Article

Touching Hearts before Convincing Minds: Red Tourism and the Construction of Chinese Value Identity among International Students

Ruiqi Zhang[1,2,*]

[1] School of Tourism Sciences, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China
[2] China Red Tourism Research Institute, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China
* Correspondence: Ruiqi Zhang, School of Tourism Sciences, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China; China Red Tourism Research Institute, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

Abstract: Red tourism has become a latent channel for China's international communication, yet research has concentrated on domestic tourists, leaving the identity formation of international students largely unexamined. Drawing on acculturation theory, interaction ritual chain theory and place attachment theory, this study develops a framework of cultural distance, experience type and identity level, and examines how anti-fascist commemorative narratives are transformed across cultural boundaries. Using a mixed-method design, the study finds that international students display an "emotion first, cognition lagging" structure: peace value identification exceeds factual understanding of the historical events. Ritual participation exerts the strongest effect on emotional resonance, which in turn drives behavioural intention and mediates the cognition–behaviour link, while cultural distance weakens the conversion of experience into identity. The findings reposition red tourism as a site where shared universal values travel more easily than national historical detail, and suggest that its international expression should move from translation to structural reorientation of narrative emphasis.

Keywords: red tourism; cross-cultural communication; international students; value identity; cultural distance

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Red tourism refers to themed tourism activities organised around the sites and markers that commemorate the achievements of the Chinese people under the leadership of the Communist Party of China during the revolutionary and wartime periods, with the revolutionary history, deeds and spirit embedded in these sites as its substantive content. Since the promulgation of the 2004–2010 National Red Tourism Development Plan, more than two decades of policy promotion and market development have transformed red tourism from a single instrument of political education into a composite undertaking that combines national identity construction, cultural transmission, industrial revitalisation and local development [1]. Red tourism resources are therefore simultaneously heritage sites, educational bases and tourism products [2].

In parallel, the building of international communication capacity has been elevated to the level of national strategy. Soft power is not generated through one-way information delivery but depends on audiences' reproduction of meaning in concrete situations [3]. The war memorials, sites and museums on which red tourism relies provide precisely such a situation of "embodied presence": audiences no longer encounter Chinese history indirectly through media texts, but experience historical narratives directly under the compound stimuli of space, materiality and ritual.

Received: 29 September 2026
Revised: 05 November 2026
Accepted: 19 November 2026
Published: 22 November 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The continued expansion of the international student population in China provides a realistic sample for this inquiry. As a culturally distinct group that resides in China over an extended period and is deeply embedded in Chinese social life, international students are simultaneously the targets of national-condition education and potential "third-party communicators" of Chinese stories. Existing studies find that study experience in China and scholarship policies significantly shape the breadth and emotional orientation of international students' perceptions of China [4], while their perception of China's national image displays a marked tension between "developmental achievements" and "institutional imagination" [5]. Yet through which experiential mechanisms such perceptual change occurs, and under what conditions it is obstructed, remains empirically unexamined.

The year 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. This juncture offers a distinctive narrative opportunity: the anti-fascist war, as a world-historical event, possesses an inherently transnational memory foundation and moral consensus, and the historical facts of international cooperation in China's resistance—such as Norman Bethune, the Flying Tigers and the Soviet volunteer air group—provide commensurable symbolic resources for cross-cultural narration. How to narrate "China's resistance" as part of "the world's anti-fascist memory" is a question that the international expression of red tourism must answer.

1.2. Research Questions

Against this background, the study addresses one core question: how does red tourism construct Chinese value identity among international students? This question can be decomposed into three interlocking sub-questions. First, through what encoding, channel and decoding stages are anti-fascist historical narratives cross-culturally transformed within the red tourism field, and which narrative elements possess cross-cultural commensurability? Second, what structural features does international students' value identity exhibit in red tourism, and are there systematic differences across cultural spheres? Third, how do experience type, cognition and emotion divide labour and transmit influence in identity formation, and in what sense does cultural distance constitute a boundary condition?

1.3. Research Significance

Theoretically, this study extends the audience boundary of red tourism research from domestic tourists to international students, and attempts to answer an interdisciplinary question at the intersection of communication studies and tourism studies: under what conditions is value identification possible across cultures? Research on tourism and national identity has developed a relatively mature explanatory framework [6,7], but its implicit premise is that audiences and narrators share the same body of historical memory and cultural codes. Whether the logic of identity formation changes when audiences enter the narrative field with differentiated cognitive frameworks still requires theoretical re-examination. By incorporating cultural distance into the analytical framework, this study seeks to reveal the boundary conditions of identity construction and to offer a new explanatory path for research on the nexus between tourism and political identity.

Practically, the findings provide an operational basis for the international expression of red tourism. First, they inform experimental content design for the national-condition curricula of "Study in China" programmes. Second, they supply audience evidence for multilingual exhibition, narrative stratification and ritual design in revolutionary memorials. Third, through the "reverse communication" of international students, they suggest a grassroots pathway for integrating anti-fascist narratives into the global system of historical memory.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Red Tourism and National Identity

Domestic red tourism research has developed a fairly complete thematic spectrum. Analyses based on scientific knowledge mapping show that the field has shifted its centre of gravity from resource development and product design towards educational function, identity mechanisms and high-quality development [8]. According to differences in research orientation, existing contributions can be grouped into three main strands.

