troop and supplies transportation in the Nansha Islands was well decorated and placed in a prominent position of the cruise hall. Furthermore, in accordance with the interest and curiosity of tourists, the staff often openly disclosed on which island troops were stationed, the location of these islands, the types of troops present, what kinds of facilities and equipment were on the islands and how advanced warships they once witnessed and so forth.

When stewards strenuously boasted the geopolitical sensibilities of the tour to impress tourists, some of their exposures had been at the fringe of possible disclosure of national secrets, which contradicted the government requirement. The revelation of the surveillance platform provided a good example in point. Due to the small size of these tiny islands, few things can be toured, especially when it came to the uninhabitable Quanfu Island. In this circumstance, the only artificial building on Quanfu, which was installed with surveillance and information facilities, became the tourist attraction:

You can see this building which seems unfinished. In fact, it is not unfinished; it is as it is. The slanted panel on the top of the building is a solar panel, and there is a camera on it, a military camera. The other two islands also have such a building, but because there are many other constructions, they are not as conspicuous as here. This camera is set up by the troop on the opposite island - Shanhu Island - to monitor the safety of the surrounding waters. There are troops stationed on that island which had been occupied by Vietnam for 18 years until the Xisha naval battle.

Although China's effort to establish maritime surveillance and information networks was

widely documented (Dahm 2018), it was still unimaginable to see the employees deliberately exposing the surveillance facility to tourists. When asked about the intention behind this introduction, all stewards explained: “because there is nothing to talk about on that island. That building is the only thing worth introducing to tourists”. When further questioned if they were worried about divulging relevant national and military secrets, one of them said: “now that the state has decided to open these islands for tourism, there is nothing to worry about. Furthermore, interpreting such sites can allow tourists to better understand the sacredness and seriousness of this place”. These explanations correspond to Nyíri’s (2006) argument regarding China’s tourism development approach. Nyíri suggests that China’s tourism is idiosyncratically unfolded in a form of scenic spots, bounded and controlled zones wherein attractions are presented one by one for interpretation, visiting and sightseeing. For fear of nothing to offer for tourist consumption, or for fear it is not like traditional ‘tourism’, the staff chose to transform as much geopolitical information and objects to be tourist attractions as possible.

The second aspect manifesting the transformative power of tourism is the almost complete exposure and staging of the fishing communities. Generally, in order to protect the normal life of locals, the backstage of the destination is closed to tourists (MacCannell 1973). Yet, at Xisha, the front-back stage dichotomy was dissolved. There was no division between them. The backstage of these island destinations was fully open for tourists to visit. Tourists were encouraged to enter the homes of fishermen to socialise with them and learn more about their island lives, of course, among others, learning more about their stories of defending national territory. A typical example came from the disclosure of the role of fisherfolk in China’s SCS comprehensive strategy. The steward of *Nanhai Dream* elaborated:

The fishermen here are the ones assisting our nation to defend the frontier. As we all know, the South China Sea is a special place. If our popularity is booming, the outsiders (invaders) dare not to come, let alone to encroach on our territories or illegally fish here.

The state lets our fishermen live here for six months every year, and then gives them a subsidy of 40-60 yuan per day. When the fishermen are dwelling here, they can fish as usual and at the same time help our nation to guard the frontier. In addition, the tourism development also provides a new way for our fisherfolk to earn an income.

Utilising fisherfolk as a force to bolster maritime presence is not uncommon in the territorially contended SCS. China, Vietnam and the Philippines have all employed fisherfolk as key actors to defend their alleged maritime rights (Zhang 2016). China has mobilised its fisherfolk to join in the maritime militia and encouraged them to enduringly reside in these disputed islands by providing a special subsidy, which is dubbed as “people’s war at sea” (Kraska and Monti 2015). Developing tourism in the SCS, in addition to directly strengthening China’s territorial claim, can support the civilian territorialisation of fisherfolk by enriching and supplementing their livelihood sources and thereby promoting their permanent settlement on these contested islands. Moreover, tourism development is contributive to decreasing the reliance of fisherfolk on fishery resources, and preserving the marine ecological environment of the SCS. This factor is also of significance given that the entire SCS fish stock is heavily depleted (Li and Liu 2016).

Furthermore, every banal detail concerning how fisherfolk sustain their daily lives on these isolated islands was transformed into attractions to meet tourists’ curiosities and to rich tourist product supply, such as the residential and office complex built by the government for the free use of fisherfolk, the desalination facilities, solar power generators, free WiFi equipment, and even the vegetable gardens and livestock raised by fishermen. However, all of these mundane introductions were just to convey that “now nothing is lacking on the islands. Life here is as modern as living in the mainland” (the steward of *Changle*). In this sense, it is suggested that tourism at Xisha is not simply a revelation of the backstage of fishing communities, but more akin to an orchestrated performance being enacted on the island-stage, aiming to demonstrate the political efforts conducted by the Chinese state to enhance the living conditions of fisherfolk, as well as the tangible improvement having been brought about by

such efforts. Therefore, this kind of backstage exposure actually points to a dissolution of both front and back stages, whereby the touristic islands were fully choreographed as a stage (Edensor 2001), to perform China's achievement in upgrading this region. In this tourism performance, tourists were also invited to take a role, specifically the role of a witness watching the historical happenings on these islands. This conforms to the consistent practices of the CCP which frequently takes tourism as a technique to propagandise the efforts it has done for China's independence and prosperity to win more respect and legitimacy for its rule (Zhao and Timothy 2017).

