# OXFORD BROOKES BUSINESS SCHOOL

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# SPATIAL PATTERN OF CHINESE PACKAGE TOURS TO THE UK AND NORTHERN IRELAND AND THEIR IMPLICATION ON TOURIST CONGESTION

# INTRODUCTION

Tourist's desire for international travel can no longer be contained. Sky News highlighted that UK tourist bookings to 'amber-list' countries had increased by 400% following the lifting of UK government quarantine restrictions in July 2021. Many tourism-reliant European destinations have been quick to welcome back international visitors. The need for work critically reviewing congestion and its management remains as vital as ever.

Large package tours have been held responsible for causing tourist congestions in the major UK tourist cities. This project focuses on the large Chinese package tours to the UK and Northern Ireland. It presents the spatial features of all the packages, their similarity and differentiation, and the rationales behind the design of the itineraries.

# METHODS

The Chinese group tour itineraries to the UK were extracted from the top 10 offline and top 3 online travel agents' official websites in China. The samples cover over 85% of outbound Chinese group tours abroad each year before the COVID-19 period. The selected 13 itineraries were collected between June and July in 2019, it was the peak selling season for Chinese outbound tourists to the UK and when all itineraries were published on their websites.

These itineraries attracted 15 million Chinese tourists to the UK. Substantial interviews were also conducted with tour operator senior management teams and Chinese Destination Marketing Organisations. The presentation provides nuanced insights into how to promote UK destinations and help to diversify the existing package tour itineraries to the UK, eventually alleviating tourist congestion. ArcGIS and SPSS were used to analyse the data.

## KEY FINDINGS

**The line density analysis reveals two main types of routes covered by the Chinese package tours to the UK and NI: close circle and open linear (Figure 1).**

- The divide between the close circle and open linear depends on whether the same airport is used by the travel itineraries for landing and departure

- The close circle pattern is separated into the anticlockwise and clockwise pattern

- The open linear pattern is separated into the domestic and international itineraries, depending on whether an itinerary covers Ireland

- In the close circle pattern, the itineraries cover many of the same destinations such as London, Oxford, Cambridge, Windsor, Manchester, York and Edinburgh

- Windermere, Newcastle, and York are viewed as transit locations with little time spent in exploring these locations

- In the linear pattern, Belfast and Dublin are the main destinations. Glasgow and Liverpool are the major transit cities

**Hotspot, cold and insignificant hotspot cities are identified (Figure 2).**

- Hotspot cities are distributed in South England and Midlands, including London, Oxford, Cambridge, Birmingham, Stratford-upon-Avon, Bourton-on-Water. Cambridge and Oxford are popular destinations for Chinese tourists as a result of their international reputation for education

- Cold hotspot locations include Gloucester, Leeds and the Peak District

- Insignificant hotspots include Cardiff, Bath, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Carlisle, Gretna Green and the Lake District

## The distribution of the visited areas is also revealed (Figure 3).

- The ellipses' centres mostly focus on Southeast UK covering both domestic linear and close circle patterns

- The international linear itineraries cover more horizontal ellipses. They contain more destinations in the southern and northern parts of the UK and Ireland with scattered locations