Identity effects are the most closely watched topic. Taking the Jinggangshan scenic area as a case, Zuo found that red tourism activities significantly enhanced tourists' cognition of and affection for the Communist Party of China, and indirectly promoted party-identification behaviour [6]. Li et al. revealed the mechanism through which red tourism experience influences national identity via red emotion [9]; Zhang and Liu employed fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis to identify multiple path combinations—social memory, scenic area image, perceived value and tourism experience—that shape national identity [10]. Drawing on online user-generated content, Qian et al. constructed a theoretical model of "red tourism experience–collective memory–place identity–national identity", arguing that identity is multi-scalar and exhibits a "geographical leap" from place identity to national identity [11]. Du et al. demonstrated the intrinsic link between red tourism and public national identity at the level of cultural logic [12]. The shared contribution of this strand lies in confirming the identity effects of red tourism; its shared limitation lies in the presumed homogeneity of audiences—research subjects have been almost exclusively fellow citizens who share the same system of historical memory.

A second strand addresses the educational function and value internalisation. Lu noted early on the positive role of red tourism in the ideological and political education of university students [13]; Zheng employed online textual analysis to reveal the process of value internalisation in red tourism and its association with the generation of national well-being [14]; Li et al. systematically expounded the theoretical logic and dynamic process through which red tourism transmits red memory [15]. In recent years the analytical gaze has descended further towards experiential mechanisms: Wang et al. introduced the theory of transformative tourism experience, arguing that red tourism is the core direction of red tourism development and depends on visitors moving from "viewing" to "transformation"[16]; Liu and Qiao discussed the cultural value and educational function of red tourism using the Red Flag Canal as a case [17]; Li proposed a development path from the perspective of shaping core values [18]. Notably, all these studies take domestic students or domestic tourists as subjects, where no cultural barrier separates educator from educated and the "translation cost" of value transmission is assumed to be zero.

A third strand concerns emotional mechanisms and experience measurement. Emotion and affect are regarded as key mediators linking experience and identity. Guo et al. found that awe mediates the relationship between red tourism and national identity [19]; Liu et al. examined the influence of emotional arousal on tourists' cognition in red tourism settings [20]; Dong and Wang further verified the mediating effect of awe in the process through which red tourism shapes red identity [21]. Wang et al. tested the relationships among cognitive experience, affective experience, national identity and subjective well-being using partial least squares structural equation modelling, finding that cognitive experience significantly affects affective experience, which in turn significantly affects national identity [22]. Zhang and Jiang delineated the influence path of Olympic heritage tourism settings on national identity from the perspective of cognitive-affective system theory [23]; Lin et al. found that collective memory influences national identity through collective pride [24]; Yuan and Ma discussed the relationship between tourism experience and place identity from the perspective of "walking memory"[25]. At the macro level, Zhang and Ma discussed red tourism development grounded in national identity under the new development pattern [26]; Gao et al. characterised the spatio-temporal features and influencing factors of online attention to red tourism [27]; Zhai and Shi analysed the evolutionary patterns and attention allocation of red tourism policy based on policy texts from 2004 to 2020[1]; Zhou et al. delineated the

path through which red tourism promotes spiritual elevation, using the Xiangjiang Campaign memorial park of the Long March as a case [28]; and Song examined the emotional experience and communication of tourism in revolutionary old areas from the perspective of national identity education for university students [29].

Taken together, the domestic literature has established a robust explanatory chain from experience to emotion to identity, yet it remains anchored in a single cultural community. Whether the chain holds when the audience does not share the narrators' memory code has not been tested.

2.2. War Heritage Tourism in International Research

International research on war heritage tourism provides an important frame of reference. Packer and Ballantyne's longitudinal study of Australian war memorials and battlefield sites showed that such visits significantly enhanced visitors' understanding of national identity, with the mechanism residing in the "emotional involvement" and "generational connection" afforded by narrative [30]. Within the broader field of dark tourism, Stone proposed a "dark tourism spectrum" typology, noting the complex tension between the "degree of darkness" of commemorative sites and their educational and commemorative functions [31]. Heritage studies, from a constructivist perspective, emphasise that heritage is never an object in itself but a selection and representation of meaning made by contemporary society according to present needs [32,33]. Anti-fascist commemorative practices in European countries offer direct material for cross-cultural comparison: commemorative ceremonies at Red Army cemeteries in Slovakia and similar practices all translate war memory into collective expressions of the value of peace through spatial symbols and ritual procedures. In their study of China's red tourism, Zuo found that residents' trust in the central government moderates their support for red tourism [34], suggesting that institutional trust plays an important role in the reception of meaning in red tourism.

Overall, international research has accumulated rich findings on memory mechanisms, emotional mobilisation and the politics of space, yet two limitations remain. First, its objects are mostly Western war memories, with insufficient attention to the particularity of red culture in socialist states. Second, most studies are conducted within a single culture and devote little attention to the cross-cultural question of how audiences from other cultures interpret a country's war memory.

2.3. War Heritage Tourism in International Research

The cultural differentiation of tourism experience is a classic theme in cross-cultural research. Cohen classified tourism experience into five modes—recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental and existential—according to depth of experience, noting that different modes correspond to different ways of seeking meaning [35]. This typology implies that the same tourism field may present entirely different structures of meaning to tourists from different cultural backgrounds.

Acculturation theory explains the psychological process of intercultural contact at the individual level: Berry proposed that acculturation unfolds along two dimensions, "maintenance of the heritage culture" and "participation in the new culture", producing four strategies—integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation [36]. For international students on short-term sojourns, the integration strategy is most conducive to accepting host-country values while maintaining one's own cultural identity. Hall's high-context/low-context distinction reveals differences in the extent to which information transmission depends on context [37], while Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide comparable coordinates for differences in individualism–collectivism and power distance [38]. These frameworks help explain why the same narrative yields different decoding outcomes among audiences from different cultural spheres.

