Sweden's Destination Image among Chinese Tourists

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Executive summary

This report examines how Chinese outbound tourists perceive Sweden as a travel destination, based on visual and textual data from the leading Chinese travel media platforms, namely Ctrip and Mafengwo. Amid increasing Chinese tourism to the Nordic region in the aftermath of the COVID-19 hiatus, Sweden's destination image in China must be better understood to differentiate it from that of other Nordic countries. This is especially important given that Sweden is regularly marketed collectively with other Nordic countries to the Chinese market. To our knowledge no studies focusing specifically on images of Sweden within the Chinese tourism market have been identified in recent literature. Although Sweden is traditionally promoted internationally as a predominantly nature-based destination, this study establishes that Chinese tourists considered in the study primarily perceive and experience Sweden through a cultural and urban lens.

Key Findings

- *Cultural and urban focus:* Over 70% of tourism images from both independent tourists and package tours emphasized cultural heritage and urban landscapes, especially in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. Historical architecture and museums (e.g., Gamla Stan, Vasa Museum) are central attractions.
- *Limited nature-based tourism:* Despite expressing a general preference for natural landscapes, very few Chinese tourists venture into Sweden's rural or wilderness areas. However, natural elements like water bodies and birds within urban contexts are widely photographed and appreciated. Coexistence of humans and nature is an attractive feature.
- *Passive and slow tourism:* Most Chinese tourists in the sample engage in passive activities like sightseeing, dining, and attending royal guard ceremonies. Food-related experiences (e.g., tasting authentic food, promenading in local markets) are especially popular, particularly among independent travelers.
- *Design and aesthetic appeal:* "Nordic style" — including colorful architecture reminiscent of fairy tales, and Scandinavian design — strongly resonates with Chinese tourists.

- *Different tourist profiles:* Package tours marketed via Ctrip emphasize cultural highlights and "VIP-style" dining in Sweden, while independent tourists use blogs and apps to seek authenticity, flexibility, and slower travel styles.

Recommendations for Swedish DMOs and other tourism stakeholders

- Prioritize marketing cultural and urban attractions, such as historical sites, museums, and authentic gastronomy experiences.
- Highlight the coexistence of nature and urban life to align with tourists' photographic interests and sustainability themes.
- Improve accessibility and visibility of natural attractions and alternative cities beyond Stockholm, Gothenburg or Malmö to broaden Sweden's attractiveness.
- Leverage authentic travel narratives and user-generated content to inspire independent travelers.

This study, therefore, highlights an interesting gap between Sweden's projected nature-based tourism brand and the actual experiences of Chinese tourists, suggesting an opportunity to recalibrate tourism marketing strategies for this growing visitor segment.

内容摘要

本报告基于中国主要旅游媒体平台（携程和马蜂窝）的视觉和文字数据，探讨了中国出境游客如何看待瑞典这一旅游目的地。COVID-19 疫情过后，中国赴北欧地区的游客人数逐渐回升。瑞典在中国的旅游目的地形象还需更深入的理解，因为瑞典通常与周边领国作为一整块区域共同进行营销。据我们所知，近期文献中尚无针对瑞典在中国的旅游目的地形象的研究。尽管瑞典在国际上一贯被定位为以自然景观为主的旅游目的地，但本研究中的中国游客主要是从文化与城市的角度感知并体验瑞典。

主要结论：

- 文化与城市导向：超过 70%的旅游图片（无论是自由行游客或者是跟团游客）皆强调文化遗产与城市景观，尤其是集中于斯德哥尔摩，哥德堡和马尔默等城市的景观。其中，历史建筑与博物馆（例如斯德哥尔摩旧城区，瓦萨博物馆）是首选旅游景观。

- 有限的自然旅游观光：尽管游客们普遍喜欢自然景观，但实际上很少有人深入瑞典的乡村或荒野地区。不过，城市环境中的自然元素（例如水域和鸟类）则大量的出现在了旅游摄影中，并被游客们所欣赏。人与自然共存的城市景观被视为具有吸引力的城市特征。

- 慢节奏低参与式的旅游模式：本研究样本中的大多数中国游客都倾向于低参与式的活动，比如观光，用餐与观看王室卫兵交接仪式等。其中，以食物为中心的体验（例如品尝地道的当地美食，漫步在当地的市集）在自由行游客中尤其的受欢迎。

- 设计与美学吸引力："北欧风" ——包括色彩缤纷，童话感十足的建筑与斯堪的纳维亚设计美学在中国游客中引起了强烈的共鸣。

- 游客类型的差异：携程等平台推广的跟团旅游以瑞典的文化与 "贵宾式"的餐饮体验作为营销亮点，而自由行游客则倾向通过旅行博客与旅游应用程序寻找更加地道，灵活与慢节奏的旅行方式。

对瑞典旅游景区管理机构的建议：

- 优先营销文化和城市景点，如历史遗迹、博物馆和正宗美食体验。
- 突出自然与城市生活的和谐共存，以契合游客的摄影兴趣与可持续发展旅游主题。
- 提高自然景点和斯德哥尔摩以外其他城市的可达性和知名度，以增加瑞典旅游的整体吸引力。
- 利用真实的旅游叙事和社交媒体上的用户生成内容来激发自由行游客的旅行灵感。

因此，本研究强调了瑞典以自然为基础的旅游品牌与中国游客的实际体验之间存在的有趣差异，并且为重新调整针对这一日益增长的游客群体的旅游营销战略与品牌定位提供了机会与建议。

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1 Introduction

Being a popular natural tourism destination, Sweden receives many tourists who wish to experience its relatively untouched nature (e.g., forests, mountains, lakes, and northern lights) and engage in nature-related activities (e.g., skiing, hiking) (Sataoen, 2021). As a Nordic country, Sweden does not only market its destination image individually but is also often marketed to international tourists collectively together with other Nordic countries. This situation might lead foreigners who have not traveled to the region to mix-up the respective countries' traits. Simultaneously, it can make it more difficult for each Nordic country to distinguish itself as a unique tourism destination. Considering the growing popularity of visits to the Nordic region among Chinese tourists (Tommasini et.al, 2016), this study focuses on how outbound visitors from China perceive Nordic countries in general and Sweden in particular as tourism destinations (Tommasini & Zhou, 2016).

According to Dichter et al., (2018), China which is one of the largest outbound tourism markets in the world, has in recent years witnessed a dramatic increase of visits by its nationals to European countries. This trend has continued following the hiatus in global travel associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Allied Committees on Tourism, 2023). Based on this trend, certain studies (e.g., COTRI, 2018; Cai, 2015; Liu, 2017) examined the branding strategies of Nordic countries on Chinese social media and how Chinese tourists perceive different Nordic countries as tourism destinations. However, while most of those studies examined the destination image among Chinese tourists by focusing on the Nordic countries as one entire region, only a handful of investigations focused on the destination images of the respective destinations. Notable exceptions include studies of Finland's destination image among Chinese tourists, which demonstrated that most of these travelers were interested in Christmas culture, northern lights, snowy climate and Finland's natural landscapes (e.g., Wang, 2018, Hiltunen, 2018). However, we were unable to identify studies relating to the destination image of Sweden among Chinese tourists. Based on this research gap, our aim in this report is to understand how Chinese outbound tourists perceive Sweden through an examination of Chinese travel media. Since using travel websites and/or apps to support prospective tourists to

book their travel-related services is the most used method in China, we considered these websites as reliable and representative information sources.

This report has been divided into 6 chapters. In chapter 2, we provide background information about destination images in Nordic countries, and the challenges these countries face when marketing themselves. We also examine the phenomenon of increasing numbers of Chinese tourists traveling to Nordic countries in general noting that we lack detailed information about the destination image of each country respectively. The choice of Sweden as our case study is explained. We discuss background information about how the Chinese tourists' travel behavior has evolved in recent years and why it is necessary to examine Chinese travel media.

In chapter 3, we review previous literature related to destination images, including how individuals form an image of a destination, and how DMOs create a destination image to market their tourism resources by using narratives and photographs in their advertisements. Also, we examine how the usage of social media, for example, travel blogs, affects potential tourists' perceptions of a destination and how people understand personal travel blogs and blogs created by tourism business sectors in different ways.

In chapter 4, we explain how we selected Chinese travel media, and how we used images and textual information to understand our research aim. Two main travel websites were used, namely Ctrip (携程) and Mafengwo (蚂蜂窝). We browsed many Chinese travel media and then chose images and textual information related to travel in Sweden from the top 10 websites on Ctrip and top 10 travel blogs from Mafengwo as the sample of package tour advertisement and independent tourist content. We used mixed methods to analyze the data. First, we used descriptive statistics of the images and subsequently selected and categorized typical representative images as the data source for semiotic analysis. The explanation of the semiotic analysis was supported by textual information on the websites.

In chapter 5, the findings highlighted that most Chinese outbound tourists in our sample perceive Sweden as a cultural and urban tourism destination. Both package tour advertisement and travel blogs created by independent tourists included

photographs that overwhelmingly (approximately 70%) indicated cultural and urban sites. The most popular cultural related tourism attractions are museums and old architecture. Natural elements integrated within urban landscapes (e.g., water bodies such as lakes, rivers and canals, birds, green spaces) are frequently highlighted in our sample, although it is obvious that only 2% of package tourists and 9% of independent travelers from China visit natural attractions in Sweden. Passive activities are popular among Chinese tourists in our sample, while watching royal guard ceremonies is one of the must-do activities. Activities related to gastronomy are also popular. For instance, many Chinese tourists like to visit restaurants to experience what they perceive to be authentic local cuisine. Visits to food markets are also popular. Moreover, the pictures related to tourism infrastructure showed that Chinese tourists in our sample are interested in Nordic design, such as colorful historical buildings (which they perceive as settings to popular fairytales), or modern interiors (which they associate with IKEA). Only 3 groups of independent tourists shared their pictures of nature-based Swedish activities (e.g., hiking and sauna) in our sample.

