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Unpacking the complexity of cultural distance in inbound and outbound tourism:

A case-oriented approach

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Unpacking the complexity of cultural distance in inbound and outbound tourism: A case-oriented approach

Abstract: Due to limitations in mainstream symmetric methodologies, the linkages between cultural dimensions and tourism demand have yet to be fully understood. Drawing on Hofstede's theory of national culture and adopting the asymmetric and case-oriented fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis method, this investigation explored configuration models of cultural distance between 65 countries in relation to China's inbound and outbound tourism flows. Using a series of three studies, this research assessed the impact of grouping Hofstede's six cultural distance dimensions and the effect of cultural distance as a whole on Chinese inbound and outbound tourism flows within the cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic distance framework. Findings indicate that several paths respectively lead to high inbound and outbound tourism flows. Uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation are core conditions for high inbound and outbound tourism flows, respectively. Three testable propositions were additionally evaluated by comparing cultural distance configurations between high inbound and outbound tourism flows.

Keywords: Complexity; Cultural distance; International tourism flow; Hofstede's national culture; fsQCA; Case-oriented approach

1. Introduction

Globalization is a seemingly inescapable trend (Mowforth & Munt, 2015), as evidenced by ballooning international tourism flows. Transnational flows are accompanied by the intersection and integration of cultures; such processes naturally influence tourism development. The relationship between culture and tourism flows has attracted close scholarly attention (Ahn & McKercher, 2015; Liu et al., 2021; Manosuthi et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2007; Reisinger & Crotts, 2010; Yang et al., 2019). Studies have investigated how national culture influences tourists' destination choices and behavior, including in terms of inbound tourism flows (Azimi Hashemi & Hanser, 2018; Huang et al., 2021; Manosuthi et al., 2020; Qiang et al., 2019; Schuckert & Wu, 2021; Yang & Wong, 2012; Yang et al., 2019) and outbound tourism flows (Bi & Lehto, 2018; Huang et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2023). Although prior work has enriched the understanding of national culture and tourism, a key question has gone overlooked: whether the impact of cultural distance is the same for inbound and outbound tourism. Addressing this topic will provide a "two-way flow" perspective on how cultural distance shapes international tourism flows. Findings will therefore bridge the gap between singular viewpoints while expanding awareness of the relationship between inbound and outbound tourism.

Despite researchers having focused on the connection between cultural distance and tourism demand, a consensus on the positive or negative effects of this link remains absent (Cheung & Saha, 2015; Liu et al., 2021; Manosuthi et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2013). Yang et al. (2019) pointed out that cultural distance is a

double-edged sword between international tourist source markets and destinations. The complexity of culture renders this concept challenging to define or empirically measure in a uniform fashion. A few studies have documented a positive impact of cultural distance on tourism market demand (e.g., Ahn & McKercher, 2015). Nonetheless, the negative role of cultural distance on such demand dominates the literature (Bi & Lehto, 2018; Yang et al., 2019). It is thus imperative to apply a pragmatic approach (e.g., a case-oriented method) to scrutinize how cultural distance informs tourism demand.

The influence of cultural distance on tourism is complicated and sometimes non-linear (Bi & Lehto, 2018). Most relevant work has relied on correlation-based techniques such as gravity models (Bi & Lehto, 2018; Yang & Wong, 2012), variance tests (Huang & Crotts, 2019), and econometric models (Huang et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Others have adopted statistical regression models such as linear regression (Ahn & McKercher, 2015), multivariate regression (Kumar &Dhir, 2020; Manosuthi et al., 2020), and latent class regression (Wei et al., 2023), which use restrictive assumptions and linearly estimate the net effects of independent variables (Fiss, 2011; Gligor et al., 2019; **Kim & Hyun, 2024;** Phillips et al., 2020). Despite several revelations, correlation-based analyses ignore the nuanced functional relationship between culture and tourism. These techniques also oversimplify the impact of cultural distance on tourism demand. As such, studies may not uncover the multifaceted "chemical reactions" between cultural distance and other variables, leading to biased conclusions. Business and management scholars have also criticized

the impediments of conventional quantitative methods to theoretical advancement. Many have advocated for novel methodologies to replace or supplement traditional quantitative thinking (Douglas, Shepherd et al., 2020; Fainshmid et al., 2020; Misangyi et al., 2017). It remains necessary to unpack cultural distance's role in inbound and outbound tourism by applying an innovative methodology to investigate complicated configuration effects among variables (Douglas et al., 2020; Fainshmidt et al., 2020; Woodside et al., 2011).

The aim of this study is to explore and elucidate the complexities between inbound and outbound tourism flows and cultural distance. Given the multidimensional and nonlinear nature of the relationship between cultural distance and tourism flows, a single study is insufficient to capture its intricacies comprehensively.

Excelling at revealing complex phenomena, multi-study approach is optimal and crucial for analyzing the multifaceted impacts of cultural distance on the tourism industry, which has been advocated in recent tourism and hospitality research (e.g., Kim et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; So et al., 2021). Directed by multi-study approach, this research employs three distinct studies. Each study builds progressively on the findings of its predecessor, allowing for an in-depth exploration from broad correlations to specific directional relationships. Study 1 investigates the complex relationships between Hofstede's six-dimensional cultural distance model and high tourism flows in China. Studies 2 and 3 examine the overall construct and individual cultural dimensions in relation to

other distance factors, providing complementary insights and comparative path models. Accordingly, this multi-study approach enables a comprehensive examination of how cultural distances subtly influence tourism flows, not only deepening our understanding, but also verifying the robustness of our conclusions across different analytical models.

The next section presents an overview of the literature on cultural distance and tourism flows. We then discuss the logic and advantages of case-based fsQCA and outline our data collection and calibration procedures. We next empirically perform necessity and sufficiency analyses of causal conditions of cultural distance for high inbound and outbound tourism flows in China. Three studies (responding to the three research questions) investigate the role of cultural distance in international tourism flows. Finally, we develop three propositions for subsequent work and offer marketing insights to manage international outbound and inbound tourism.

2. Theoretical background

Culture is diverse and correspondingly difficult to define (Reisinger & Crotts, 2010). Hofstede (1980) described culture as "a common mental process shared by persons in the same social group that can be utilized to differentiate members from various social groups" (p.18). This conceptualization is popular in the management domain (Liu et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2007; Woodside et al., 2011). Culture can also be interpreted at different levels, such as the national level, where culture is believed to be shared within countries and distinct between them (Dawar & Parker, 1994).