- SPSS NOVA test shows that these itineraries demonstrate differentiation in duration of days and travel distances but show no difference in attractions covered. This result indicates the itineraries cover similar attractions and cities
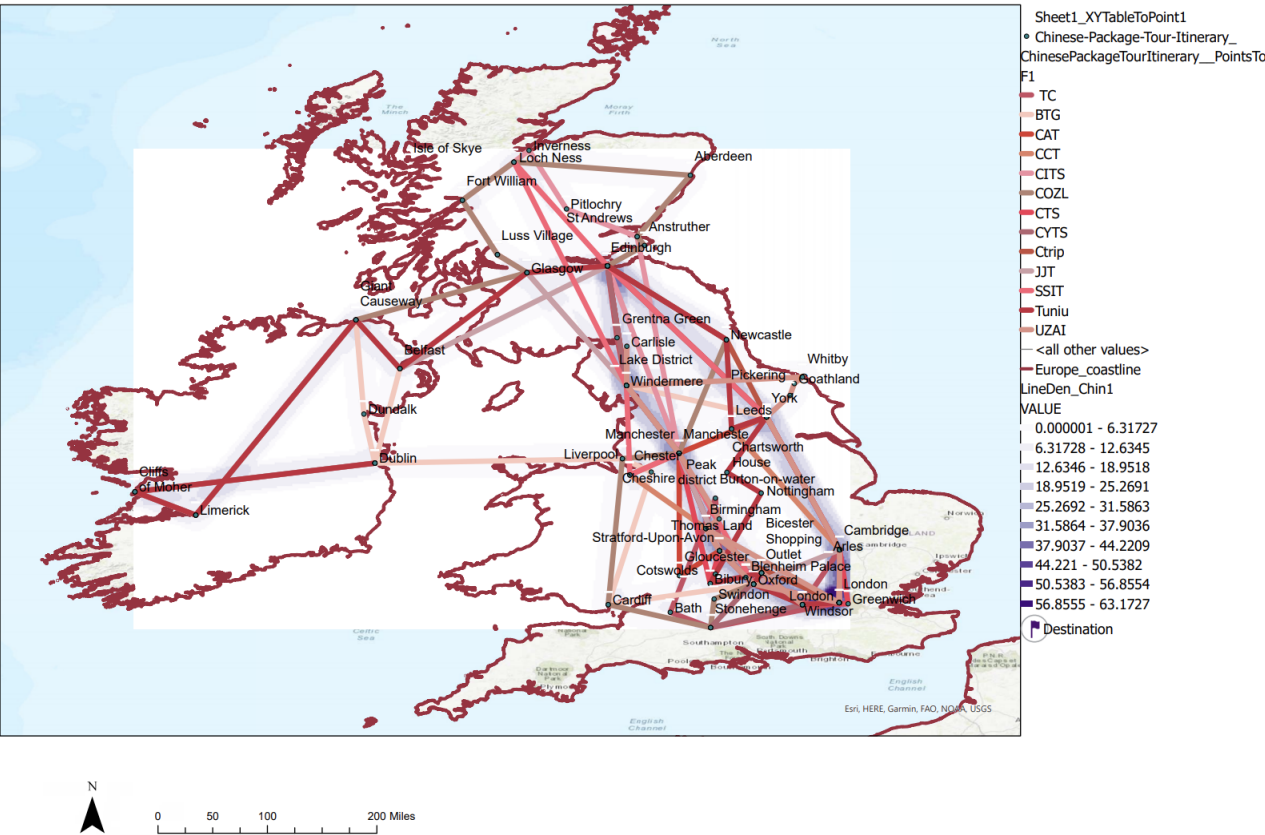


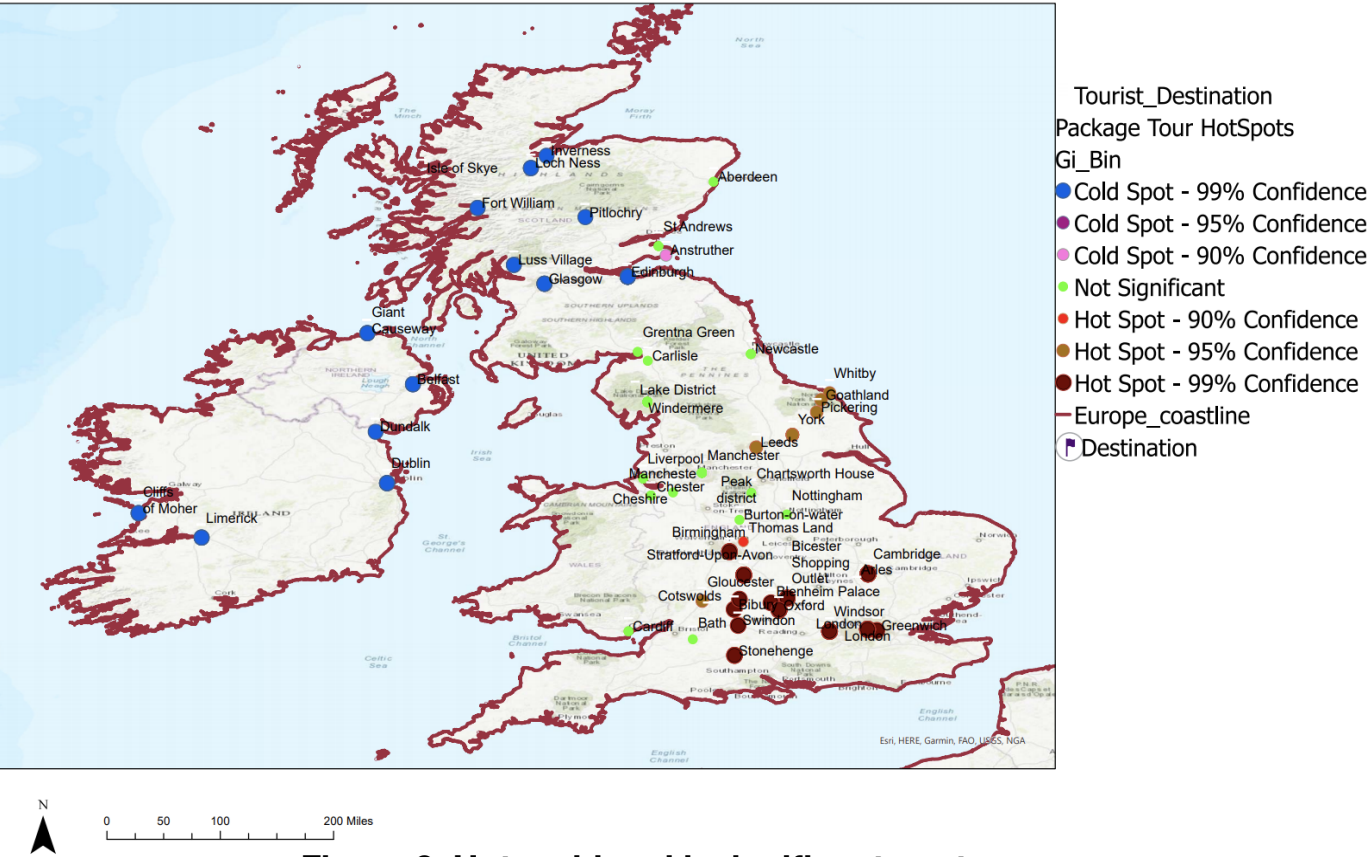**Figure 1. Line density of package tour itineraries**