In chapter 6, we discussed the results and compared them to those of previous studies. In our result, the cultural and urban tourism image is highly associated with Chinese tourists' preferences in Sweden. This reflects Chinese outbound tourists' preferences regardless of their destinations. However, the result in our study differs from previous research (e.g., Soraya, 2024) which emphasized nature as the main projected image of Sweden. In chapter 6, we also discussed that the accessibility of each tourism attraction plays an important role in affecting the travel routes of Chinese tourists in our sample.

In the final part of the report, our findings lead us to certain recommendations. We suggest that Swedish DMOs and other tourism actors can focus more on marketing cultural (museums, old buildings) and urban (urban landscapes, coexistence of natural and human-made elements) tourism destinations, while also providing additional travel information about nature-based tourism possibilities, especially in terms of increasing the accessibility of each tourism attraction. This also relates to gastronomy-related activities. We also suggest that to attract more Chinese tourists

into nature-based and rural destinations more marketing and efforts to enhance accessibility are needed. Since natural elements frequently appear in photos of urban landscapes, and since 24% of Chinese outbound tourists express preference for natural landscapes regardless of destination, this study indicates that there is potential to further developing nature-based tourism for this market within Sweden. The report concludes with a discussion of some of the limitations, such as heavy reliance on social media.

2 Background

Previous research on the destination image of Nordic countries (e.g., Sataoen, 2021, Hiltunen, 2018, Osland et al., 2021) indicates that foreigners often view Nordic countries as a singular region based on their images of various traits that all these countries share. These include, for example, long snowy winters, Viking history, and beautiful nature, which attracts many tourists to pursue nature-based tourism (Sataoen, 2021, Hiltunen, 2018, Osland et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these researchers have also reflected that the similarities of Nordic countries could serve as a challenge when it comes for each country trying to establish a distinct destination image and market itself separately (Hiltunen, 2018).

Meanwhile, as Zheng et al. (2020) have mentioned, the number of Chinese tourists in Nordic countries has significantly increased in recent years, which is not entirely surprising considering that China is one of the world's largest sources of outbound visitors. As Tommasini et al. (2016) have mentioned, Chinese tourists no longer restrict themselves to visits within the Asian region. Instead, they now travel to a wide range of destinations throughout the world. Indeed, an increasing number of Chinese travelers visit the Arctic region (Tommasini et al., 2016) while in 2018 alone, more than 1 million Chinese tourists visited Nordic countries (Zheng et al., 2020).

To understand how the Chinese perceive Nordic countries as tourism destinations, the China Outbound Tourism Research Institution (COTRI, 2018) examined Chinese tourists' images of Nordic countries (including Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Greenland) from both a supply and demand perspective. Their findings showed that Chinese tourists' destination image of Nordic countries tends to be homogeneous. For example, the nature-oriented image of all these destinations is largely related to winter, snow, and Northern lights. Also, Chinese tourists consider countries like Denmark, Norway and Sweden to be "expensive". However, the COTRI study also showed that there are some unique images for each of the Nordic countries based on their own respective features. For example, exotic nature and good self-drive conditions are perceptions particularly linked to Iceland. Denmark is perceived largely based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales and its suitability

for family trips. Finland is associated with Santa Claus and the country's gastronomic reputation. Sweden is linked to its unique culture (COTRI, 2018).

Based on the different features of each Nordic country, we must examine their destination image separately. In the past, several studies (e.g., Wang, 2018, Hiltunen, 2018, Tommasini, et, al., 2016) have discussed Finland's destination image among Chinese tourists. For example, Wang (2018) investigated how DMOs throughout Finland created their respective images and marketed their destinations to Chinese tourists. The findings showed there are several components in Finnish tourism advertisements, including culture (e.g., reindeer meat, Christmas traditions and decorations), the outdoors (e.g., northern lights, Finnish cottages) and activities (e.g., sauna, winter sports). Also, various words related to specific feelings supported the marketing of the destinations. These included "exciting" but also "relaxing and pleasant" feelings being mentioned together with some activities in Finland's destination marketing advertisement (Wang, 2018). From the visitors' perspective, Tommasini et al. (2016) studied the perception of Finland among Chinese outbound tourists. Their findings suggested that Chinese tourists are often attracted by natural landscapes and winter activities. Also, their study emphasized that Chinese independent travelers prefer authentic and unique experiences, as well as exotic destinations such as Rovaniemi in Finland.

Nevertheless, despite the appearance of these studies there has been surprisingly minimal research focusing on Sweden's destination image among Chinese tourists. As Hiltunen (2018) mentioned, Chinese tourists consider Stockholm to be Sweden's most famous city. For most Chinese people, Sweden evokes images related to beautiful landscapes and various famous Swedish brands or events such as IKEA, Volvo and the Nobel prize. But as COTRI (2018) indicates, it is mostly Stockholm and to a lesser extent Gothenburg and Malmö which are most popular destinations among Chinese tourists, whereas other localities throughout the country are largely not well known. In the meantime, several studies (Dichter et al., 2018; Tommasini et al. 2016; COTRI, 2018) have suggested that the travel behavior of Chinese tourists has been gradually changing. Initially, Chinese outbound tourists used to book their journey through local travel agencies and used to travel in large groups led by

guides. In contrast, nowadays, an increasing number of Chinese tourists tend to make their own travel arrangements without relying on tour operators and/or travel agents. Indeed, their journeys are highly reliant on information they gain from travel websites or mobile apps (Cai, 2015). As is already the norm in the digital economy, Chinese tourists use the internet for support throughout all the stages of their travels from planning the trip to booking various components such as their transport and accommodation. Travel media such as Qyer or Mafengwo also allow potential visitors to gain a better mental image of the destinations by providing illustrations of what they can expect to see and do once they arrive (Tommasini et al., 2016, Cai, 2015). As Tommasini et al., (2016) have indicated, some Chinese online travel communities (e.g., Qyer.com) attract large numbers of users. This means that such travel media are now the main sources through which Chinese tourists obtain travel information related to various destinations. Regarding our limited understanding of the Chinese tourists' perceptions of Sweden as a singular destination, we now turn our attention towards answering the following question: *What is the predominant image of Sweden presented in Chinese travel media?*

2.1 Chinese Outbound Tourism

According to the Chinese outbound tourism report in 2025, China is one of the largest outbound tourism markets in the world. Its outbound tourist numbers and tourism expenditure remain the highest in the world (UN Tourism, May 2025). By January 2023, after ending its COVID-19 policy, China finally opened its borders and began to witness a recovery of its tourism industry (both inbound and outbound) (Third Bridge, 2023). Indeed, the numbers of outbound tourists dramatically began increasing after 2023, even though they originally remained at only 50% of the 2019 levels. Nevertheless, the tourist numbers have kept increasing, as seen through a study by the China tourism academy (2024), which summarized key features of the Chinese outbound market in the aftermath of COVID-19.

A questionnaire (collected by China Tourism Academy) from 31 Chinese provinces showed that most tourists participate in group tours when traveling with their friends and family. The factors that are important to Chinese outbound tourists are

price, transportation, unique experience, beautiful nature, special food, travel safety and security of the accommodation property they choose. Price is the most important factor, especially the cost of accommodation. The report of Chinese outbound tourism 2023-2024 showed that around 50% tourists chose budget hotels, 1/3 chose medium priced hotels, while the number of people who chose luxury hotels had decreased compared with the year before 2020 (China Tourism Academy, 2024). The report of Chinese outbound tourism also indicated that highly educated and younger tourists have become mainstream. 74.36% of tourists have a bachelor's degree or a diploma from a vocational college, while 82.8% are between 22-41 years old. This means that almost everyone (if not everyone) is using the internet in one way or another to obtain travel information.

As indicated in an earlier study by Dichter et al. (2018) concerning the Chinese outbound tourism market, most young people 20-24 are proficient in using websites and mobile apps. Not only do they use tourism apps to book travel services, but they also prefer to consult websites to plan their travel schedule and to make digital payments during their trip (Dichter et al., 2018). Additionally, a report from the China tourism academy (2024) mentioned that the frequently searched travel topics on the internet included information about transportation, accommodation, and prices but also about local customs and traditions (China Tourism Academy, 2024). Furthermore, for Chinese outbound tourists, currency exchange rates, visa restrictions, and availability of international flight routes are key factors, which ultimately determine the destinations of choice (Lu, 2017). This has meant that Asian countries remain the most popular outbound destinations for Chinese travelers. The big data report on tourism 2023 showed that 61% of outbound tourists chose to visit Asian countries during that year, even though this number had decreased by 6% compared to 2019. In contrast, the proportion of tourists choosing Europe for outbound travel had increased significantly by 2023 compared to 2019, from 19% to 23% (Allied Committees on Tourism, 2023). Most Chinese tourists are attracted by European cultural heritage (39%), while natural heritage constitutes 24% of the total. Among the European countries, Italy received the most Chinese tourists (Allied Committees on Tourism, 2023), since its rich culture, art, shopping and gastronomy are very important attractions (Li, September 2019).