Culture partly drives consumers' decision making as well (Shah et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020).

2.1 Cultural distance and tourism flows

In the tourism discipline, national culture has long been recognized as an important research topic (Crotts, 2004), with many studies striving to clarify this phenomenon (e.g., Azimi Hashemi & Hanser, 2018; Bi & Lehto, 2018; Liu et al., 2021; Manosuthi et al., 2020). One of its most intriguing aspects is cultural distance, referring to the gap between the cultural orientation of tourists and a host country (Crotts, 2004)—specifically, similarities and differences between one's national culture and that of the host country (Reisinger & Dimanche, 2010; Shenkar, 2001). Cultural distance has been taken as an explanatory variable and even a theoretical framework to explain the ties between culture and tourism (Hofstede, 1980, 1989; Hofstede et al., 2010; Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1992).

Research on the relationship between cultural distance and tourism can be categorized into national and individual levels (Yang et al., 2019). Most studies assume the latter perspective, covering topics such as the effects of cultural distance on tourists' attitudes and behavior, service-related perceptions, and tourism demand (Bi & Lehto, 2018; Crotts, 2004; Leung et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2019). Some scholars have argued that the cultural distance framework is unsuitable for individual tourists due to the heterogeneity of perceived cultural distance between the citizens of one country and others (Yang et al., 2019). Applying national cultural scores on an individual level can lead to "ecological

fallacy" (Mezias et al., 2002; Yang et al., 2019). Yang et al. (2019) thus used national data to explore the effect of cultural distance on China's inbound tourism flows. Cultural distance was found to have an adverse influence, with uncertainty avoidance factors serving as moderators. Bi and Lehto (2018) investigated the impact of cultural distance on China's outbound tourism flows and confirmed a non-linear relationship based on an inverted U curve between cultural distance and international tourism flows. These studies expanded the general sense of how cultural distance shapes inbound or outbound tourism. However, little work has focused on the role of cultural distance in inbound and outbound tourism within a single study. Exactly how cultural distance informs international tourism flows remains ambiguous (Bi & Lehto, 2018; Huang et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2019). The current research explores the influence of culture on inbound and outbound tourism flows at a national level to offer clarity.

2.2 Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Researchers have pondered ways to measure cultural distance from different perspectives and dimensions (Boyacigiller, 1990; Clark & Pugh, 2001; West & Graham, 2004). The most common approaches are the cultural distance frameworks proposed by Hofstede (1980), Schwartz (1994), and the World Values Survey (WVS) (Inglehart, 1997), all of which appear useful for operationalizing cultural differences among nationalities. Hofstede's (1980) framework is especially popular (Ahn & McKercher, 2015; Litvin, 2019; Soares et al., 2007).

In particular, Hofstede's cultural distance framework prevails in tourism (Ng et

al., 2007; Yang et al., 2019). It has grown over time from four initial dimensions (power distance [PDI], uncertainty avoidance [UAI], individualism [IDV], and masculinity [MAS]) to six with the additions of long-term orientation (LTO) and indulgence (IND) (Hofstede et al., 2010). Cultural distance is usually presented as an index, calculated by weighting each dimension (Ahn & McKercher, 2015; Ng et al., 2007). Scholars have applied one or more dimensions to explore how culture influences cross-border vacationing (Lord et al., 2008) and to uncover tourists' travel characteristics (Qian et al., 2018). The dimensions are also correlated (Hofstede et al., 2010); their combined effects hence need to be included in models containing culture as a determinant. Yet independent tests or dimension-based weighting cannot comprehensively reveal the intrinsic relevance of Hofstede's cultural distance on study results. How to integrate and reconstruct certain dimensions within the cultural distance framework while giving full play to the interactions between them would represent a breakthrough. A few scholars have noticed this shortcoming (e.g., Hsu et al., 2013; Woodside et al., 2011), although studies on the interactions between dimensions are sparse. Huang and Crotts (2019) called for further investigation by focusing on multiple dimensions of cultural distance instead of using an overall index. Their work inspired contemplation of the roles of individual dimensions of such distance. We used cross-national data and a configurational modeling approach (fsQCA) to inspect the relationships among cultural dimensions and international tourism. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual model.

Insert Figure 1 about here

2.3 Overview of the Inbound and Outbound Tourism in China

Over the past two decades, Chinese tourism has undergone significant transformations, reflecting broader socio-economic shifts and evolving cultural patterns witnessed in the country (Dai et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). In this period, there have been dynamic changes in both inbound and outbound tourism, which are pivotal for understanding the intricate relationship between cultural dimensions and tourism flows explored in the current research.

From 2000 to 2020, China's inbound tourism flourished, initially driven by the country's rapid economic growth and its rich cultural heritage. Iconic historical sites like the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, along with modern marvels such as the Shanghai Skyline, have consistently attracted millions of international visitors. Despite this growth, the sector has faced significant challenges, particularly from global health crises like the 2003 SARS outbreak and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. These events caused temporary but severe declines in tourist arrivals, highlighting the sector's vulnerability to external shocks and the need for strategies to enhance resilience, such as diversified tourism offerings and improved health safety protocols (Yang et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, China's outbound tourism has seen exponential growth, with Chinese nationals emerging as one of the largest segments of international travelers for many countries (Javed et al., 2021). Supported by increased disposable incomes, relaxed travel restrictions, and an expanding middle class with a strong desire for international travel, by the 2010s, Chinese tourists had

become significant contributors to global tourism economies, especially in popular destinations across Asia, Europe, and North America (Shao et al., 2020). Their spending habits, particularly on luxury goods and services, have prompted destinations worldwide to adapt their offerings to meet Chinese cultural preferences and expectations, such as providing Chinese language services and culturally familiar foods.

These trends are crucial for analyzing how cultural distances influence tourism flows, the central theme of this research. For instance, the rise in outbound tourism reflects shifting cultural norms toward greater individualism and indulgence, which correlate with preferences for overseas travel and choice of destinations. Considering the importance of these shifts to explain the varying impacts of cultural distance on inbound versus outbound tourism flows, the study leverages detailed statistical data on these trends to explore the configuration effects of cultural dimensions such as power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance on tourism patterns. By integrating these observational trends into the analysis, the research not only contextualizes the impact of cultural dimensions on tourism but also enriches the theoretical framework used to examine international tourism flows in China. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which cultural distances manifest in the tourism sector, offering valuable insights for tourism management in an increasingly globalized and culturally diverse world.