Empirically, Zhao et al.'s study of international students from Central Asian countries found that their perception of China's national image is jointly shaped by media exposure, interpersonal interaction and on-site experience, with the explanatory power of on-site experience significantly underestimated [5]. Li et al. evaluated the educational

effectiveness of scholarship policies for international students from the perspective of perceptions of China, finding that systematic national-condition education arrangements can significantly improve students' cognitive structures and emotional attitudes [4]. These studies confirm the importance of on-site experience and educational intervention, but have not yet probed the differentiated effects of specific experience types.

Taken together, the literature leaves room for advancement in three respects. First, an audience gap. Identity research on red tourism has taken domestic tourists as its object almost without exception; the experience structure and identity pathway of international students as "cultural others" have not been systematically examined. Second, a mechanism gap. Value transmission under cross-cultural conditions is not a simple extrapolation of the domestic situation; its encoding–decoding process involves the moderation of cultural distance, yet existing models lack any characterisation of this boundary condition. Third, a methodological gap. Domestic studies rely mainly on quantitative questionnaires and international studies mainly on qualitative cases, each with blind spots in depicting the experience–emotion–identity chain and lacking a design of triangulation. This study addresses these gaps.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

Acculturation theory provides the foundational framework for understanding identity change among international students. Berry emphasised that acculturation is a bidirectional process in which migrants or sojourners change both themselves and their environment, and that outcomes depend on the depth, frequency and voluntariness of cultural contact [36]. Accordingly, this study uses "cultural distance" to characterise the degree of difference between international students' heritage cultures and Chinese culture, operationalised through cultural sphere, Chinese proficiency and length of stay in China. The greater the cultural distance, the higher the "translation cost" of narrative decoding and the lower the efficiency with which experience is converted into identity. This logic constitutes the moderation hypothesis of the study.

Collins's interaction ritual chain theory holds that the efficacy of ritual depends on bodily co-presence, the exclusion of outsiders, a shared focus of attention and a shared mood, which together generate emotional energy and group solidarity and precipitate collective symbols [39]. Flower-laying ceremonies, moments of silence and on-site interpretation all contain typical ritual elements. Halbwachs's theory of collective memory holds that memory depends on social frameworks and that individuals acquire memory by participating in group rituals [40], while Assmann distinguished communicative memory from cultural memory, emphasising that the latter is transmitted across generations through institutionalised symbolic systems [41]. Ritual design in red tourism therefore does not merely convey information but produces emotional energy and memory frameworks, which provides the theoretical basis for treating emotional resonance as a key mediator.

Bandura's social cognitive theory holds that behavioural intention is shaped by both cognition and affect, with self-efficacy and outcome expectations playing a moderating role [42], Kolb's experiential learning theory describes learning as a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation [43]. Together they support decomposing identity into knowledge cognition, emotional resonance and behavioural intention, and hypothesising a sequential transmission among the three: concrete experience first forms knowledge cognition, reflection and affective processing generate emotional resonance, which is finally externalised as behavioural intention.

The tripartite framework of place attachment proposed by Scannell and Gifford decomposes attachment into person (individual or group), psychological process (affect, cognition, behaviour) and place (spatial level, specificity, social and physical elements)[44]. This framework implies that the spatial atmosphere, exhibition rhythm and material texture of a memorial are not the background of narrative but an intrinsic constituent of identity formation. What distinguishes red tourism from classroom

teaching is precisely the embodied place experience it affords: visitors walk, pause and gaze within physical space, and bodily posture itself participates in the construction of meaning.

Integrating these theories, the study constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework (see Figure 1). Vertically, the framework follows the flow of meaning transformation: the historical narrative layer supplies narrative resources, which enter experience design through element encoding; experience type constitutes the encoding end, with guided visiting, ritual participation and volunteer service corresponding respectively to cognitive, affective and behavioural experience; the channel adaptation layer performs a mediating function, in which multilingual interpretation, immersive technology, intercultural dialogue and collaborative tasks determine whether the narrative can be effectively delivered; and the identity level constitutes the decoding end, composed of three progressive levels—knowledge cognition, emotional resonance and behavioural intention. Horizontally, the framework specifies the moderating mechanism: cultural distance acts upon the experience–identity conversion process, with cultural sphere, language proficiency and length of stay jointly determining the difficulty of decoding.

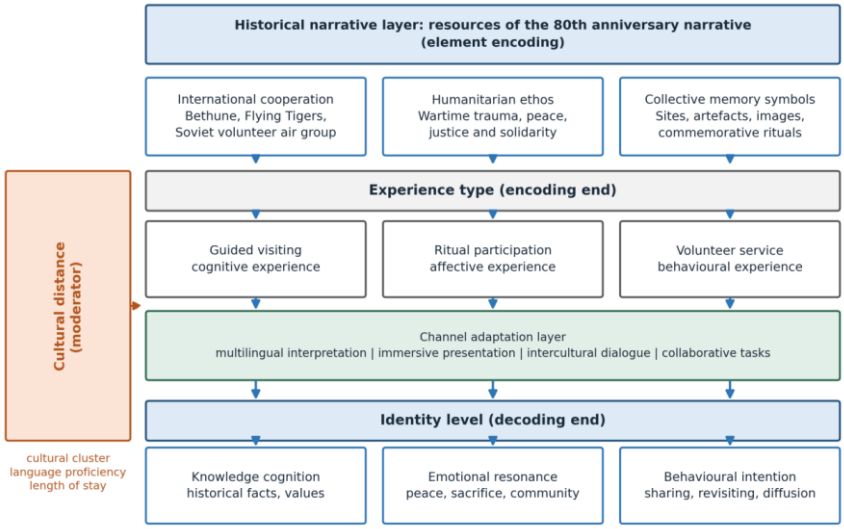


Figure 1. A Three-Dimensional Analytical Framework of Cultural Distance, Experience Type and Identity Level