Conclusion

This study interrogates the geopolitical nature of China's Xisha tourism, unravels the territorial politics played out in tourism, while examining the complex interplay between tourism and territorialisation. Based on an ethnographic approach and discourse analysis, this study demonstrates that Xisha tourism is inherently geopolitical and integral to China's comprehensive geopolitical strategy in the SCS for territorialisation. Tourism is designed by the state to directly uphold China's sovereignty and territorial claims in the SCS, and also to implicitly support China's other territorialisation projects in the region. In the indirect respect, tourism is practiced to assist the economic development of Sansha City, and serve some military uses, while facilitating the permanent settlement of fishermen on the disputed islands.

This study also reveals China's tourism expansion ambition to Nansha Islands. Yet, it suggests that such an expansion is not necessarily a unilateral territorial expansion, but seems more to be a territorial preservation tactic; that is, aiming to consolidate China's existing territorial occupations in Nansha. This is because China stressed it would jointly work on tourism development with other SCS countries and designed tourism as a peace-maker, and a stepping stone for further high-politics cooperation with other nations. This finding partially

supports the argument of Fravel (2011) concerning China's SCS dispute attitude that China is more concerned with solidifying its present territorial possessions and maritime rights. To some extent, China's cooperation strategy can be seen as a fulfilment of China's initiative in solving the SCS territorial rivalries that "shelve disputes, jointly develop", proposed by Deng Xiaoping. In this way, tourism would not necessarily aggravate geopolitical conflicts in the SCS, rather may provide an alternative way to peacefully co-exist and accrue mutual benefits from the cooperative approach to exploiting this sea. This finding is contrary to the argument of Rowen (2018) that the tourism operation in the SCS would most likely lead to a tourism war. It seems unlikely at least on the level of high-politics arrangement.

Characteristically, Xisha tourism is found to be politically-oriented, and in a highly regimented and disciplined structure in order to better propagandise and legitimate China's geopolitical strategies and territorial claims. By virtue of such rigid tour organisations, careful activity and mobility arrangements, and selective site presentations and interpretations, the Xisha tourism operators maintained full control over the sights, temporalities and spaces experienced by tourists. Also, they involved the tourists as complicit actors in the (re)production and redefinition of territorial facts, whilst framing them as passive spectators of tourist sites and receivers of the indoctrination of territorial ideology. The governmental authorities and tourism intermediaries hegemonically control the definition, representation and interpretation of the meaning of this travel, wherein travelling to Xisha is defined and performed as a voyage to feel patriotism, to participate in a historical happening, and to witness the rising of China.

Space needs to be thought of as a performative articulation of power (Gregson and Rose 2000). In this study, we argue that tourism is a performative territorial practice capable of producing nationalised territories in the SCS. It also reveals that Xisha tourism is performatively constituted, that is, a staged and scripted performance performed by tourism

operators for the purpose of political propaganda and power projection. The islands are choreographed as a stage whereby the government internally performs China's rightful ownership over the SCS, a rising Chinese image and the efforts and achievements that it has conducted to upgrade this region to its nationals, whilst externally projecting China's state sovereignty and control over this sea.

More generally, this study uncovers the entanglement of tourism and territorialisation. Tourism and territorialisation are mutually constituted and interdependent. Tourism is not just an instrument for territory and sovereignty claims, a site in which fierce geopolitical rivalries play out, but also one that proactively engages in the process of state (re)territorialisation to performatively produce the effect of national territories. On the other hand, although tourism supports and facilitates China's geopolitical intentions, it also contradicts and even challenges the state's political arrangements to some extent, when tourism exercises its transformative power to remould disputed territories into tourism destinations and transform sensitive geopolitical information into tourism products. As such, the interaction between tourism and territorialisation is more complicated, beyond the duality that one supports, supplements or subverts the other. However, even if there are dissonances, tourism appears to largely align with China's geopolitical ambitions.

The main argument of this study suggests that tourism should be conceptualised as a constitutive dimension of geopolitical restructuring processes in the SCS, and an essential part of the performative and discursive assemblage that sustains the will to claim territorial possession of the SCS through recourse to sovereign right. Besides being empirically-innovative, this study contributes to conceptual innovations in research on tourism and geopolitics. By going beyond the traditional research focus on the hard-power of the SCS maritime territorial contention, and attending to the under-researched tourism operation, this study offers a fresh perspective on the geopolitical dynamics in the SCS.

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