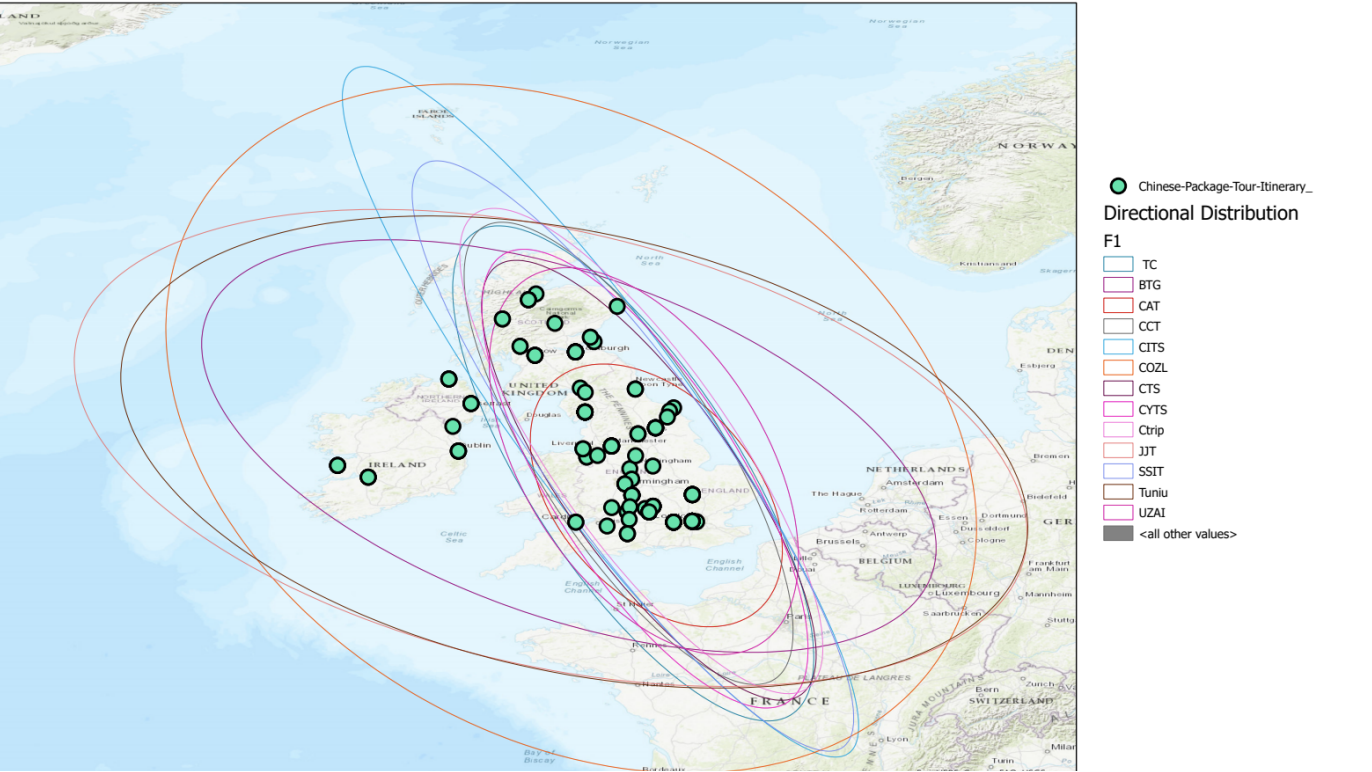**Figure 2. Hot, cold and insignificant spots**