The methodological significance of this framework lies in converting the linear chain of narrative–experience–identity into a communication structure of encoding–channel–decoding, thereby rendering the loss and gain of meaning under cross-cultural conditions observable and explicable. The internationalisation of red tourism is essentially not a translation of narrative content but an adaptation between encoding modes and decoding frameworks.

2.5. Research Hypotheses and Conceptual Model

2.5.1. Experience Type and Identity Level

The experiential forms of red tourism can be distinguished into three categories according to depth of involvement. Guided visiting centres on viewing, listening and reading, and functions to supply basic information about historical facts and value connotations, corresponding to the formation of knowledge cognition. Ritual participation centres on procedural activities such as flower laying, moments of silence and oath-taking, and functions to arouse shared emotion through bodily co-presence, corresponding to the generation of emotional resonance. Volunteer service centres on voluntary work, collaborative tasks and social practice, and functions to translate

cognition and emotion into concrete action, corresponding to the strengthening of behavioural intention. Accordingly, the study proposes:

H1a: Guided visiting has a positive effect on international students' knowledge cognition.

H1b: Ritual participation has a positive effect on international students' emotional resonance.

H1c: Volunteer service has a positive effect on international students' behavioural intention.

2.5.2. The Sequential Transmission between Cognition and Emotion

The influence of cultural distance on identity construction is twofold. On the one hand, a moderate cultural distance can stimulate novelty and exploratory motivation, prompting visitors to seek meaning more actively; on the other hand, when the distance is too great, unfamiliar historical background, language barriers and misalignment of value frameworks substantially raise decoding costs and weaken the efficiency of converting experience into identity. For anti-fascist, a narrative theme with a universal moral foundation, the negative effect of cultural distance may be partially offset but is difficult to eliminate. Accordingly, the study proposes:

According to social cognitive theory and experiential learning theory, cognition is the precondition of affective processing and emotion is the direct antecedent of behavioural intention. In red tourism settings, visitors first build a basic understanding of historical events through exhibition information, and this understanding constitutes the interpretive frame of affective response; emotion without a factual foundation tends to be transient and difficult to convert into stable value judgements. Conversely, once emotional resonance is formed it acquires a relatively independent behavioural drive capable of producing externalising behaviours such as sharing, revisiting and dissemination. Accordingly, the study proposes:

H2: Knowledge cognition has a positive effect on international students' emotional resonance.

H3a: Emotional resonance has a positive effect on international students' behavioural intention.

H3b: Knowledge cognition has a positive effect on international students' behavioural intention.

H4: Emotional resonance mediates the relationship between knowledge cognition and behavioural intention.

2.5.3. The Moderating Role of Cultural Distance

The influence of cultural distance on identity construction is twofold. On the one hand, a moderate cultural distance can stimulate novelty and exploratory motivation, prompting visitors to seek meaning more actively; on the other hand, when the distance is too great, unfamiliar historical background, language barriers and misalignment of value frameworks substantially raise decoding costs and weaken the efficiency of converting experience into identity. For anti-fascist, a narrative theme with a universal moral foundation, the negative effect of cultural distance may be partially offset but is difficult to eliminate. Accordingly, the study proposes:

H5: Cultural distance negatively moderates the effect of experience type on identity level; the greater the cultural distance, the lower the efficiency of converting experience into identity.

2.5.4. Conceptual Model

Integrating H1 to H5, the study constructs a conceptual model of how red tourism influences international students' Chinese value identity (see Figure 2). The model takes experience type as the exogenous variable, identity level as the endogenous variable and cultural distance as the moderator, forming a transmission chain of experience–cognition–emotion–behaviour together with a moderating mechanism of cultural boundaries.

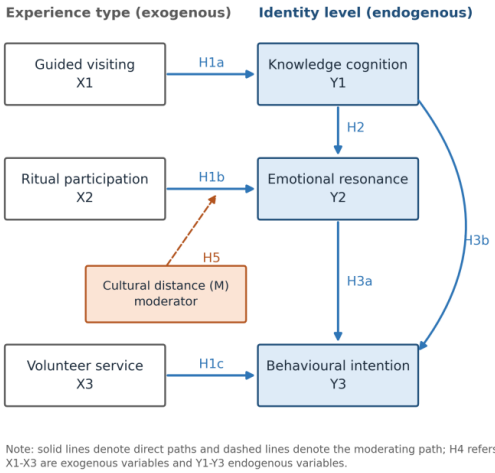


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Red Tourism's Influence on International Students' Chinese Value Identity

3. Empirical Analysis

3.1. Research Design and Case Selection

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was adopted. The quantitative strand estimates the relationships among experience type, cognitive and affective mediators, behavioural intention and cultural distance; the qualitative strand explains how the narrative elements of the sites are encoded, adapted and decoded by audiences who do not share the narrators' memory code. The two strands are integrated at the interpretation stage rather than treated as independent studies.