3. Methodology

3.1 fsQCA method

QCA is a social science methodology rooted in set theory and Boolean algebra for multi-case studies. The approach seeks to blend the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research (Ragin, 2009, 2014) and is becoming mainstream (Douglas et al., 2020; Fainshmidt et al., 2020; Misangyi et al., 2017). The premise of QCA is to unveil multiple cases' universal features by considering how sets are related. This approach is essentially case-oriented rather than variable-oriented and can be applied in exploratory and inductive studies as well as in testing and deductive research (Furnari et al., 2021).

QCA offers several advantages over other methods. First, it has lower sample-size requirements. More prevalent quantitative methods are based on the regression principle, which features a minimum data size requirement. Traditional qualitative studies generally feature representative cases as research objects. QCA, in combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, avoids constraints in the number of cases: studies can involve small or medium case sets or large databases. Second, this method can handle complex antecedents. A prerequisite of regression models is the absence of multicollinearity among variables. The net effects of individual variables on outcome variables are identified using the algorithmic principle. By contrast, QCA is based on configuration theory and focuses on the interaction between variables and combinatorial effects (Akhshik et al., 2021; Judge et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022), thus enabling more detailed explanations of complex causes leading to an outcome. Third,

regression-oriented methods stress causal asymmetry and draw conclusions about correlations between variables. In other words, the same variables produce positive or negative results. On the contrary, QCA directly demonstrates causality through relationships between sets: it emphasizes inconsistencies in antecedent conditions that generate positive and negative outcomes and then identifies which conditions (and combinations thereof) trigger asymmetric outcomes (Fiss, 2011). Fourth, QCA allows for complete case interpretation. It is a largely case-oriented method; as such, both model construction and interpretation feature continuous interactions with specific cases to enhance interpretability.

To address the research objectives, we employed fsQCA to investigate how Hofstede's six dimensions of cultural distance (i.e., PDI, IDV/collectivism, MAS/femininity, UAI, LTO/short-term orientation, and IND/restraint) interact with each other and asymmetrically influence high inbound and outbound international tourism flows. In addition, as a complement to the cultural distance factor, we introduced other distance factors that affect national tourism flows using Ghemawat's (2001) cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic (CAGE) framework. The CAGE distance framework, comprising the dimensions of cultural distance, institutional/administrative distance, geographic distance, and economic distance, is highly influential in international business and trade (Ghemawat, 2001; Giudici & Rolbina, 2018). This framework integrates the distance factor within different industries and at multiple industry levels. International tourism is a typical trade industry; tourism flows are guided by economic activities and trade (Britton, 1991;

Webster et al., 2007). Therefore, the CAGE distance framework is conceptually relevant to international tourism flows.

Through Boolean algebra and set analysis, QCA assumes that independent variables are interdependent and jointly act on outcome variables with no optimal equilibrium state. There are also equivalent paths and solutions (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2000, 2009, 2014; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009; Liu et al., 2020). Relevant methods allow researchers to explore the combined impact of an interaction across numerous factors on specific results. This approach can help answer our three research questions. We chose fsQCA for several reasons. First, traditional regression analysis is primarily useful for exploring the net effect of a single factor, such as to estimate the average net effect of one or more variables in a sample. fsQCA can reveal relational configurations among various factors, whereas symmetric statistical methods cannot. Second, different from statistical methods based on correlations between variables, QCA develops causal inferences through set theory between a set of conditions and of results. Third, fsQCA offers several advantages over crisp-set QCA (csQCA) and multi-value QCA (mvQCA) (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). csQCA only deals with dichotomous variables, often leading to a loss of variable information and contradictory configurations while increasing analytic challenges (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). Compared with csQCA, mvQCA can handle multi-classification nominal variables and improves accuracy of the Boolean assignment of distance and constant ratio variables to some extent. However, mvQCA and csQCA each rely on a clear set and truth table; they are only appropriate for dealing with "kind problems." fsQCA is

better able to evaluate distance and ratio variables: it can address categorical problems as well as degree changes and partial membership. Because the causal conditions discussed in this research involve continuous variables, fsQCA can capture subtle influences of antecedent conditions to varying levels and degrees (Ragin, 2009).

3.2 Data collection and calibration

Data on inbound and outbound tourism flows to China were obtained from the Euromonitor International database (Blecher et al., 2015; Kotabe, 2002), the world's leading market information provider which consolidates consumer and industry information from 205 countries (https://www.euromonitor.com). Cases were chosen from among 65 countries. Countries were selected due to conforming to specific criteria: 1) the top 100 Chinese inbound tourism countries; 2) the top 100 Chinese outbound tourism countries; and 3) countries in the Hofstede dataset.

To minimize effects from major events, especially the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to international tourism since 2019, we extracted international tourism flow data from 2017. Our subsequent studies (Studies 2 and 3) included the cultural distance index, constructed using Kogut and Singh's (1988) suggested approach. Economic distance was defined as the ratio of the country in World Development Indicators (WDI) to China's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2017. Geographic distance was based on data from China and the other case countries as published on the CEPII website. Institutional distance also plays an important role in tourism development (Brau et al., 2011; Chang et al., 2012; Detotto et al., 2017). We adopted the governance index published under Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) for

2017 from the World Bank to represent this variable. The index comprises six governance dimensions: control of corruption, government effectiveness, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, regulatory quality, rule of law, and voice and accountability. The following algorithm was used for comprehensive evaluation:

$$ID_{ij} = \frac{1}{M}\sum_{m=1}^{M}\left\{\left(I_{mi} - I_{mj}\right)^2 / V_m\right\}$$

where ID_{ij} represents the institutional distance between country i and country j; I_{mi} is the score of the m dimension of country i, and I_{mj} is the score of the m dimension of country j; V_m is the variance in dimension m; and M is the number of institutional distance dimensions.