**Figure 3. Directional distribution**

The Chinese package tour itineraries have remained unchanged since they were created 30 years ago. The interviews expose some of operational difficulties, the financial risks in organising international tours and the lack of up-to-date knowledge about foreign destinations. These challenges have forced the major tour operators to collaborate with smaller Chinese operators who are prepared to sell these itineraries because they do not have the knowledge and financial resource to develop their own international tours. As a result, the entire travel industry in China has been selling the same travel itineraries to the UK. Far from incorporating consumers' preferences, the package tour designs in China are largely led by operation feasibilities.

As all the itineraries are the same, they distribute tourists to the same attractions and same cities, consequently causing tourist congestion. The hotspots created by Chinese package tours in some areas are different from UK's other international destinations, such as tourists from USA, Australia and European cities.

# RESEARCH IMPACT

- It is not enough to manage tourist congestion once it has formed, as is the common approach. It is far more important to manage the package tour products that are available to consumers in their home country

- Redesigning package tour itineraries appears the quickest way to redistribute tourist flows at destinations

- The most effective way for the UK DMOs to promote new destinations lies in direct collaboration with the major Chinese tour operators

- The Chinese consumers have little access to independent travel information and they rely on the tour operators, particularly the mainstream ones, to advise and make decision

- The spatial patterns and travel corridors, especially the Hotspots analysis, reveals immediate opportunities for DMOs to add adjacent attractions and cities to the existing itineraries

- As the existing tour itineraries have been established to meet operating feasibility, UK DMOs can develop brand new itineraries along different patterns for the Chinese tour operators to sell

- As the Chinese are keen on other European destinations, UK can be promoted jointly with another European city to increase its appeal

- Incentives or travel vouchers can be introduced to encourage the Chinese tour operators to include new attractions

- The airport locations have an adverse effect on the tourist itinerary and it is worth encouraging the Chinese tour operators to use other UK airports

*"The cliché of Chinese tourists disembarking from buses for short visits to photograph well-known sights is based on a shocking reality – the itineraries of travel companies are largely the same because only a few players are informing the choices."*

**Dr Kate Mingjie Ji**

# RESEARCH TEAM



### Principal Investigator: Dr Kate Mingjie Ji, Senior Lecturer at Brookes Business School, Oxford Brookes University

Kate has a research interest in tourist behavioural modelling, embodied experience and tourist mobility. She led a project funded by ESRC to investigate tourist congestion in the City of Oxford. She has also participated in a consultancy project to assess the capacity of conference centres and event venues in Oxfordshire. She has attended radio interviews to advise on key tourism management issues and her work appears in leading tourism and hospitality journals. Dr Ji's research has been welcomed by tourism and hospitality practitioners to whom she has given several seminars.



### Research Collaborator: Dr Jonathan Reynolds, Associate Professor at Said Business School, University of Oxford

Jonathan's teaching and research focus primarily on the retail sector. He is particularly recognised for his scholarship and expertise in the areas of electronic commerce and omni-channel retailing, innovation and entrepreneurship in retailing, retail productivity and skills, and the role of place in marketing and retailing. His views are sought after by businesses, policy makers and the media. He is heavily committed to knowledge exchange, actively seeking to ensure that his research can be widely disseminated amongst policy-makers and practitioners.



### Research Assistant: Mr Zhihao Chen, PhD student in Tourism Management at Oxford Brookes Business School

Zhihao's research interests are tourists' spatial behaviour and big data analysis. He participated in collecting package tour itinerary data and contacting interviewees throughout the entire project.