Moreover, data from the China Outbound Tourism Research Institution (COTRI, 2018) indicated that there are several Chinese tourism markets dependent on the way they choose to travel. These are: package groups; customized tours (refers to small private groups whereby customers can communicate with their tour operators who provide them with customized schedules); and independent travelers (people who make travel plans by themselves without the aid of tour operators). The latter usually search for tourism information or even buy their tourism services through websites or mobile apps). According to statistics relating to Chinese outbound tourists from Ctrip 2017, the number of independent travelers is rapidly growing. That number constitutes 42% of all outbound tourists, although package group tours still have the highest percentage (44%), and private and customized groups account for 14% (COTRI, 2018). Also, the COTRI (2018) concluded that there are some differences between these travel types. The package groups mainly visit well-known landmarks in the destinations, and their schedules tend to be fixed. Moreover, the travel itinerary of a package tour regularly includes hidden costs such as those incurred by including stops for shopping or offering optional activities during the trip. Compared with package groups, the feature of customized group tours is that the tourists can communicate with tour operators directly and tailor-make the activities within their travel schedule. This form of travel is more flexible than the package group tour, although the cost is higher. Also, customized groups usually consist of a small group of people who are family or friends. In other words, people who join such groups tend to know each other before the journey (COTRI, 2018).

As the Outbound Tourism Consumption Trend Research Report (2024) concluded, there have been several changes of Chinese tourists' travel behavior in the aftermath of COVID-19. "Authentic" and "budget" became key words for Chinese tourists. Tourists who prefer authentic travel experiences increasingly prefer to experience local customs and traditions in greater depth than during their earlier travels (World Tourism Alliance, 2024). This seems to match what most international visitors do today regardless of their nationality (BookMyBooking, 2025). Also, some Chinese tourists are increasingly interested in outdoor activities in tourism destinations, such as those offered by, for example, an Indonesian tour operator,

which combines volcano hiking and traditional leisure activities in one Chinese market-oriented tourism product (World Tourism Alliance, 2024). As that DMO's advertisement states, the tourism products they offer are "one-time travel, various experiences". This type of product combines authentic experiences for budget-minded travelers, something which is very attractive to Chinese tourists (World Tourism Alliance, 2024).

Meanwhile, Chinese tourists are becoming more diverse in the way they travel. Traveling independently becomes increasingly popular among Chinese outbound tourists. Young Chinese tourists prefer to choose this travel style since it allows them to express their own personality and interests, and the lifestyle that they pursue. For example, "lay down" tourism which refers to slow tourism, has become a trending word on Chinese social media as well as a popular activity among young people (World Tourism Alliance, 2024). As Tan (2023) reported, young tourists are becoming tired of the fast pace of their daily life and choose a relaxed way to travel. Some of them avoid visiting popular tourist destinations because they might be too crowded, and they also do not like fixed travel schedules. Instead, these tourists might not even make any specific plans while traveling (China Youth Daily, 2023). Based on changes of the Chinese travel behavior, some tourism operators have also been altering their tourism products. Compared with package tourism products, customized tourism products have become increasingly popular, allowing tourism companies to communicate with customers, and add the customers' own preference in the travel plan. Also, some of the customers prefer a specific theme when designing their customized travel plan, such as including a visit to a sports event or to certain specific outdoor activities World Tourism Alliance, 2024). To conclude, the travel behavior of Chinese tourists is becoming more flexible, especially for experienced tourists, and those who are focused on novelty, no matter if they travel with tour operators or independently.

3 Destination image

The definition of destination image appeared in 1979 and relates to a person's belief, idea, or self-expression regarding a destination (Crompton, 1979). Later, this definition was widely used in tourism research, and researchers discussed destination images from different perspectives. Wang et al. (2023) concluded that it includes the factors, which influence someone's destination image, such as a person's independent traits (e.g., cultural background or personalities), or the destination's characteristics (e.g., its offer of events, pop culture and commodities).

Moliner-Tena et al. (2023) divided destination image into two different types, namely *cognitive* image and *affective* image. Cognitive images are created by available resources at a destination, while affective images are related to people's feelings of a place, such as joy, relaxation, or pleasure. Both can affect tourists' motivations and engage them to visit the destination. To market the destination, Beerli and Martín (2004) indicated the importance of the information source that destinations provide and how the information affects the tourists' perception and decision making. For example, destinations attract tourists directly or indirectly through information sources, including advertisements from tour operators or DMOs, mass media (e.g., movies, short videos), or the experiences that are shared by other tourists. However, the information sources from traditional tourism advertisements, which are produced by DMOs or tour operators, differ from the information provided by other tourists. Garrod (2008) talked about the relationship between destination images and tourists' own photographs. Photographs are important to both the destinations and tourists, because from a tourist's perspective, photographs are people's "anticipant or daydream about a place" (Garrod, 2008, p.347) and the place that they choose to photograph shapes or idealizes people's image about the place. Meanwhile, by reflecting someone's valuable travel memories, photographs provide the stories that the photographers want to tell others (Garrod, 2008). Thus, information from other tourists plays an important role in promoting various destinations.

3.1 Travel blogs and destination image

The increasing prevalence of social media has diversified the ways in which individuals obtain travel-related information (Lupu et al., 2023). User-generated content, such as travel blogs based on personal travel experiences, has emerged as a significant source of inspiration for prospective tourists. As Kaikkonen (2016) notes, travel narratives shared on social media platforms now represent one of the most influential forms of travel information. Similar to travel photography, travel blogs play an important role in shaping destination preferences and motivating travel decisions, while also supporting travelers in constructing their own memorable experiences (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023).

Compared with promotional materials produced by tourism industry actors, information disseminated through travel blogs is generally perceived as more trustworthy (Kaikkonen, 2016; Jog & Alcasoas, 2023). This is partly because commercial advertising tends to highlight only favorable attributes of destinations or products. Kaikkonen (2016) further argues that blogs authored independently of DMOs or tour operators are viewed as more credible by potential tourists. Content that includes overt marketing cues, such as official slogans or destination logos, may lead readers to infer a commercial intention and consequently doubt the information's reliability.

In addition, travel blogs typically provide interactive features, allowing readers to communicate directly with authors through comments or feedback. Such interactions enable potential tourists to ask questions and obtain clarifications, thereby enhancing perceived credibility. Travel blogs are also regarded as more authentic than traditional marketing channels because they frequently contain information that official promotional materials omit, such as accounts of cultural misunderstandings or descriptions of potential safety risks in specific locations (Kaikkonen, 2016).

3.2 Destination image of Nordic countries

The term "Nordic countries" as a geographical and cultural region refers to 5 countries, namely Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland (Sataoen, 2012). The image of Nordic countries as an emerging topic in tourism research often relates to their nature, landscapes, cold weather, Viking culture, and happy societies. As mentioned earlier, previous studies indicated that the destination images of 5 Nordic countries tend to be similar among the Chinese (e.g., Hiltunen, 2018; Sataoen, 2021). These similarities include geography (e.g., located in northern geographical regions, which present similar natural conditions), society (e.g., safety, equality), and culture (e.g., innovation, urban design).

While the perceived homogeneity of the "Nordic" image provides a coherent regional brand, it simultaneously poses challenges for individual Nordic countries seeking to differentiate themselves and communicate their distinctive attributes (Hiltunen, 2018). As Sataoen (2021) observes, Nordic countries employ a dual strategy: they market themselves collectively under a shared regional identity while also attempting to highlight national uniqueness. Balancing these two approaches can be difficult, particularly when the regional brand risks overshadowing country-specific characteristics. To identify how the Nordic countries distinguish themselves within this shared framework, several studies (e.g., Hiltunen, 2018; Osland et al., 2021) have analyzed their destination images individually. Beyond common natural, social, and cultural features, national branding efforts often incorporate well-known commercial or cultural symbols. Examples include Sweden's association with the Nobel Prize and IKEA, and Finland's branding link to Nokia (Hiltunen, 2018).

Moreover, user-generated content offers additional insight into how international travellers perceive these destinations. An analysis of TripAdvisor reviews by Osland et al. (2021) indicates that, although Nordic countries are widely associated with nature, clear distinctions emerge: Denmark is frequently linked to biking, culture, and history, whereas Finland's image is more strongly associated with gastronomy. These findings underscore the nuanced differences that exist within an otherwise cohesive regional brand.

Moreover, several studies (e.g., Cai, 2015; Hiltunen, 2018; Liu, 2017) specifically focused on how Chinese tourists perceive Nordic countries. Their findings showed that, in general, Chinese tourists' destination images of Nordic countries differ minimally from those of other tourists. However, Cai (2015) also suggests that for Chinese tourists, the perception of destination image might be different, since how tourists perceive a destination is affected by their living environment at home. For example, Chinese outbound tourists might consider blue sky or green spaces in the center of a city as "beautiful nature", since China has long been facing serious a shortage of green space as well as environmental pollution in many of its large cities (Cai, 2015). Cai (2015) also indicated, that from a social point of view, the Chinese often consider Scandinavian countries as a "future world", since these countries are perceived as having highly developed and organized societies with well-educated and friendly citizens. Compared with China where public transportation systems tend to be severely over-crowed, and strangers never smile to each other, the social environment in Scandinavian countries promises a very positive destination image to Chinese tourists (Cai, 2015). To conclude, the destination images of each Nordic country appear to overlap, which creates challenges when trying to market these individually. This, of course, does not mean that each Nordic country on its own does not have a unique selling proposition.