Calibration is a cornerstone of QCA (Ragin, 2009; Rihoux & Ragin, 2008), referring to the process of assigning membership scores to a case set (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Each case has a membership score on all condition sets and result sets. Ragin (2009) proposed three calibration methods: direct valuation, direct calibration, and indirect calibration. Consistent with the literature (Fan et al., 2017; Fiss, 2011), we applied direct calibration to convert data into membership scores. Specifically, the "calibrate" function in fsQCA software was used to calibrate China's outbound and inbound tourism flows. In line with mainstream QCA research (Fan et al., 2017; Fiss, 2011; Judge et al., 2020), we chose fuzzy scores of 0.95, 0.50, and 0.05 as respective thresholds for full membership, the cross-over point, and full non-membership (see also Ragin, 2009; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). PDI, IDV/collectivism, MAS/femininity, UAI, LTO/short-term orientation, IND/restraint, cultural distance, economic distance, geographic distance, and institutional/administrative distance were

each calibrated using these qualitative breakpoints. Detailed definitions and calibration of these conditions are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

4. Empirical Results

4.1 Necessity analysis of causal conditions

Following Douglas et al. (2020), Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle (2022), and Rihoux and Ragin (2009), we first examined whether a single condition constituted a necessary condition for high outbound and high inbound tourism flows. Set theory indicates that the necessity of a single condition verifies whether the result set is a subset of a certain condition set (Ragin, 2009). In fsQCA, the consistency parameter is a major standard to measure necessary conditions: when this parameter reaches 0.9, the condition is deemed necessary for the given outcome (Olya, 2023; Ragin, 2009; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

Our analysis of necessary conditions revealed that no single condition (and its non-set) for high inbound and outbound tourism flows exceeded a consistency parameter of 0.9. Therefore, among all conditions, none was necessary for high outbound/inbound tourism flows in China. This circumstance also reflects the complexity of a combination of different conditions rather than the prominence of a single condition (Olya, 2023; Woodside et al., 2011).

4.2 Sufficiency analysis of configuration models

In contrast to necessity analysis, fsQCA is principally intended to reveal the

sufficiency of results caused by the configuration of antecedent conditions. Similarly, from a set theory perspective, sufficiency analysis determines whether sets of antecedent conditions are subsets of the result sets (Ragin, 2009). The consistency parameter is again used to measure a configuration's sufficiency, albeit with a different calculation method and minimum acceptable value than for necessary conditions. Schneider and Wagemann (2012) suggested that the consistency of the sufficiency test should not be lower than 0.75. In other studies (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2022; Olya & Akhshik, 2019; Witt et al., 2022), the threshold for sufficiency consistency was between 0.75 and 0.9. Empirical discussions have also concerned determination of the frequency threshold. The threshold is usually based on the size of the study sample: the value is equal to 1 for a small sample and is larger than 1 if the sample is of a moderate or large size. The number of cases, the number of antecedent conditions, and researchers' familiarity with each case are also taken into account (Ragin, 2009). In this study, in light of the aforementioned points and earlier work (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2022; Witt et al., 2022), 0.8 was chosen as the consistency threshold while considering the proportional reduction in inconsistency values (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

In sum, fsQCA presents three solutions of differing intricacy: complex, intermediate, and parsimonious solutions. Based on generic QCA research (Fiss, 2011; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012), we focused on the intermediate solution: it is moderately complex but does not allow necessary conditions to be eliminated. This solution is also helpful in reporting parsimonious solutions. According to Fiss (2011),

a solid circle (●) indicates the presence of the condition, a hollow circle (⊙) indicates the absence (or negation) of the condition, and a blank represents a fuzzy state (i.e., the condition can be either present or absent). A large circle (●/⊙) denotes the core condition (i.e., applying to both intermediate and parsimonious solutions); a small circle (●/⊙) denotes a peripheral condition (i.e., applying only to intermediate solutions). Coverage is also a crucial indicator of empirical relevance in QCA. This facet conveys a configuration's importance (Ragin, 2009) and functions similarly to R^2 in regression (Fiss, 2011).

4.2.1 Findings from Study 1

Table 2 shows that the overall solution's consistency for the four configurations of the high inbound tourism flows model was greater than the lowest acceptable value of 0.75. Case coverage reached 0.56. The consistency of individual solutions was also greater than 0.75 in all instances. With respect to a single configuration (longitudinal), in M1 (~PDI*IDV*~UAI*LTO*IND), LTO and IDV played core roles; the presence of IDV, as well as the absence of PDI and UAI, played peripheral roles. The overall solution consistency in M1 reached 0.902, raw coverage reached 0.326, unique coverage reached 0.053, and case coverage reached 4: the Netherlands (0.73, 0.54), Switzerland (0.64, 0.50), Sweden (0.64, 0.51), and the United Kingdom (0.6, 0.64). In M2 (~PDI*IDV*MAS*~UAI*IND), the presence of IDV and MAS, as well as the absence of UAI, were core conditions, the presence of IND and the absence of PDI were peripheral conditions, and LTO had no impact on high inbound tourism flows. The consistency of M2 reached 0.828, Raw coverage was 0.367, and unique coverage

(0.097) was the highest of all four configurations. Eight cases were included: Ireland (0.83, 0.26), the United Kingdom (0.81, 0.64), the United States (0.76, 0.92), South Africa (0.75, 0.49), Australia (0.74, 0.66), New Zealand (0.69, 0.52), Switzerland (0.64, 0.50), and Canada (0.58, 0.68). M3a (PDI*IDV*MAS*UAI*LTO*IND) and M3b (PDI*IDV*MAS*UAI*LTO*IND) shared the same core conditions (i.e., the presence of PDI and LTO and the absence of UAI), but their peripheral conditions varied slightly: M3a had an absence of IDV, MAS, and IND; M3b included the presence of IDV and MAS and the absence of IND. M3a exceeded M3b in consistency (0.910 vs. 0.836), raw coverage (0.285 vs. 0.228), and unique coverage (0.089 vs. 0.014). They covered three and two cases, respectively: Vietnam (0.64, 0.94), Indonesia (0.54, 0.66), and Singapore (0.50, 0.72) for M3a; and Slovakia (0.69, 0.07) and India (0.60, 0.70) for M3b. A horizontal comparison of the four configurations indicates a consistent absence of UAI, exemplifying this condition's contributions to high inbound tourism flows. This result echoes findings from Yang and Wong (2012) and Crotts (2004) based on regression-oriented methods. More broadly, LTO in M1 and MAS in M2 are substitutable; they do not need to exist simultaneously to produce the outcome with the other four conditions in M1 and M2.