Three memorial sites in China were selected according to three principles: complementary narrative types, mature capacity for international reception and comparable spatial scale. The Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression beside the Lugou Bridge in Beijing carries the national total-resistance narrative along a chronological axis. The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre centres on traumatic memory, constructing an intense affective space through the mass-grave site, the Wailing Wall and the Peace Square. The Burma Road heritage site, including the Huitong Bridge and the Songshan campaign sites, takes transnational collaboration as its narrative thread. The three cases correspond respectively to national memory, traumatic memory and international-cooperation memory, providing the structural conditions for comparison.

3.2. Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected between September and October 2025 through online and offline channels. Questionnaires were distributed through international student affairs offices, class groups and student associations, with quotas set by cultural sphere to avoid over-concentration of a single national group. Thirty-four questionnaires were returned; after excluding responses with excessively short completion times, regular response patterns or missing values on key items, 30 valid questionnaires remained, an effective response rate of 88.2%. All respondents were international students enrolled at Chinese universities who had visited at least one of the three sites. Interview participants were identified through purposive sampling, balancing cultural sphere, gender, Chinese proficiency and number of visits; 20 in-depth interviews of 62 to 95 minutes were completed. The interview language was Chinese or English according to participants' preference, and all sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

All participants were informed of the research purpose, the use of materials and the anonymisation procedure, and signed informed consent forms. No personally identifying information was collected in the questionnaire, and interview transcripts were coded

before analysis so that quotations cannot be traced to individuals. The study involved no intervention and no collection of sensitive personal data, and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

3.3. Research Design and Case Selection

Measurement of the core variables drew on established scales adapted to the context of anti-fascist historical narrative. Experience type was operationalised as three dimensions—guided visiting, ritual participation and volunteer service—following the distinction between viewing, ritual and practice in the red tourism experience literature [9,16,22]. Knowledge cognition was measured with five items covering the historical sequence, the global significance of China's resistance, the facts of international cooperation, the value pursuits embedded in the narrative and the capacity to retell its significance [19,22]. Emotional resonance was measured with six items covering empathy with wartime suffering, identification with the value of peace, acceptance of a community with a shared future for humankind, understanding of patriotic feeling and recall of the respondent's own national history [19,21]. Behavioural intention was measured with four items covering willingness to disseminate, willingness to share on social media, willingness to revisit and willingness to engage in volunteer service [22,28]. Cultural distance was measured with four items on perceived differences in language, historical knowledge, value orientation and interaction style [36,38]. All items used a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Scale development followed standard procedures. Initial items were drafted from the theoretical constructs and assessed by three experts in tourism management and two in cross-cultural communication for correspondence between items and constructs; semantically redundant or ambiguously targeted items were deleted or revised accordingly. Five international students from different cultural backgrounds then participated in cognitive interviews to confirm comprehension and to remove items whose wording presupposed local historical knowledge. In the formal administration, Cronbach's alpha for every dimension exceeded the conventional 0.70 acceptability threshold, and item-total correlations indicated no item requiring deletion. Because the sample is small, reliability is reported at the level of acceptability rather than as a basis for structural claims.

3.4. Analytical Strategy

Quantitative analysis proceeded in three steps. Descriptive statistics and reliability testing characterised the overall level of identity on each dimension. Independent-sample comparisons and one-way analysis of variance examined differences across cultural spheres. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was then used to estimate path coefficients, with mediation tested by bootstrapping and moderation tested through the interaction term between experience type and cultural distance. PLS-SEM was chosen for its tolerance of sample size and distributional assumptions, which suits exploratory settings. It should be stated explicitly that 30 cases fall well below the sample size normally recommended for PLS-SEM; path coefficients are therefore interpreted as directional and relative rather than inferential, no substantive inference about model fit is drawn, and all estimates await verification with a formal sample.

Qualitative analysis was conducted in NVivo 12 through three-level coding. In open coding, initial concepts were extracted sentence by sentence from the transcripts. In axial coding, initial concepts were grouped into thematic categories following the analytical logic of cognitive deconstruction, affective arousal and meaning reconstruction. In selective coding, core categories were identified and the relationships among them established. Coding was performed independently by two researchers, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Because the interviews belong to the preliminary phase of the project, the qualitative strand is reported as an initial coding of thematic categories rather than as a saturated theoretical account, and no frequencies or verbatim quotations are presented as evidence of prevalence.

4. Results

4.1. Research Design and Case Selection

The valid sample comprises 60 international students. Southeast Asia accounts for 33.3%, Europe and North America for 26.7%, Africa for 23.3% and the Middle East for 16.7%. Female respondents form a slight majority (53.3%). Chinese proficiency is distributed across beginner (33.3%), intermediate (40.0%) and advanced (26.7%) levels. Sixty per cent had visited once and 40.0% twice or more, which permits a preliminary comparison between first-time and repeat visitors. Table 1 reports the composition.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Sample (N = 60)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Cultural sphere	Europe and North America	16	26.7
	Southeast Asia	20	33.3
	Africa	14	23.3
	Middle East	10	16.7
Gender	Male	28	46.7
	Female	32	53.3
Chinese proficiency	Beginner (HSK 1-3)	20	33.3
	Intermediate (HSK 4)	24	40.0
	Advanced (HSK 5-6)	16	26.7
Number of visits	Once	36	60.0
	Twice or more	24	40.0

Note: Cultural sphere is an operational classification; East Asian countries (the Republic of Korea and Japan) are grouped into the Southeast Asia category because of cultural proximity.