4 Research Methods

In this study, we selected content analysis as our research method and chose Chinese travel media as our data source. As Snelson (2016) mentioned, it is very common to use social media as the data source for conducting a content analysis since the user generated content, for example, pictures, videos, textual information includes sufficient valuable information (Snelson, 2016).

To gain a deeper understanding of the research topic, our data included both quantitative and qualitative content. We first collected 458 images for descriptive statistics, then selected the most representative images from each category based on their features and examined them qualitatively. We also used textual information to support the explanation of the images during a semiotic analysis stage. To conduct this process, we firstly browsed several Chinese social media and travel platforms, such as travel videos on bilibili.com, tourism official accounts on Wechat, and OTA (online travel agency) websites. After familiarizing ourselves with the potential data sources and comparing them with ones used in previous studies (e.g., COTRI, 2018; Cai, 2015; Wang, 2018), we divided Chinese outbound tourists into two different groups based on their travel mode - package tourists and independent tourists. Subsequently, we chose tourism advertisements on Ctrip and travel blogs on Mafengwo as the data sources of package tourists and independent tourists respectively. The image and textual data as they related to travel to Sweden were collected from the top 10 tourism advertisements on Ctrip and travel blogs on Mafengwo. After browsing the websites several times, we first categorized the possible signifiers for semiotic analysis, then selected and categorized the images by following selected criteria. These criteria included the quality of the pictures, which had to be clear and illustrate what the photographer wanted to emphasize in each case. We avoided pictures which illustrated the same item from different angles as well as ones that we considered to be irrelevant to our study topic (e.g., selfies on travel blogs).

By utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods to process the data in different stages, we were able to confidently address the research question and interpret the

results. In the following sections, we provide detailed information on how each data processing step was conducted.

4.1   Selection of Chinese travel media

According to COTRI (2018), around 44% Chinese outbound tourists participated in package tour groups whereas 42% made their own travel arrangements and travel independently. A smaller proportion (14%) participate in private and customized tours which tend to be quite expensive (COTRI, 2018). Based on this categorization of Chinese outbound tourists, we divided tourists into two different groups, package tour groups and independent travelers, especially since data relating to them can be accessed on travel media quite easily. The first group includes those travelers who use tour operators to arrange everything during the journey. By contrast, independent travelers prefer to use travel platforms as supportive tools before and during the journey (COTRI, 2018). Also, as previous studies (e.g., Cai, 2015; Wang, 2018; COTRI, 2018; Lambrini, 2022) have mentioned, the Chinese rely heavily on travel media to book their travel services, regardless of whether they ultimately choose to travel via package tours or independently. Subsequently, in this study we selected two Chinese travel websites, namely Mafengwo (蚂蜂窝) and Ctrip (携程) as our principal data source. By conducting content analysis and semiotic analysis of the pictures and texts from these two websites, the destination image of Sweden among two different types of Chinese outbound tourists was investigated.

Mafengwo is the most used travel media site among Chinese young generation. This website supports independent travelers to make their own travel plans. This website allows people who prefer to travel without consulting tour operators to share travel information and book travel related services (Mafengwo, 2025). Also, Mafengwo offers a section offering a "travel blog", which allows users to write their own travel experiences and share these with others. People who read these blogs can comment or even ask questions regarding the travel information offered. These travel blogs have attracted many potential Chinese tourists. According to Guo (2019), in the year 2019, Mafengwo recorded around 1.3 billion signed-up users and more than 130 million monthly active users (chinesetouristagency.com). It is

important to mention that this number is high because it includes Chinese speakers outside China, but we should also consider the fact that many of the signed-up persons are not active. Once potential tourists decide to travel, they can identify different types of travel related products on the Mafengwo website, for example, tickets, hotels, or visa services. Many independent tourists use this website to make their individual travel plans and book their travel services (Mafengwo, 2025). In this study, to identify the destination image of Sweden among Chinese independent travelers, we chose to examine travel blogs on the Mafengwo website, since the travel blogs contain the travelers' numerous personal interpretations about the destinations they have visited.

Additionally, we referred to advertisements for package tours on the Ctrip website as another data source for our study. Ctrip is one of the most popular travel websites in China, which provides various travel services to Chinese tourists, including hotel and ticket reservations, package tours and business trip management. The China Outbound Tourism Industry Trend Report 2024 indicates that among all the online travel agencies, Ctrip accounts for 62.9% of the Chinese outbound package tour market share, making it the most used online travel agency for Chinese outbound group tourists (Fast data, September 2024). Moreover, COTRI, (2018) highlighted that Chinese travel agencies usually package four Northern Europe countries (namely Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark) and market them collectively. This meant that although we recognize that the Ctrip website tends to market the Nordic countries collectively we sought to identify how the Chinese tour operators specifically convey Sweden's image to its customers.

4.2   Image analysis

As mentioned earlier, the images we collected from Ctrip were used to analyze how Chinese online travel agencies market Sweden as a tourism destination to package tourists, while images from Mafengwo showed how Swedish tourism destinations are perceived by Chinese independent tourists. To reduce bias arising from the algorithm recommendation from big data, the travel information in our study was extracted by searching the key words "Sweden (瑞典)" without logging in with our own accounts. The images were collected from the top 10 websites in March 2025,

although the ranking of these websites might have changed since then. Also, travel blogs that were likely to be business-oriented (e.g., blogs with a discount code, or bloggers who had more than 1000 followers) were excluded from the data source, given that popular bloggers become influencers who may collaborate with tourism businesses. Potential tourists might perceive business blogs as an unreliable information source (Kaikkonen, 2016).

To analyze images from travel social media, we employed content analysis as the first step since it is "a method to analyze photographs which aims to describe the content and appearance quantitatively" (Jenkins, 2003, p 312). To analyze the images quantitatively, we categorized the images into different groups. The criteria used to categorize the images were based on the preferences of Chinese outbound tourism (Allied Committees on Tourism, 2023). According to the statistics from Allied Committees on Tourism, (2023) cultural tourism (e.g., visits to cultural heritage sites or art museums), nature tourism (e.g., visits to natural tourism sites) and urban tourism (e.g., city walk) were considered as the top 3 favorite tourism type among Chinese outbound tourists for the year of 2023. Consequently, culture, nature, and urban tourism were first used to categorize the images. Among the cultural and urban categories, some of the cultural heritage sites and urban landmarks slightly overlapped. When assigning these, our criteria depended on the text followed by the picture and whether the picture was based on a long-range as opposed to a close-up view. The images of the landmark buildings taken from a close-up view, as well as the text on the website mentioning that tourists entered the buildings and went sightseeing, are considered cultural heritage. In contrast, landmark images taken from a long-range and shown as part of a panoramic city view are categorized as urban tourism. Other than these three main tourism types, we also considered "activity" as an additional category, since Chinese outbound tourists engage in various activities such as experiencing local gastronomy or visiting hot springs as a way of immersing themselves more deeply in host societies (Allied Committees on Tourism, 2023). Finally, we added tourism infrastructure (e.g., accommodation and transportation) as a category, considering its importance in terms of overall travel experience. Thus, our final categorization of images

referred to: nature (N); culture (C); urban tourism (U); activity (A); and tourist infrastructure (I). Table 4.1 indicates how we categorize our data images.

Table 4.1. The categories of the tourist images

Categories	Subcategories	Possible Signifiers
Nature	Weather, natural landscapes, wild animals	Snow view, northern lights, sunset, lakes, sea, animals
Culture	History, art	Churches (outside and inside), old buildings, museum buildings, museum exhibits, sculptures, souvenirs, shop window decorations
Urban tourism	Landmarks, street views, urban landscapes	City landmark, city views from long range, buildings and shops along the street, boats and ports, parks
Activities	Passive, active	Watching ceremony, dining, shopping, hiking, sauna
Tourist Infrastructure	Infrastructure	Restaurants, cafes, hotels, transportation

To analyze two different types of travel media, we created two separate folders for images from the top 10 package tour websites (coded P1 to P10) and top 10 travel blog websites (coded B1 to B10) for each type of travel media in our database. Each image we chose was numbered and assigned into its appropriate category. For example, a package tour marketing image from the first website for natural sites is coded as P1N, whereas the top 7th travel blog image showing cultural heritage is coded as B7C. To analyze the frequency of the data, Microsoft Excel was employed as the statistical software.

Furthermore, as Sezerel, et. al (2016) have suggested we employed semiotic analysis as an extended step beyond content analysis. Semiotics can be used as an intermediation tool between tourist destinations and potential tourists. On the one hand, through the transfer of some of a destination's components (e.g., nature landscapes, historical items or tourism infrastructure) into semiotics, destinations can generate specific images for tourism marketing. On the other hand, potential tourists might interpret the implied meaning of the semiotics based on their own personalities and cultural backgrounds (Sezerel, et al., 2016). By interpreting the implied meaning of representative images for each category, semiotics enables the development of an in-depth understanding of a Swedish destination image among Chinese tourists in our sample. To interpret the meaning behind the representative images, we also used textual information from the websites to support the interpretion. The detailed information about how we use textual information to interpret the hiding meanings of semiotics in the data images is discussed in the following section.