Table 2 also displays the configuration model of China's high outbound tourism flows. In terms of the number of configurations, high outbound and high inbound tourism flows featured four similar paths. The overall configuration consistency (0.831) and coverage (0.617) for high outbound tourism flows surpassed those for high inbound tourism flows. A2 and A1 shared three paths which included the same

case countries. The unique configuration model for A2, (~PDI*IDV*MAS*UAI*LTO*~IND), centered on MAS and LTO. This configuration's raw coverage and unique coverage were quite high (0.353 and 0.127, respectively) compared with other configurations. The corresponding countries were Hungary (0.73, 0.52), Italy (0.72, 0.51), Czech Republic (0.63, 0.54), and Japan (0.59, 0.97), different from those related to M2 with high inbound tourism flows. The configurations of high inbound tourism flows did not include UAI, whereas LTO applied to all configurations of high outbound tourism flows. Factors pertaining to cultural distance therefore play similar yet distinct roles in high inbound and high outbound tourism flows in China.

Insert Table 2 about here

4.2.2 Findings from Study 2

Study 2 entailed a supplementary investigation. We explored the complex relationships and pathways of cultural distance (as a whole and coupled with economic distance, geographic distance, and institutional distance) on China's high inbound/outbound tourism flows. This study also set the stage for Study 3.

The three models in Table 3 depict the action paths of various distances on China's high inbound tourism flows. The consistency of the overall solution was 0.784, and overall coverage reached 0.808. Economic distance was the core condition among these three paths. Economic factors heavily influence inbound tourism flows (Dwyer et al., 2000; Saha et al., 2017). The paths also demonstrated unique peripheral

conditions: the absence of cultural distance in M1a (~CD*ED), the presence of institutional distance in M1b (ID*ED), and the presence of geographic distance in M1c (GD*ED). The consistency of M1a (0.896), solution coverage (0.613), and unique coverage (0.108) were highest. The paths also covered 14, 17, and 17 cases, respectively. Institutional distance, geographic distance, and the absence of cultural distance are mutually substitutive and do not need to exist simultaneously. Combining these aspects and economic distance can affect high inbound tourism flows in China.

As with the models featuring high inbound tourism flows, three models emerged for high outbound tourism flows. The conditions constituting M1 (~CD*ID*ED) were the presence of economic distance and geographic distance along with the absence of cultural distance; all were core conditions without peripheral conditions. The consistency peaked at 0.914. The presence of economic distance and the absence of geographic distance were core conditions for M2a (ID*~GD*ED) and M2b (~CD*~GD*ED). ID was the peripheral condition for M2a, whereas the absence of cultural distance was the peripheral condition for M2b. Similar to B1, economic distance was the core condition of B2. Institutional distance and the absence of cultural distance in M1 complemented the absence of geographic distance in configurations M2a and M2b, respectively. B2 was especially complex in that it contained more conditions in each configuration model and fewer cases versus B1. Study 2 emphasized economic distance in international tourism flows. Several paths affecting inbound and outbound tourism flows in conjunction with economic distance were identified with QCA, deepening the results of prior work.

Insert Table 3 about here

4.2.3 Findings from Study 3

Study 3 built on Studies 1 and 2 by testing the variability in interaction effects of multiple cultural distance dimensions. These dimensions were then compared with the overall cultural distance index to clarify the impacts of inbound and outbound tourism in China. Findings shed further light on how cultural distance influences international tourism flows.

Table 4 shows that C1 included more configurations than C2. For high inbound tourism flows, when different distance conditions were added, the IND dimension pervaded all configuration models as the sole core condition. Economic distance remained a critical anachronistic condition, although its importance was diluted compared with Study 2. Economic distance was also an optional condition in the M1a configurations for C1 and C2. The cultural distance dimension interaction therefore had a major effect in addition to the index of the average sum of Kogut and Singh's (1988) proposed dimensions. Furthermore, the IND dimension represented a core condition in all configurations. All configurations in C2 displayed an absence of UAI; institutional distance and PDI were peripheral conditions for each path. The configuration structure of C1 and C2 exhibited commonalities upon deconstructing the cultural distance dimension; the cases covered under each configuration were consistent as well. The cultural distance dimension interaction and integration thus shape China's high inbound/outbound tourism flows.

Insert Table 4 about here

5. Theoretical propositions

This research contributes to the knowledge base in international tourism by exploring how cultural distance drives high inbound and outbound tourism flows. Three sequential studies tested a configurational model via fsQCA to identify complex configurations between China's high inbound/outbound tourism flows and cultural distance. We refined the internal mechanisms of this complexity to develop theoretical propositions for future investigations. The parsimonious solutions of A1 and A2 and the underlying relationship indicate two patterns: LTO-oriented and MAS-oriented. The former embodies a frequent influencing pattern of cultural distance on China's high inbound/outbound tourism flows, whereas the latter serves as a differentiating pattern (Table 5).

The LTO-oriented pattern covers two configuration modes: 1) LTO and PDI and ~UAI, with typical cases of Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore; and 2) LTO and IND, with representative cases including the United Kingdom and Switzerland. These modes lead to high inbound and outbound tourism flows and inform the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Given the presence of power distance and the absence of uncertainty avoidance, or the presence of indulgence, long-term orientation is sufficient to impact China's high inbound and outbound tourism flows.

The MAS-oriented pattern also includes two configuration modes: 1) MAS and

IDV and ~UAI, a mode of influence in response to high inbound tourism flows in China (e.g., the Netherlands and Sweden); and 2) MAS and LTO, a unique configuration of China's high outbound tourism flows (e.g., Slovakia, India, Hungary, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Japan). The following proposition thus applies:

Proposition 2: Given the presence of individualism and the absence of uncertainty avoidance, or the presence of long-term orientation, masculinity is sufficient to impact China's high inbound and outbound tourism flows.

Similar to previous studies, when adopting Kogut and Singh's method (1988) to calculate Hofstede's cultural distance and integrate other forms of distance, we found that the configuration models of B1 and B2 were inconsistent: each presented distinct influencing paths. Yet upon comparing C1 and C2, we only deconstructed cultural distance (keeping all other types of distance the same) and conducted modeling again using fsQCA. Results showed that the configurations leading to high inbound tourism flows were closely aligned with outbound flow configurations. This set of comparative studies indicated heterogenous weights between cultural distance dimensions, confirming Hofstede's (1989) conclusion. The following proposition is relevant as well:

Proposition 3: The impact of cultural distance on China's high inbound and outbound tourism flows is consistent, and the interactions between cultural distance dimensions affect the roles of other types of distance on these tourism flows.