4.2. Levels of Value Identity

Descriptive results show an uneven profile across dimensions (Table 2). Identification with the value of peace records the highest mean (M = 4.18), followed by acceptance of a community with a shared future for humankind (M = 3.82) and willingness to disseminate culture (M = 3.75). The two lowest items concern historical knowledge: understanding of historical facts (M = 3.38) and awareness of the global significance of China's resistance (M = 3.15). The pattern suggests that affective and value-level identification is achieved more readily than factual and contextual understanding, a gap that is consistent with the qualitative finding that respondents respond to the moral frame of the narrative while remaining uncertain about its historical particulars.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Identity Levels by Dimension (N = 30)

Dimension	Item	Mean	SD	Rank
Knowledge cognition	Understanding of historical facts	3.38	0.85	6
	Awareness of the global significance of China's resistance	3.15	0.90	7
Emotional resonance	Identification with the value of peace	4.18	0.74	1
	Acceptance of a community with a shared future for humankind	3.82	0.79	2
	Understanding of patriotic feeling	3.52	0.87	4
Behavioural intention	Willingness to disseminate culture	3.75	0.82	3
	Willingness to participate again	3.46	0.89	5

Comparison across cultural spheres is reported for descriptive purposes only (Table 3). Southeast Asian respondents record the highest means on all three dimensions, followed by African and Middle Eastern respondents, with European and North American respondents lowest on knowledge cognition. Given the small size of each subgroup, no significance testing was performed and no ordering should be treated as an established difference.

Table 3. Identity Levels Across Cultural Spheres (M ± SD)

Dimension	Europe and North America	Southeast Asia	Africa	Middle East
Knowledge cognition	3.12 ± 0.80	3.55 ± 0.77	3.20 ± 0.83	3.28 ± 0.86
Emotional resonance	3.90 ± 0.72	4.15 ± 0.70	4.02 ± 0.76	3.85 ± 0.78
Behavioural intention	3.42 ± 0.84	3.80 ± 0.78	3.65 ± 0.81	3.50 ± 0.85

Note: Given the small size of each subgroup, no significance testing was performed.

4.3. Path Estimates

All six direct paths carry the hypothesised sign (Table 4). Ritual participation is the strongest predictor of emotional resonance (β = 0.45), and emotional resonance is the strongest predictor of behavioural intention (β = 0.51), which supports H1b, H3a and, indirectly, the affective primacy argument underlying the model. Guided visiting predicts knowledge cognition (β = 0.30), supporting H1a, and volunteer service predicts behavioural intention (β = 0.39), supporting H1c. The path from knowledge cognition to emotional resonance is positive (β = 0.26), supporting H2, while the direct path from knowledge cognition to behavioural intention is weak (β = 0.14) and approaches the conventional threshold, supporting H3b only marginally. The relative magnitude of the two paths into behavioural intention is the central quantitative result: affect dominates, cognition contributes, but cognition operates largely through affect.

Table 4. Path Coefficient Estimates (N = 30)

Hypothesis	β	SE	t	p
H1a: Guided visiting → knowledge cognition	0.30	0.09	3.33	0.001**
H1b: Ritual participation → emotional resonance	0.45	0.10	4.50	<0.001***
H1c: Volunteer service → behavioural intention	0.39	0.11	3.55	<0.001***
H2: Knowledge cognition → emotional resonance	0.26	0.08	3.25	0.001**
H3a: Emotional resonance → behavioural intention	0.51	0.09	5.67	<0.001***
H3b: Knowledge cognition → behavioural intention	0.14	0.07	2.00	0.046*

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Estimates are based on the pilot sample and are interpreted as directional rather than inferential.

4.4. Path Estimates

All six direct paths carry the hypothesised sign (Table 4). Ritual participation is the strongest predictor of emotional resonance (β = 0.45), and emotional resonance is the strongest predictor of behavioural intention (β = 0.51), which supports H1b, H3a and, indirectly, the affective primacy argument underlying the model. Guided visiting predicts knowledge cognition (β = 0.30), supporting H1a, and volunteer service predicts behavioural intention (β = 0.39), supporting H1c. The path from knowledge cognition to emotional resonance is positive (β = 0.26), supporting H2, while the direct path from knowledge cognition to behavioural intention is weak (β = 0.14) and approaches the conventional threshold, supporting H3b only marginally. The relative magnitude of the two paths into behavioural intention is the central quantitative result: affect dominates, cognition contributes, but cognition operates largely through affect.

Bootstrapping indicates that the indirect path from guided visiting through knowledge cognition and emotional resonance to behavioural intention is positive, and that the indirect path from ritual participation through emotional resonance to behavioural intention is stronger than the corresponding direct path, which is consistent with H4 and with the sequential logic of cognitive deconstruction, affective arousal and meaning reconstruction. Because the sample cannot support stable interval estimation, these results are reported as directional support for the chain rather than as precise effect sizes.

Cultural distance moderates the relationship between experience type and identity outcomes (H5). Among respondents reporting high cultural distance, the association between guided visiting and knowledge cognition is weaker, whereas the association between ritual participation and emotional resonance is not attenuated. In other words, cognitive transmission is sensitive to cultural distance, while ritual-based affective transmission is comparatively distance-insensitive. This asymmetry is the most practically consequential finding of the study, because it implies that the design of international-facing red tourism should not allocate effort evenly across experience types.