4.3   Textual analysis

As mentioned earlier, in the study we also used text from each website as supportive material, since relying solely on the images available on the websites might not always be easy for interpreting their intention. For example, during the earlier stage when browsing the package tour advertisements, some travel information like "dinner will be representative of local food" only appears in textual form without an accompanying picture. Also, the tour operators might market a random street view or urban landscape with text that contains information of how they perceive and explain the destination to their customers. Moreover, other than relying solely on traditional marketing approaches (e.g., advertisements), data extracted from each travel blog illustrated different stories from a variety of tourist types (e.g., family group, female solo travelers). For example, on the same tourism site, each group of tourists could show different feelings and thoughts and share them in their blogs. Compared with travel advertisements, this type of travel information precisely attracts potential visitors of the same type as the blogger. Since the timing when the potential tourists read those blogs might match their visitor identity types with those of the bloggers, this may cause an increase in their motivation to book a

trip. Thus, using the textual data source to support the interpretations of the images is necessary. Through examining the language in texts, it is possible to be more accurate in the results of the study.

4.4   Thematic analysis

To understand the patterns of how Chinese tourists in the sample and tour operators perceive Sweden as a tourism destination, we employed thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that can be applied to various types of data. By categorizing the text into themes, the meanings and patterns behind the text can be deeply understood (Naeem et al., 2023). All the data for thematic analysis was organized by Microsoft Excel. The text from package tour advertisements and travel blogs was divided and stored in two different sheets in Excel. By transcribing the textual data and connecting them with the image, the themes emerged from the image, and texts can provide a clearer insight of the data.

4.5   Limitations of this study

This study has several limitations. First, our data has been collected on two websites without logging in with our own accounts, since the algorithm might lead to bias of the data. However, when searching the keyword "Sweden", the top ten websites on Ctrip and Mafengwo are neither sorted by their timeline nor by their number of views. During the data collection stage, it was not possible to determine how exactly the ranking algorithm works. Another limitation is that the content on social media might exist only for a short period of time.

As has already been mentioned, whereas our data collection was completed in March 2025, the content and the rankings of the top 10 websites might have changed since then. Moreover, the explanation of Sweden's destination image is based on the textual information and pictures on Ctrip and Mafengwo as representative of Chinese package and independent tourists respectively. However, the way that people book their trip may vary, since potential tourists might use other travel platforms or contact travel agencies by visiting them without using their websites. This study could not reach out to Chinese travel social media and interview any tour operators or Chinese outbound tourists. Based on the limitations, we encourage

future research to further examine other Chinese travel media (e.g., official travel account on Wechat, Videos about Sweden on Bilibili), and interviews with Chinese tour operators as well as tourists who traveled to Sweden.

5 Analysis of Images from Chinese Travel Media

## 5.1 Content Analysis

Package Tour

This study revealed that no package tour product in the Chinese travel market targets Sweden on its own. When searching for the keyword "Sweden" on Ctrip, the website showed several countries (Demark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Estonia) collectively, since Chinese tour operators market these countries as a package, and brand them as "Northern Europe (北欧)" route (COTRI, 2018). Therefore, the images found on the Ctrip website are from the Northern Europe product page while "Sweden" is only one constituent of the itinerary.

Like the findings about tour operators in previous studies (COTRI, 2018), the tour operators in our study also tend to market Nordic countries based on their stereotypical features. On the Ctrip website, Iceland and Norway are fundamentally marketed as nature-based tourism destinations, with the most frequently highlighted natural elements being northern lights, glaciers and fjords. Meanwhile, for Denmark, Sweden and Finland, the website offers images displaying cultural heritage (e.g., sculptures and old buildings) or urban landscapes (e.g., boats and ports beside the city). Also, the package tour advertisement features dining as the only activity. All the package tour products in the Ctrip top 10 advertisements illustrated seafood buffet, Chinese food, and several local representative cuisines as a combination of the food the tourists should expect during their vacation. The most typical cuisine, for example, for Denmark was pork steak. For Sweden it was meatballs, while lamb soup was highlighted for Iceland. All these dishes are marketed as an activity whereby the tourist gets to "taste local authentic food". In the case of tourism infrastructure, images of good hotels with fancy cafes or restaurants are highlighted for all countries. Among all the Nordic countries, hotel

rooms offering good landscape views (e.g., fjords, snowy mountains, lakes) are mostly featured in the Iceland and Norway sections, since the marketing these two countries are mostly related to nature.

In our study we collected 173 images relating specifically to the Swedish part of the itinerary. Figure 5.1 displays the categories that are marketed through the package tours.

Figure 5.1. Categorization of tourism images (package tour advertisement)
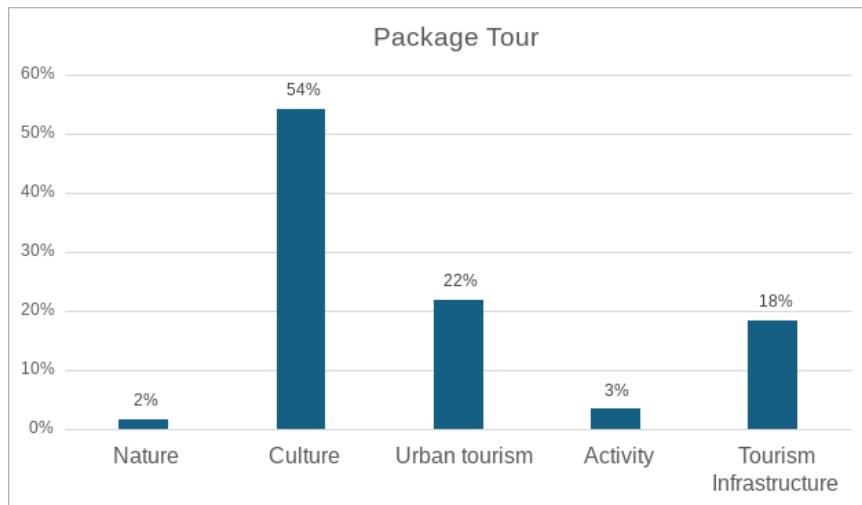
Culture (54%) accounted for most images. The majority of these (67% of all cultural images) showed old buildings of historical significance such as churches and museum buildings. The textual information, which accompanied the pictures of such buildings, showed the package tourists standing in front of the buildings and listening to the interpretation from their tour guides but no pictures from the interiors were displayed. Meanwhile, around 21% of the cultural images showed the interiors of the attractions, such as the exhibits contained in Stockholm's Vasa Museum and the frescos in the City Hall. From the narratives on Ctrip website (e.g., P1), Vasa Museum and the City Hall are marketed as "world cultural heritage sites" together with other world natural heritage sites in Norway and Iceland. As the

advertisement mentioned, the combination of cultural and natural heritage sites makes the tourism products more varied.

Images relating to urban tourism (22%) form the second most popular category. Among all the urban tourism images, around 80% showed a typical feature of an urban landscape in Sweden, namely the colorful city buildings surrounded by water, boats and ports in the lake or sea. These urban landscape images were usually aerial photos or photos taken from a long range. An additional 21% of urban tourism images related to panoramic views of city landmarks. This type of image is often taken from a long range and integrated within broader city views. Typical images included those of Stockholm City Hall, the signature Turning Torso building in Malmö, and Gustaf Adolfs square in Gothenburg.

Furthermore, the tour operators marketed high quality hotels. As the text on the P8 website said, a good quality hotel is one of the reasons why their product is expensive. 18% of the images can be categorized as tourism infrastructure, including hotel buildings, hotel bedrooms, fancy cafes or restaurants, and other entertainment facilities within hotels.

Only 3% of images highlighted activities. Images on the Ctrip marketing material showed that the only type of activity shown appeared to be linked to dining. The images showed seafood or diverse buffets in hotels as well as Swedish meatballs. All the package tour advertisements showed the image or mentioned Swedish meatballs in their text, and the marketing language was listed as "the classical Nordic cuisine" (P4).

Very few nature-based images were shown in the Sweden section comprising only 2% among all the pictures. The only Swedish natural attraction that was illustrated was through an advertisement relating to Lake Vänern. The images of Lake Vänern were shown on the P3, P5, P8 websites, while the textual information indicated the use of superlatives as part of their tourism marketing language. For example, they stated that "Lake Vänern is the largest lake in Sweden, and the third largest lake in Europe".

Overall, the images of culture and urban tourism categories comprise around 76% of total images, indicating that for Chinese package tours to Sweden, cultural tourism and urban tourism appear to be the most frequently marketed products. The top 10 advertisements on Ctrip showed that all the package tours offer Stockholm as a destination, and they all stop at the same attractions, namely Gamla Stan, the Royal palace, Vasa Museum, and the City Hall. In addition to Stockholm, some of these package tours incorporate visits to Malmö (P6) and Gothenburg (P1, P2, P3, P7) since these are connecting cities on the way to Denmark and Norway, which are usually marketed together with Sweden in a single travel package.

Independent Tourists

In this study, we examined 285 images from the Mafengwo travel blogs and categorized these. Two bloggers in our sample had visited Sweden on their own (B7 and B10) while other bloggers traveled there with their family and friends. As opposed to package groups who tend to visit several countries on one tour, most independent tourists visit Sweden as their only destination. The result from travel blogs showed that 6 Chinese bloggers mentioned they only visited Sweden, 3 bloggers visited several Nordic countries, and 1 blogger mainly visited Abisko in northern Sweden although he took a one-day cross-border trip to Norway and returned to Abisko in the evening. Some of the cities which the independent tourists visited such as Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg were identical to the ones visited by package groups. However, two bloggers (B4 and B10) visited Abisko national park for the opportunity to see the northern lights. Also, another blogger (B2) visited Visby on the island of Gotland, since as the author mentioned in her blog, their travel inspiration was derived from a Lonely Planet travel book and a Japanese anime called "KiKi's Delivery Service" by Studio Ghibli since Visby and Stockholm serve as prototypes of the town featured in this anime.