Insert Table 5 about here

6. Conclusions and implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

This research enriches understanding of how cultural distance theory applies to international tourism flows at the country level using a case-oriented fsQCA approach. Findings contribute to the tourism literature in three ways. First, this empirical work represents one of the first efforts to leverage a configurational method to predict inbound and outbound tourism flows based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Studies of tourism flows featuring this theory have mostly involved regression-oriented and symmetrical methods, which can rarely fully explain mobility phenomena in light of cultural differences due to cultural complexity (Woodside et al., 2011). We performed asymmetrical research to address related knowledge voids and have provided a concrete sense of how cultural distance affects international tourism flows from a configuration perspective.

Second, three studies were completed to further contextualize culture's role in international tourism flows. No single cultural distance dimension accounted for high inbound and outbound tourism flows; rather, integrated antecedent conditions were integral in explaining outcome conditions regarding these flows. This revelation contradicts research that has applied cultural distance dimensions independently (Huang & Crotts, 2019). In addition, any single factor associated with a cultural dimension, geographic distance, economic distance, or institutional distance was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition in producing high international tourism flows. Multiple factors instead interacted and formed various paths through such

interactions. Our research takes an initial step towards reframing international tourism flows through a configuration lens. The findings also supplement applications of cultural distance theory. Furthermore, we have highlighted the meaning of cultural distance and deepened comprehension of its role in international tourism flows by reassembling affiliated dimensions. Cultural distance theory has hence been enlarged with respect to tourism flows. For high inbound flows, UAI was absent from all antecedent configurations. This result confirms the dimension's importance as documented previously (Barkema & Vermeulen, 1998; Money & Crotts, 2003). LTO appeared in all configuration paths for high outbound tourism flows. Although QCA does not advocate for overinterpretation of any single condition except the necessary condition (Ragin, 2009), when the core condition appears in a configuration, this condition's prominence becomes evident (Fiss, 2011). We additionally compared structural differences in outbound and inbound tourism flows under the same cultural distance scenario, complementing research on single tourism flows (Bi & Lehto, 2018; Huang et al., 2021; Manosuthi et al., 2020; Qiang et al., 2019; Schuckert & Wu, 2021). The identified configurational variation in cultural distance for China's international tourism flows followed two theoretical patterns, LTO-oriented and MAS-oriented, which respectively corresponded to two of our propositions. fsQCA has demonstrated that economic distance is essential to international tourism flows (Dwyer et al., 2000; Saha et al., 2017). Building on this result, we deconstructed cultural distance and observed that its interactions influence the effectiveness of other forms of distance on international tourism flows.

Third, in a departure from prior work using fsQCA, we employed a case-oriented method to test our model at the country level (Kan et al., 2016). Pragmatic solutions can follow from this approach to address intricate cultural impacts in tourism marketing at a case level. We noted specific case types and offered corresponding practical insight and cultural marketing guidance. Other QCA applications in tourism management are limited from a case standpoint. We encourage more case-oriented QCA studies and a return to this methodology's intended purpose (Fainshmidt et al., 2020; Hyde et al., 2012; Ragin, 2009). Such work would help to illuminate the value of combining qualitative and quantitative strategies in this field.

6.2 Managerial implications

This research provides indispensable insights for tourism decision makers and businesses, highlighting various pathways that influence high inbound and outbound tourism flows in China. According to the nuanced understanding of cultural distances uncovered in our studies, tourism strategists can develop more effective policies and marketing strategies to further strengthen precision marketing and ensure substantial economic benefits.

Firstly, national tourism authorities are encouraged to apply these specific cultural insights in formulating strategies that fit the unique cultural dynamics of target markets. For example, for countries where community engagement and cultural authenticity are highly valued, such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam, promotional efforts should focus on local traditions and cultural interactions in order to attract more tourists seeking authentic cultural

experiences. From this, marketing materials that vividly depict local festivals, traditional crafts, and unique landscapes, placing these elements at the forefront of the tourism narrative would be effective attempts.

Secondly, to enhance marketing precision, destination marketers need to adjust their promoting direction based on the attributes of cultural dimensions identified in the research. In markets that are characterized by high uncertainty avoidance, such as Germany and Japan, it is beneficial to emphasize detailed travel itineraries, clear safety standards, and comprehensive guidelines in promotional content. Conversely, for countries with lower levels of uncertainty avoidance, like the United States and Australia, spontaneity and adventure should be highlighted in marketing. Thus, promoting less structured travel options that meet these tourists' preference for flexibility and discovery would be marketers' focus.

Furthermore, the development of tourism products also needs to be culturally informed to maximize tourist engagement and satisfaction. In the UK and Switzerland, where there is a preference for semi-inclusive pricing and the autonomy in travel, offering flexible travel packages that allow tourists to tailor their experience, such as choosing boutique accommodations or unique local dining options, will likely enhance tourist satisfaction. Similarly, for markets like the Netherlands and Sweden, where dignity and a rich experiential approach are prioritized, services should include exclusive experiences, such as private guided tours to less-known locales and access to high-end local offerings. Apart from

tailoring efforts, training the tourism workforce adequately to interact with a culturally diverse tourist base is equally essential. This means extensive modules on cultural sensitivity, appropriate communication styles, and excellent customer service across different cultures should be included. Among them, creating role-playing scenarios and mimicking real-life interactions with tourists from diverse backgrounds can be particularly effective in enhancing understanding and responsiveness to diverse tourist needs and preferences. Finally, fostering long-term strategic partnerships with key international markets can facilitate sustained tourism flows. As for countries with significant cultural distances, collaborative initiatives such as joint marketing campaigns, cultural festivals, and educational exchange programs can foster deeper appreciation and mutual respect, enhancing both inbound and outbound tourism.

This paper provides a comprehensive strategic framework for harnessing cultural differences to fortify the effectiveness of tourism marketing practices, ranging from detailed policy formulation and segmented marketing to culturally tailored product development and workforce training. These detailed, actionable and culturally attuned measures contribute significantly to the sustainability and expansion of China's tourism sector on a global scale.

6.3 Limitations and future research

Several limitations of this research present opportunities for subsequent work. We exclusively considered Hofstede's cultural distance perspective. Competing frameworks, such as that by Schwartz and the WVS model, were excluded. Our

conclusions therefore require further validation. In addition, we only analyzed the paths of high international tourist flows. A key advantage of QCA is that it can test results' asymmetry; many chances thus exist for further study. Finally, we referred to quantitative data to evaluate configurational models using fsQCA. Future research can apply a complementary qualitative approach to further verify our three propositions.