4.5. Qualitative Findings

Three-level coding of the 20 preliminary interviews yields a three-stage structure. At the stage of cognitive deconstruction, respondents report that campaign processes, military deployment and political lines are perceived as information requiring substantial prior background and are quickly skipped in its absence, whereas named facts of international cooperation provide an immediate entry point. At the stage of affective arousal, the mass-grave site, the Wailing Wall and objects of individual suffering trigger identification with the value of peace, and several respondents connect the material to historical experience in their own countries, which indicates that affective transmission operates through a universal rather than a national frame. At the stage of meaning reconstruction, respondents move from sympathy with victims to recognition of a shared commitment to peace, and it is at this point that value identity is articulated in the respondents' own vocabulary rather than in the vocabulary of the exhibition.

The qualitative material also identifies a boundary condition. Respondents with advanced Chinese proficiency and repeated visits are more likely to engage with the historical particulars, which suggests that the affective entry point is a threshold rather than a destination: ritual and humanitarian frames open the narrative, but sustained engagement still depends on the availability of contextual knowledge in a language the audience can process.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical Value

The study makes three contributions. First, it extends the explanatory chain of red tourism research from a single cultural community to a cross-cultural audience. Existing work has established a robust domestic chain from experience through emotion to national identity, but its implicit premise is a shared memory code between narrator and audience. By showing that the chain survives in modified form when that premise fails, the study specifies the boundary of the existing framework rather than merely replicating it.

Second, the study disaggregates experience type. Most studies treat the red tourism experience as a single construct, whereas the present results show that guided visiting, ritual participation and volunteer service operate through different mediators and with different sensitivity to cultural distance. This specification explains why the literature reports inconsistent effect sizes: the aggregate effect depends on the mix of experience types in a given sample.

Third, the study connects war heritage tourism research with acculturation and interaction ritual theory. International work on war heritage has documented the identity effects of commemorative visits, and heritage studies have long insisted that heritage is a contemporary selection of meaning; the present study specifies the mechanism through which that selection becomes effective for an audience outside the memory community, namely ritual-based emotional energy and humanitarian value framing.

5.2. Theoretical Value

For the international expression of red tourism, the findings imply a shift of design priority from information delivery to frame conversion. Because ritual participation and humanitarian narrative are comparatively insensitive to cultural distance, sites that

receive international visitors should secure at least one participatory ritual node and one humanitarian narrative thread before investing further in multilingual interpretation of campaign history. Multilingual provision remains necessary, but it addresses the weaker path.

For the design of reception programmes for international students, the results support a staged sequence: an affective entry point in the first visit, contextual knowledge in subsequent visits, and volunteer service as the pathway from attitude to behaviour. The finding that volunteer service predicts behavioural intention directly, bypassing the affective mediator, suggests that practice-based participation should be treated as a distinct instrument rather than as an appendage to guided visiting.

For cross-cultural communication policy, the asymmetry between cognitive and affective transmission suggests that the international communicative efficacy of commemorative sites should be evaluated on affective and behavioural indicators, not only on knowledge acquisition. A site that produces strong value identification but weak factual recall is not a failure of communication; it is a different communication outcome that current evaluation systems do not capture.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Four limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample of 30 is a pilot sample and falls below the size normally required for structural equation modelling; all path estimates are directional, no fit inference is drawn, and the conclusions require verification with a formal sample of several hundred respondents across multiple sites and multiple waves. Second, the qualitative strand consists of 20 preliminary interviews reported as an initial coding of thematic categories; a saturated account with systematic attention to negative cases remains to be completed. Third, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causal order among knowledge cognition, emotional resonance and behavioural intention; a longitudinal design tracking the same respondents across repeated visits would permit stronger inference about the staged sequence proposed here. Fourth, cultural distance is measured as perceived distance rather than as an objective national-culture index, which limits comparability with studies using Hofstede-type scores.

Future research can proceed along three lines. A formal survey with adequate power would allow the chain mediation model to be tested against alternative specifications, including a reversed affect-to-cognition ordering. An experimental or quasi-experimental design manipulating narrative frame within the same site would isolate the causal effect of humanitarian versus campaign-centred interpretation. And a comparative design across countries with different wartime positions would test whether the affective transmission mechanism holds when the audience's national memory is not merely absent but directly opposed.

Funding: This paper was supported by Beijing International Studies University 2025 Research Series Special Project (No. XSFZ25A002).

References

1. Y. X. Zhai and P. H. Shi, "Evolutionary patterns, attention allocation and optimisation paths of China's red tourism policy: an empirical analysis of policy texts from 2004 to 2020," *Resource Development and Market*, vol. 37, no. 9, pp. 1136–1144, 2021.
2. G. Wall and N. R. Zhao, "China's red tourism: communist heritage, politics and identity in a party-state," *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 305–320, 2017.
3. J. S. Nye, "Public diplomacy and soft power," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 616, no. 1, pp. 94–109, 2008.
4. Q. Liu, Q. X. Sun, and Q. J. Liu, "Educational effectiveness of scholarship policies for international students in China: an examination based on perceptions of China," *China Higher Education Research*, vol. 42, no. 9, pp. 74–82, 2026.
5. X. Zhao, X. You, and S. Lin, "China's country image in the eyes of international students from Central Asian countries," *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 13, p. 569789, 2022.
6. B. Zuo, "Red tourism and party identification: an empirical study of the Jinggangshan scenic area," *Tourism Tribune*, vol. 29, no. 9, pp. 60–72, 2014.