Like the package tour related images, photographs by independent travelers also depicted culture (44%), and urban tourism (24%), meaning that these two categories comprise the top 2 rankings of every picture taken. Nevertheless, images from independent tourists do, indeed, depict more nature (e.g., northern lights, snow views) and more activities such as hiking and sauna compared with those

highlighted in package tour advertisements. The smallest group of photographs by independent travelers highlighted tourism infrastructure including the images of cafes, restaurants, accommodation, and transportation.

Figure 5.2. Categorization of tourism images (Independent Tourists)
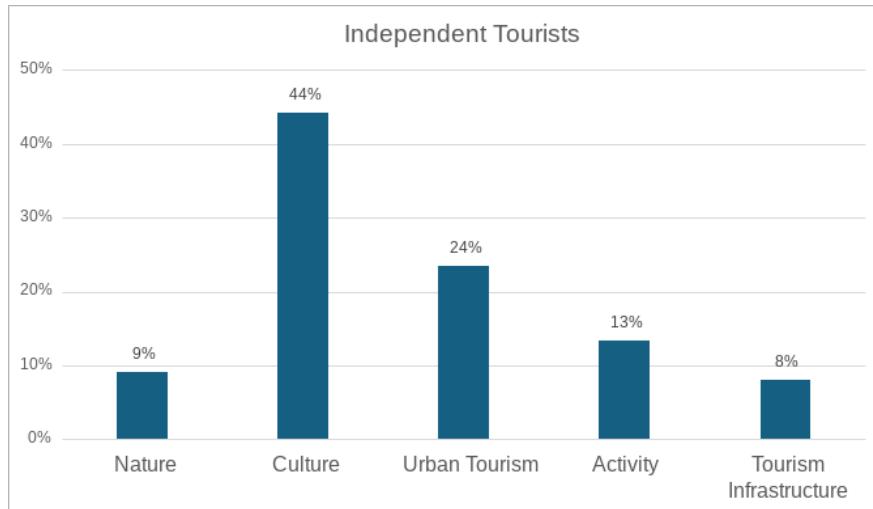
For independent travelers, the images depicting cultural elements constitute the largest number of pictures taken (44%). The subcategories of culture relate to history and art/design. Thus, images of historical museums and their exhibits but also those of historical buildings are the most popular (66%), while 34% depict art and design elements (e.g., art museums and their exhibits, shop windows, souvenirs). In contrast to package tours (where history relates almost exclusively to historical buildings and the Vasa Museum), independent tourists visited several museums. For example, family groups (B3, B6, B8), visited not only historical and art museums but also included children-friendly venues (e.g., the toy museum, Junibacken).

The urban tourism category makes up 24% of all the images. Indeed, around 52% of urban tourism images are related to urban landscapes. Like package tour advertisements, the features of urban landscape pictures from travel blogs, which specifically highlighted Swedish cities focused on water, city buildings from long range, and combinations of docks and boats. Unlike the tour operator advertisement,

images from independent tourists showed several street views (33% of urban tourism), which were shot from the tourists' point of view. These images displayed how the city looks when people walk along the streets as they encounter local-style buildings on their way. A very small proportion of landmark oriented images (10%) featured as part of the urban category.

There are 13% images offered by individual travelers, which were related to activities. Most chose passive activities (around 90%) such as dining, roaming through the local food markets, watching the royal guards' ceremonies, partying on cruise ships, and taking a sauna. Only around 10% of the images showed active activities, including hiking and rock climbing in a museum for kids. Compared with the package tours (3% dining activity only), the activities that independent tourists experienced are more diverse.

Another 9% of images showed nature, including animals (27%), weather-related themes (27%) and natural landscapes (46%). Among the subcategories, most of the pictures related to the natural landscape, e.g. snow-covered forests, frozen lakes or sea, blue lakes or sea and green turf combined with a blue sky. Weather pictures consisted of sunsets or northern lights, while animal pictures mostly highlighted different types of birds, though there was one picture showing a moose. Some independent tourists visited Abisko national park as their natural destination, most likely enticed by the exotic Arctic. Pictures from B4 and B10 highlighted various features of Arctic nature (Northern lights, frozen lakes and snow views).

The images from travel blogs also showed different types of tourism infrastructure, even though only 8% of all photographs focused on such elements, including transportation, accommodation, cafes, bars, and restaurants. Compared with infrastructure images highlighted in the package tour websites (only hotel-based infrastructure), the pictures from independent tourists also demonstrated what buses or trains look like, while also highlighting the conditions in different types of accommodation (e.g., hostel, Airbnb, Couchsurfing) and the atmosphere in cafes or restaurants in the city.

5.2 Semiotic Analysis

Combining the data from content analysis, semiotic analysis from the images and textual information on the website, the results show five different themes, namely: *cultural tourism*; *"Nordic style" design*; *urban nature;* and *slow tourism*.

Cultural tourism

Our study's results indicated that cultural tourism sites, including historical and art venues are the most popular tourism attractions for both package groups and independent tourists who choose to visit Sweden. Chinese tourists in our sample visited such sites when they were roaming the main tourist cities. The pictures related to cultural tourism were taken from Stockholm, Malmö, Gothenburg, and Visby. Among those cities, Stockholm was, by far, the one most visited. Indeed, all the package tourists and 9 groups of independent tourists had visited Stockholm. Also, all the Chinese tourists in our study, (i.e., both the package tourists and the independent ones) illustrated the existence of a "classical route" in Stockholm during their city walks, which includes Gamla Stan (the old town), the Royal Palace, Vasa Museum, the City Hall, and features of art and design exhibited in the Stockholm metro system. Among all the cultural images, a considerable number overwhelmingly focused on historical architecture such as churches, monuments, and sculptures. The textual content analysis, which covered both travel blogs and package tour advertisements indicated the high frequency of terms like "medieval history", "well preserved" "old streets and buildings" in descriptions of Swedish cities. In our study, it appeared that older buildings with steepled roofs (e.g., see figure 5.3., figure 5.4 below) were highly representative of what Chinese tourists viewed as popular cultural elements. Such pictures were frequently present in the material advertised for package tours as well as within the independent group travel blogs, especially those displaying red-brick buildings (the red color contrasting with the blue sky appears to be a typical marketing image as well as a favorite picture among tourists).

Figure 5.3. Stockholm City Hall. Photo by Jonatan Svenssson Glad, "Stockholm City Hall-170352.jpg", Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 5.4. Buildings with Steepled Roofs. Photo by Lusine Margaryan.

This finding highlighted the Chinese outbound tourists' great passion for visiting sites of historical architecture. This preference is also exhibited by Chinese domestic tourists. As various studies (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004) have mentioned, tourists formulate the image of a destination based on their previous experiences and subjective knowledge. Meanwhile, the China tourism academy (China Old Town Tourism Development Report, 2024) reported that 93.4% respondents in China are interested in gaining old town tourism experiences, while the architecture style of an old town tends to be one of the most attractive factors for those who travel to such destinations. Chinese cities have witnessed modernization trends in recent decades, which has resulted in the gradual decline or disappearance of traditional architecture. Thus, many Chinese urban areas are becoming increasingly homogeneous, over-commercialized and lacking authenticity (China tourism academy, 2024). This has led many people to search for traditional architectural styles and thus, when traveling abroad they are also on the lookout for sites to satisfy their "old town passion".

It is also worth mentioning that the perceived architectural images Chinese people have might relate to historical images of western cultural heritage. As Manley et al. (2020) have suggested, many Chinese respondents who traveled to Scotland emphasized their wish to visit old towns with castles, churches and monasteries. Because this type of cultural heritage is associated with the feeling of "exotic", certain traditional architectural styles might create a feeling of "object-related authenticity" (Manley et al. 2020, P20). This explains why pictures in our study showed that a "well-preserved medieval town" with what is perceived as "exotic" architecture is very attractive for Chinese tourists.

Furthermore, several museum-related pictures appeared in cultural categories, including museum buildings but also items displayed within the museum. The pictures of museums, which focused heavily on the buildings, reflected that several such places attracted Chinese tourists because of their construction style rather than their contents. Like in the case of other types of architecture, the reason why tourists took pictures of museum buildings is that these are perceived as "exotic" or meaningful landmarks. For example, independent tourists frequently

photographed the Nordic Museum (Nordiska Museet) (4 groups) since the building's steepled roof was an attraction to these travelers. Also, the Nobel Prize Museum was highlighted in 6 travel blogs, although as 3 bloggers mentioned in the text, they only took pictures from outside the museum without entering. Since the Nobel prize is a famous cultural brand for Chinese tourists it appears that taking pictures depicting the "Nobel prize" sign without entering the museum and visiting the exhibition in-depth was considered adequate as a sufficient validation of their visit to this site.

Meanwhile, our study showed that Vasa Museum is the most popular museum. The pictures of Vasa Museum exhibits were highlighted in 5 travel blogs and all the Ctrip advertisements. Even though independent tourists are at liberty to select among a wide range of museums, the tour operators in our sample appear to choose the Vasa Museum as their "must visit" cultural heritage site in Sweden. The most representative museum item picture is the Vasa ship (see. Figure 5.5). From the textual content, the keywords "17th century's ship crafting", "well-preserved", or "magnificent" are frequently mentioned in both package advertisements and travel blogs. As the advertisement on Ctrip website mentioned, "This is not just a museum; it is a time capsule. The well-preserved shipwreck not only contains a dramatic history but also shows the Swedish ship crafting skill in the 17th century" (P9).