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Table 1

Definitions of antecedents and outcome conditions and calibration

Condition	Definition	Calibration			Data (Source)
		Full membership	Cross-over point	Full non-membership	
Inbound tourism flows	Inbound tourism flow data for the year 2017	2308	55	3.4	Yearly data for 2017 from Euromonitor International Database
Outbound tourism flows	Outbound tourism flow data for the year 2017	6359	170	7.7	
Cultural distance (CD)	Cultural differences between case countries and China	4.5	2.4	0.6	Cultural distance index from Kogut and Singh (1988)
Power distance (PDI)	Extent to which case countries can accept an unequal distribution of power	94.7	64	23.8	65 nation cases from 100 Chinese inbound/outbound tourism countries and those included in the Hofstede dataset (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010)
Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)	Tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity in case countries	97.4	65	29	
Individualism (IDV)	Measuring whether the case country is concerned with the interests of the individual or the collective	86.3	40	14.3	
Masculinity (MAS)	Whether case country members exhibit more masculine qualities or feminine qualities	85.3	48	9.3	
Long-term orientation (LTO)	Extent to which case country members are comfortable with delayed gratification	82.7	46	13	
Indulgence (IND)	Extent to which the case country allows for basic human needs and the desire to enjoy the pleasures of life	82.1	46	13.9	
Economic distance (ED)	Representation of economic differences between China and case countries	0.36	0.03	0.00	GDP ratio among destination countries in 2017 (WDI Database)
Geographic distance (GD)	Spatial proximity between China and case countries	18440	7468	2167	Physical distance between two national capitals in 2017 (CEPII Database)
Institutional distance (ID)	Institutional factors in case countries	10.6	4	-5.1	Yearly data for 2017 from the World Bank (WGI Database)

Table 2

Models for high inbound and outbound tourism flows

	High inbound tourism flows (A1)				High outbound tourism flows (A2)			
Condition	*M1*	*M2*	*M3a*	*M3b*	*M1*	*M2*	*M3a*	*M3b*
Power distance	⊙	⊙	●	●	⊙	●	•	⊙
Individualism	•	●	⊙	•	•	⊙	•	•
Masculinity		●	⊙	•		⊙	●	●
Uncertainty avoidance	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	•
Long-term orientation	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
Indulgence	●	•	⊙	⊙	●	⊙	⊙	⊙
Consistency	0.902	0.828	0.910	0.836	0.897	0.869	0.890	0.849
Raw coverage	0.326	0.367	0.285	0.228	0.345	0.290	0.259	0.353
Unique coverage	0.053	0.097	0.089	0.014	0.119	0.083	0.027	0.127
Solution coverage	0.555				0.617			
Solution consistency	0.799				0.831			

Note: "●/●" indicates the presence of a condition: the larger circle denotes the "core condition" and the smaller circle denotes the "peripheral condition." "（⊙/⊙）" indicates the absence of a condition: the larger circle denotes the "core condition" and the smaller circle denotes the "peripheral condition." Blank spaces indicate the presence or absence of a condition.

Table 3

Models for high inbound and outbound tourism flows

	High inbound tourism flows (B1)			High outbound tourism flows (B2)		
Condition	*M1a*	*M1b*	*M1c*	*M1*	*M2a*	*M2b*
Cultural distance	⊙			⊙		⊙
Institutional distance		•		●	•	
Geographic distance			•		⊙	⊙
Economic distance	●	●	●	●	●	●
Consistency	0.896	0.823	0.793	0.881	0.886	0.914
Raw coverage	0.613	0.604	0.579	0.571	0.549	0.448
Unique coverage	0.108	0.030	0.022	0.144	0.121	0.021
Solution coverage		0.808			0.714	
Solution consistency		0.784			0.835	

Note: "●/●" indicates the presence of a condition: the larger circle denotes the "core condition" and the smaller circle denotes the "peripheral condition." "（⊙/⊙）" indicates the absence of a condition: the larger circle denotes the "core condition" and the smaller circle denotes the "peripheral condition." Blank spaces indicate the presence or absence of a condition.

Table 4

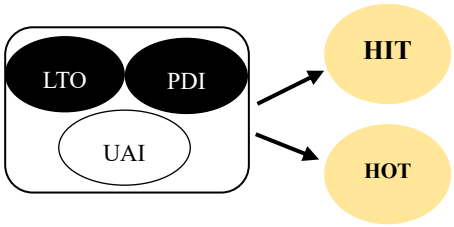
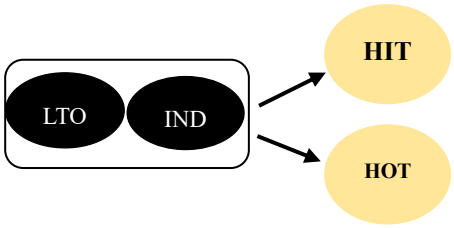
Models for high inbound and outbound tourism flows

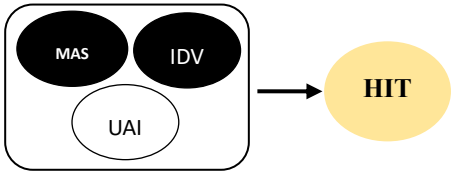
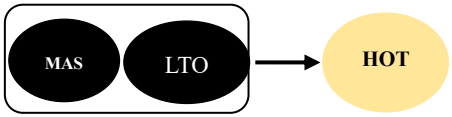
	High inbound tourism flows (C1)				High outbound tourism flows (C2)		
Condition	*M1a*	*M1b*	*M1c*	*M1d*	*M1a*	*M1b*	*M1c*
Institutional distance	●	●	●	⊙	●	●	●
Geographic distance	●	●	⊙	●	●	●	⊙
Economic distance		●	●	●		●	●
Power distance	⊙	⊙	⊙	●	⊙	⊙	⊙
Individualism	●	●	●	⊙	●	●	●
Masculinity	●	●	⊙	●	●	●	⊙
Uncertainty avoidance	⊙	⊙	⊙	●	⊙	⊙	⊙
Long-term orientation			⊙	⊙	⊙		⊙
Indulgence	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Consistency	0.897	0.944	0.934	0.825	0.878	0.921	0.879
Raw coverage	0.284	0.286	0.237	0.246	0.296	0.298	0.237
Unique coverage	0.041	0.043	0.049	0.100	0.044	0.046	0.038
Solution coverage	0.476				0.380		
Solution consistency	0.832				0.843		

Note: "●/●" indicates the presence of a condition: the larger circle denotes the "core condition" and the smaller circle denotes the "peripheral condition." "（⊙/⊙）" indicates the absence of a condition: the larger circle denotes the "core condition" and the smaller circle denotes the "peripheral condition." Blank spaces indicate the presence or absence of a condition.