7. W. W. Liu, M. M. Li, and Y. Y. Jiang, "National identity and tourism research: review and prospects," *Human Geography*, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 16–23, 2023.
8. A. L. Xie and J. Liu, "Characteristics and trends of red tourism research in China: a scientific knowledge mapping perspective," *Resource Development and Market*, vol. 36, no. 5, pp. 537–543, 2020.
9. R. J. Liu, Z. F. Huang, R. Z. Yu, et al., "The influence of red tourism on tourists' national identity," *Journal of Natural Resources*, vol. 36, no. 7, pp. 1673–1683, 2021.
10. Y. G. Zhang and L. Liu, "Influencing factors and multiple paths of tourists' national identity in red tourism destinations: a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis," *Journal of Natural Resources*, vol. 36, no. 7, pp. 1658–1672, 2021.
11. L. L. Qian, C. H. Zheng, J. W. Wang, et al., "Red tourism experience, collective memory and the formation mechanism of national identity: an analysis based on online UGC data," *Tourism Science*, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 80–95, 2024.
12. L. X. Du, G. H. Ding, and C. J. Gao, "The cultural logic of red tourism and public national identity," *Zhejiang Social Sciences*, no. 8, pp. 136–142, 161, 2023.
13. L. Lu, "Red tourism and ideological and political education of contemporary university students," *Journal of China Institute of Industrial Relations*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 107–110, 2010.
14. H. W. Zheng, "Online textual research on the internalisation of values in red tourism: with a discussion of the formation mechanism of national well-being," *Tourism Tribune*, vol. 31, no. 5, pp. 111–118, 2016.
15. W. F. Li, S. M. Fang, Y. B. Yan, et al., "The theoretical logic and dynamic process of red memory transmission through red tourism," *Journal of Natural Resources*, vol. 36, no. 11, pp. 2736–2747, 2021.
16. Y. Wang, D. H. Li, L. R. Fu, et al., "Realising the educational function of red tourism: a transformative tourism experience perspective," *Tourism Tribune*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 135–150, 2024.
17. L. Q. Liu and X. Qiao, "Cultural value and educational function of red tourism: the case of the Red Flag Canal," *Social Scientist*, no. 4, pp. 63–67, 2020.
18. D. N. Li, "Development paths of red tourism based on the shaping of core values," *Social Scientist*, no. 2, pp. 75–81, 93, 2019.
19. J. L. Guo, D. Lu, and P. Jin, "The influence of awe on tourists' national identity in red tourism," *Resource Development and Market*, vol. 34, no. 7, pp. 1026–1031, 2018.
20. H. Liu, N. Yue, and C. H. Bai, "The influence of emotional arousal on tourists' cognition in red tourism settings," *Social Scientist*, no. 3, pp. 84–90, 2018.
21. J. N. Dong and H. Y. Wang, "The mechanism of red tourism's influence on red cultural identity: the mediating role of awe," *Journal of Arid Land Resources and Environment*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 191–198, 2024.
22. J. W. Wang, H. Zhang, J. X. Yuan, et al., "The mechanism of red tourism experience on national identity and subjective well-being," *Tourism Tribune*, vol. 41, no. 6, pp. 89–103, 2026.
23. Y. Zhang and Y. Y. Jiang, "The influence path of Olympic heritage tourism settings on tourists' national identity from the perspective of cognitive-affective system theory: the case of the National Stadium," *Journal of Beijing Sport University*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 67–80, 2025.
24. Y. X. Lin, Y. Y. Jiang, T. Xie, et al., "The influence of collective memory on tourists' national identity in Olympic heritage tourism: the mediating effect of collective pride," *Tourism Science*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 86–100, 2025.
25. Z. J. Yuan and L. Ma, "Walking memory, memory walking: experience and place identity in tourism," *Tourism Tribune*, vol. 35, no. 11, pp. 5–7, 2020.
26. H. Y. Zhang and X. F. Ma, "Red tourism development based on national identity under the new development pattern," *Economic Problems*, no. 1, pp. 123–129, 2020.
27. N. Gao, X. C. Zhang, and L. Y. Wang, "Spatio-temporal characteristics and influencing factors of online attention to red tourism in China," *Journal of Natural Resources*, vol. 35, no. 5, pp. 1068–1089, 2020.
28. H. L. Zhou, Q. R. Zhang, Y. W. Cai, et al., "The influence path of red tourism on tourists' spiritual elevation: the case of the Xiangjiang Campaign memorial park of the Long March," *Journal of Guilin University of Technology*, pp. 1–15, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/ [Accessed: May 15, 2025].
29. D. Song, "Emotional experience and communication of tourism in revolutionary old areas: from the perspective of national identity education for university students," *Social Scientist*, no. 8, pp. 67–72, 2019.
30. J. Packer, R. Ballantyne, and D. Uzzell, "Interpreting war heritage: impacts of Anzac museum and battlefield visits on Australians' understanding of national identity," *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 76, pp. 105–116, 2019.
31. P. R. Stone, "A dark tourism spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions," *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 145–160, 2006.
32. L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.
33. R. Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. London: Routledge, 2013.
34. B. Zuo, "Residents' support for red tourism in China: the moderating effect of central government," *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 64, pp. 51–63, 2017.
35. E. Cohen, "A phenomenology of tourist experiences," *Sociology*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 179–201, 1979.
36. J. W. Berry, "Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 29, no. 6, pp. 697–712, 2005.

37. E. T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Books, 1976.
38. G. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001.
39. R. Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
40. M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
41. J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
42. A. Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986.
43. D. A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984.
44. L. Scannell and R. Gifford, "Defining place attachment: a tripartite organizing framework," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 1–10, 2010.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.