Figure 5.5. The Vasa ship. Photo by Lusine Margaryan.

Additionally, this study also found that all the family groups (B3, B6, B8) considered museums as their must visit tourism attractions. Compared with other groups, family group visitors also visited museums for kids such as Junibacken, the Toy Museum, and the Museum of Technology. Apart from the historical museums, art museums are also very popular for family groups. This might be associated with the fact that many Chinese families stress the importance of educational attractions. According to Sweekly (2020, August 14) overseas study tours (refers to tourism products containing both tourism and education features) are very popular for Chinese families, since Chinese parents typically want their kids to combine knowledge-acquisition with play time. In 2017, the number of people participating in overseas study tours in China was 860,000 and expanding at an annual growth rate of more than 20%. Authentic local culture, nature, and art are usually marketed as the key themes in such study tour products (Sweekly, 2020, August 14). In our study, all the family groups reflected the educational purpose of their trip for their children. For example, B8 mentioned that the modern museum was their focus during the trip, since his daughter has been studying arts.

To conclude, the pictures related to cultural tourism illustrated Chinese tourists' interests of culture, arts, and history. This specific interest is not only connected to their aesthetic preference for old and exotic architecture but also showed their desire to learn (or let their children learn) more about a new country.

"Nordic Style" Design

The term "Nordic style" (*北欧风*) has been highlighted when people describe their pictures related to elements of design such as buildings, shop window decorations, or the interior design of restaurants and accommodations. In the Chinese language, "Nordic style" is a slightly broad and ambiguous concept. When Chinese people refer to Nordic style, they may be referring to Scandinavian interior design, minimalist home products, colorful buildings, or the architectural styles of buildings from the Nordic countries (Xinhunan, 2018, July 2). In this study, two different types of Nordic style were reflected in the images. The first is related to Stockholm's colorful buildings. The second one referred to Scandinavian design in general, especially focusing on the interior design associated with IKEA (Rui, 2021, January 9).

The analysis of the images selected for our study suggests the popularity of colorful buildings. For Chinese tourists, colorful buildings such as the houses in Stockholm's Gamla Stan are commonly associated with the scenes inspired by fairy tales. In our sampling websites, both the Ctrip advertisements and the travel blogs of many individual travelers associated these buildings with fairy tales. For example, the Ctrip advertisements describe Gamla Stan as "a well-preserved old town consisting of old and narrow streets, medieval architecture, magnificent royal palace and churches, and fairy tale houses scented with the smell of coffee". The most representative picture depicts colorful buildings on Stortorget, Gamla Stan (figure 5.5). According to the textual information on the Mafengwo travel blog, Chinese tourists who visited this site associated the buildings in the area with their imaginations derived from fairy tales. As one of the blogs mentioned, "it is typical Nordic style, especially with snow, those colorful buildings look like the scenes in fairy tales" (B5). In general, Chinese tourists tend to derive their imagination of Nordic fairy tales from the tales of the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen (Luo

& Zhu, 2023). The colorful buildings in Copenhagen are often associated with the key words "colorful fairy tale" and "Nordic design" in some Chinese websites (e.g., Jiu, 2020, October 31). Even though H.C. Andersen was Danish, Chinese tourists tend to also associate feelings derived from his fairytales with Swedish buildings and other design elements.

Figure 5.6. Stockholm Gamla Stan, Stortorget. Photo by Øyvind Holmstad, "Stortorget i Gamla Stan i Stockholm 2.jpg", Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 3.0.

Another type of Nordic style that was highlighted in this study refers to Scandinavian design. This primarily relates to typical 'Scandi' interior design displaying simple lines and neutral colors, as well as functional furniture, natural materials and decor (wood, plants, snowflakes). IKEA, as Scandinavian brand, has become well-known in China as in the rest of the world, because of its minimalist style furniture and reasonable prices. In turn, this style has helped promote an aesthetic image of Nordic countries to the Chinese market.

In this study, Nordic style pictures frequently depict souvenirs, shop windows and tourism infrastructure, including the interior designs of cafés, restaurants, and accommodation facilities. For example, figure 5.6 displays what Chinese tourists may perceive as a typical Nordic style restaurant. The interior decoration of the restaurant displays neutral colors, furniture with simple lines, wood tables and some house plants. Meanwhile, figure 5.7 shows some commonly used local products that adorn Swedish homes. One author of the travel blog mentioned that these are "authentic Nordic style home products?" (B1).

Figure 5.7. Nordic Style restaurant. Photo by Easy-Peasy.ai,
"Scandinavian Minimalist Restaurant with Cozy Vibes",
https://easy-peasy.ai/ai-image-generator/images/scandinavian-
minimalist-restaurant-cozy-vibes-wooden-furniture.
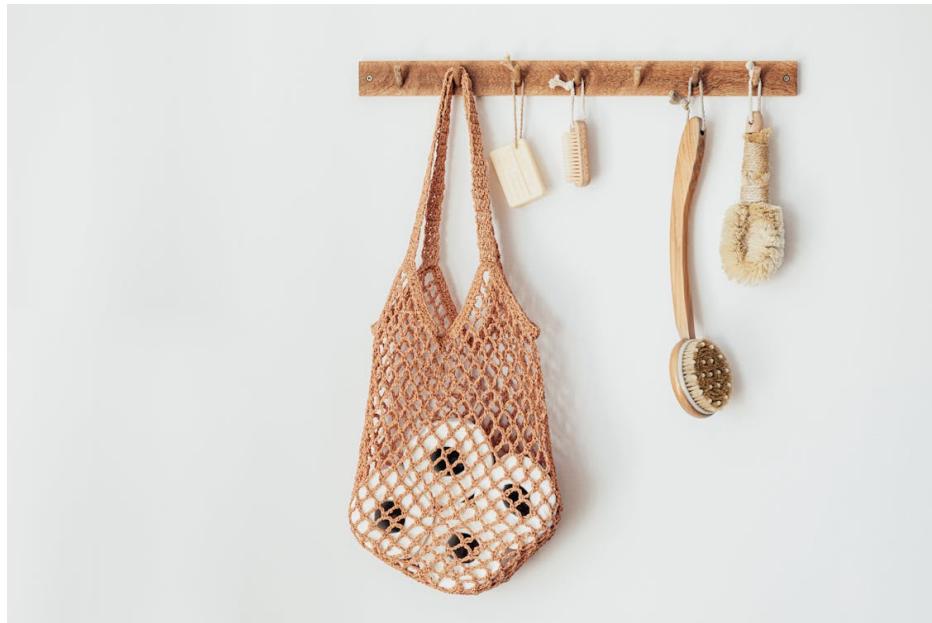
Figure 5.8. Nordic Style Home Products. Photo by Kaboompics, "pexels-karola-g-4210338.jpg", Pexels, https://www.pexels.com/photo/brown-wooden-brush-hanging-on-white-plastic-rack-5787968/.

The Nordic style, which is strongly associated with Sweden, had already shaped Chinese tourists' pre-visit images about the country. According to an article in ThePaper.cn (Rui, 2021, January 9), Nordic style elements are not only popular in Chinese home interior decoration, but many Chinese tourist accommodations nowadays also utilize elements of Nordic style (most likely courtesy of IKEA), since this type of decoration is budget and easy to duplicate (Rui, 2021, January 9). Although this also means that these establishments convey a highly homogenized image, it has also popularized the design style from the Nordic countries in China, as well as provided potential tourists with an initial impression of the Nordic countries prior to the visit.

Urban Nature

While the Nordic countries in general tend to market nature as one of their most important tourism themes (Sataoen, 2021), in this study we did not identify many images relating to natural attractions. Nevertheless, certain nature relatednature-related elements within cities were notable in several pictures. The most representative nature-oriented image in our sample is related to water bodies within urban landscapes (see figure 5.8 below). Both the package tour advertisements but also the travel blogs concerning Swedish cities included images of urban structures surrounded by water. Water bodies in urban areas serve many purposes. For example, these may function as public open spaces for leisure or for promoting water-based transportation. On Chinese language websites (e.g., Adrianne, 2016, December 23), the city of Stockholm is often known as "Northern Venice" since it consists of multiple islands and water bodies, which facilitates water borne transportation. The term "Northern Venice" is also often used in tourism marketing to help customers to easily understand the city's features. In this study "Northern Venice" was highlighted in some of the Mafengwo travel blogs (e.g., B2, B9).

Figure. 5.9. Stockholm waterfront. Photo by Lanxuan Zhang.

Urban landscapes are often presented as panoramic views, including some landmarks from long-range (e.g., Stockholm City Hall) and colorful buildings, which also incorporate water bodies and blue skies. The Most representative image shown in the package tour advertisements depicts Stockholm City Hall (Figure 5.9). As one of the city's most notable landmark buildings, the City Hall was photographed from a considerable distance, allowing the image to also highlight the body of water along which it is located. Meanwhile, the textual content relating to this building also mentioned its association with the surrounding body of water. On page 8, it is stated that the Stockholm "The City Hall, as one of the most important examples of Swedish architecture, is surrounded by water and looks like a large boat sailing. The view is magnificent from a distance."

Figure 5.10. Stockholm City Hall from Long Range. Photo by Stockholms Stadshuset, from Julian Herzog, "Stockholms Stadshuset City Hall Stockholm 2016 01.jpg", Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-4.0.