Table 5

Patterns of cultural distance on inbound and outbound tourism flows in China

High inbound/outbound tourism flow pattern	Pattern view	Typical cases	Pattern description	Cultural marketing insights
LTO-oriented high inbound tourism flows and high outbound tourism flows		Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore	For China's international tourism flows, this pattern shows consistency between high outbound and high inbound tourism flows. Case countries for these models are in three fast-growing Southeast Asian countries as well as in high-welfare countries (i.e., the United Kingdom and Switzerland). Long-term orientation with high power distance and the absence of uncertainty avoidance characterize the tourism market in three Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore. Long-term orientation with indulgence characterizes the Chinese inbound and outbound tourism markets in the United Kingdom and Switzerland. This result is comparative, with the United Kingdom scoring low on the independent dimension of long-term orientation and in cross-sectional comparisons with other high inbound/outbound tourism case countries. A fixed configuration of the indulgence dimension results in	In terms of inbound and outbound tourism, China's international tourism market and policymakers should focus on long-term orientation characteristics when promoting tourism markets and designing products. For example, regarding inbound and outbound group tours, these stakeholders should increase the number of cultural products and the degree of aesthetics. Offerings should be moderately priced. Regarding tourism management for Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam, inbound/outbound tours should prioritize active guidance and established planning. For the inbound/outbound markets of the United Kingdom and Switzerland, free travel and semi-inclusive prices should be favored (e.g., independent tours, accommodation, and meals). In terms of tourism products and marketing, the promotion and design of impactful, exciting, adventurous, hedonistic, and unique cultural and natural experience programs should be carried out.
		United Kingdom, Switzerland		

			a relatively long-term orientation, which previous studies did not identify. This pattern sheds light on the cultural marketing of inbound and outbound tourism in China and the United Kingdom.	
MAS-oriented high inbound tourism flows or high outbound tourism flows		Netherlands, Sweden	For the Chinese inbound tourism market, the Netherlands and Sweden exemplify masculinity and individualism without uncertainty avoidance.	In the Chinese inbound tourism market, elements such as high competition and high respect should be featured throughout tourism marketing materials, tourism organizations, and tourism experiences. For example, tourism products should feature fun competition; tourism experiences should convey high honor and dignity. In the Chinese outbound tourism market, for these six target countries, Chinese tourism organizations as (along with destination countries and local hospitality companies) should emphasize dignity, honor, material achievement, competition, social encouragement, and service efficiency in the tourism process/goods given Chinese tourists' interest in long-term orientation (e.g., through annual cards, bonus rewards, discounts to incentivize return visits, and investment properties). Tourism business tools should also promote sustainable consumption.
		Slovakia, India, Hungary, Italy, Czech Republic, Japan	For the Chinese outbound travel market, masculinity combined with long-term orientation characterizes Central European countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary as well as Italy, Japan, and India.	

Note: PDI = power distance; IDV = individualism; MAS = masculinity; UAI = uncertainty avoidance; LTO = long-term orientation; IND = indulgence; HIT = high inbound tourism; HOT = high outbound tourism.

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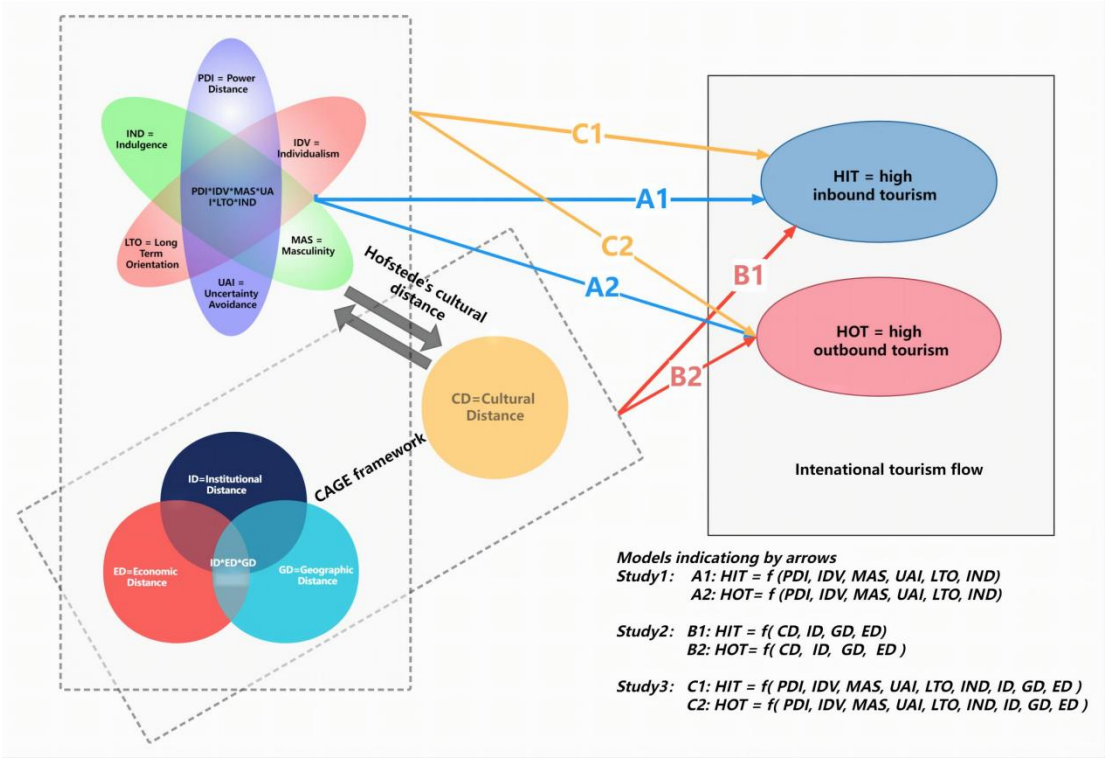

Figure 1. Research model