Independent tourists also appear to regard urban-based natural elements as one of their most favorable photographic themes. In addition to water bodies, other natural elements including trees, green spaces, and snow have been frequently depicted in their images of urban landscapes. In the sampling pictures, bloggers on Mafengwo emphasized urban-based natural elements in their pictures. The bloggers who visited Sweden in the summer and autumn highlighted the city's green spaces, especially some of its parks (see figure 5.10 below). For example, B2 showed a lot of pictures of the Almedalen park in the city of Visby. This person also mentioned that "There is brightening sunshine, blue water, big green turf and a fountain nearby the city hall; these elements make my photography look very professional". This aligns with Sun et al. (2014), who suggested that although some Chinese tourists may lack advanced photography skills, they still prefer to take more photos when traveling abroad, as they perceive that the clean blue skies and white clouds enhance the quality of their pictures.

Figure 5.11. Green spaces in Stockholm. Photo by Anke Peters.

Bloggers also emphasized Sweden's association with cold weather in their urban-based natural pictures. For example, pictures of cities included snow-covered trees and parks (figure. 5.11) or icy waterways. Some travel blogs reflected that one of the most popular pre-visit images of Sweden is as a "Nordic snow kingdom" (B9). It is also important to mention that since most of the independent tourists in the study come from southern China where it rarely - if ever - snows, the possibility of seeing snow is particularly exciting. One blogger (B6) from Shanghai mentioned that her son enjoyed snow because he had never seen winter like this before. She also shared many pictures of her family playing in the snow in a Stockholm park.

Figure 5.12. Snow view in city park in Stockholm. Photo by Lanxuan Zhang.

Another notable point in our sample was photos of animals, especially birds. While no specific animal-themed pictures relating to Sweden were identified in the package tour advertisement sample, photographs by independent tourists included one image of a moose in Abisko (B10), while several others depicted various birds. Although Osland et al., (2021) has noted that Swedish travel websites highlight natural areas in Sweden as wild animal habitats, marketing the "untouched" nature as a part of the destination image, our study revealed that Chinese tourists rarely visited natural areas outside cities when in Sweden. All the bird-related pictures were taken in the cities during urban trips. For example, there were many images of ducks and swans in urban water environments (figure 5.12), while one photograph depicted an aggressive seagull on a dining table. These pictures of urban nature illustrate the possibility of human-animal coexistence in Nordic cities.

Figure 5.13. Birds and humans co-existing in cities. Photo by Lanxuan Zhang.

Overall, most of the pictures depicting nature in this study were taken in and around urban areas. This can be explained by the fact that most Chinese tourists had targeted urban destinations in the first place. However, it is interesting to note that the cities' natural elements were more commonly highlighted in the tourists' pictures rather than more cultural attractions. As some tourists emphasized in their blogs, the natural elements in urban areas improved the quality of their photography, which made their photos look more colorful and vivid. Water features and animals in the city are particularly attractive. For tourists, photographs serve as valuable artifacts, which bring back memories of their journeys. As B5 mentioned, a seagull flying over a sculpture made the sculpture lively in her picture. Overall, the natural elements in the city do not just contain the meaning of nature but they also imply the possibility of human-animal coexistence. From the tourists' pictures and texts, people enjoyed nature in the city, even though they did not visit many natural attractions.

Slow Tourism

Most of the activities referred to in this study are passive. Dining, watching royal guards' ceremonies and roaming through local food markets appear to be popular activities for the Chinese tourists in the sample. Package tour advertisements depict activities like dining, while a small number of these highlighted possible visits to witness royal guard ceremonies if the tourists' schedule allowed this. This situation reflects the nature of Chinese package tours, which entail a "tight schedule, travel by their own bus, stop and listen to the interpretation from their tour guides in each tourism attraction" (Ren, L. 2022). All itineraries we examined on the Ctrip website followed this pattern. In other words, they allow package tourists very limited flexibility to choose activities on their own. Meanwhile, dining was the only activity in addition to sightseeing, where the package tour operators mostly included Chinese cuisine in their itineraries while only a handful offered local food tasting. These were marketed as a selling point and as a "luxury, high quality and authentic" Nordic gastronomy activity. The most representative Swedish dishes aimed at the Chinese market were meatballs and Nordic seafood buffet (P3) in the hotels or cruise ships. A typical dining environment is shown in figure 5.13. These images imply that tourists are going to dine in a luxury environment, with high quality

food, which conveys to the customers the "VIP- feeling". These inflexible arrangements offered by tour operators might explain why certain previous studies (e.g., Dichter et al., 2018) have highlighted the stereotype of Chinese tourists who prefer only Chinese cuisine while traveling.

Figure 5.14. Dining at a fancy restaurant. Photo by Cottobro Studio, "pexels-cottonbro-4253318.jpg", Pexels, https://www.pexels.com/photo/cooked-food-on-white-ceramic-plate-4253318/

For independent tourists, passive activities are also popular, but far more diverse compared to the activities organized by the tour operators. Food-related activities seem to be the most popular activities for this group of travelers. The pictures taken

by independent tourists focused heavily on the local cuisine as well as various food markets. Compared with the "luxury" feeling marketed by package tour advertisement, independent tourists focus on authentic food experiences. For instance, some tourists mentioned in their travel blogs that they usually look for local food on international mobile apps instead of Chinese apps. Google maps (B2) and TheFork (B8) were examples of the apps the independent tourists consulted before choosing restaurants based on the featured reviews. Popular images of local or other "western" food (e.g., Swedish meatballs, see figure 5.14) appeared on the travel blogs. As B6 mentioned, she experienced various styles of "authentic" Swedish meatballs made with different kinds of meat during their journey. She mentioned that "the flags on the meatballs explained what kind of meat they used in the meatballs. Especially the moose symbol on the flag is very obvious....". To her, this meant that she experienced an authentic Nordic style dinner.
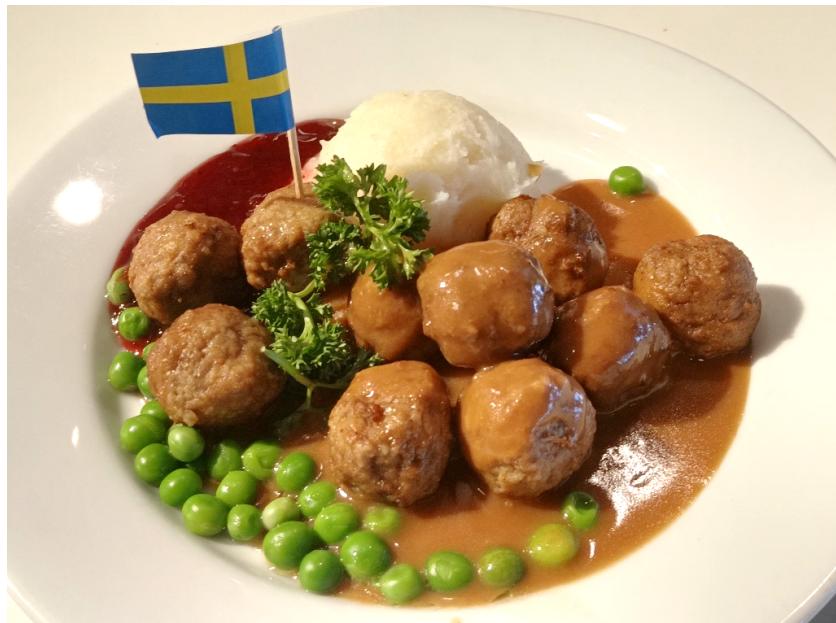

Figure 5.15. Swedish Meatballs. Photo by Fumikas Sagisavas, "IKEA_Swedish-style_meatballs.jpg", Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-1.0.

As mentioned above, strolling along the local food markets (figure 5.15) was a popular activity for independent tourists. In this study, pictures from travel blogs showed that independent tourists often visit local fruit or seafood markets or even regular supermarkets to see what kinds of food local people eat. Some of these tourists chose to eat in the restaurants inside the food markets, while others preferred to buy food from those markets and cook in their lodgings if they had kitchen facilities.

Figure 5.16. Roaming in Local Food Market. Photo by Sharon Hahn Darlin, "Östermalms_Saluhall,_Stockholm,_Sweden_(13735585323).jpg", Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-2.0.

One tourist (B10) who used CouchSurfing peer-sharing accommodation website showed a picture of cooking and dining with his host. For him, the activity of cooking and having dinner together with a local person was considered an authentic travel experience, since eating and chatting with locals is not only a simple dining activity but also entails a deeper cultural exchange.

Thus, Chinese tourists in the sample were very interested in food when traveling, reinforcing the findings by Dichter et al., (2018) who mentioned that although one of the stereotypes of Chinese outbound tourists is their preference for Chinese food, they are also extremely interested in exploring what they perceive to be local authentic food. In fact, some Chinese tourists travel to other countries (e.g., Japan, South Korea) solely to obtain gastronomic experiences (Dichter et al., 2018). Compared with package tours, the results from independent tourists showed that Chinese tourists are willing to arrange more food-related activities if they plan the journey on their own. By exploring something unique and interesting, these independent tourists believe they can better understand or feel more connected to local culture. In addition to food related activities, other passive activities were also highlighted in the travel blogs. The most popular one entailed watching the changing of the guard ceremony outside the Royal Palace in Stockholm. As mentioned earlier, since the Royal Palace was one of the "must-visit" tourist attractions, this means that watching the changing of the guard ceremony became a "must-do" activity (see figure 5.16).

Figure 5.17. Watching the changing of the guardß ceremony. Photo by Lanxuan Zhang.

Generally, the Chinese tourists in our sample engaged in activities that differed to the typical ones promoted on Swedish tourist websites (e.g., VisitSweden) such as active outdoor recreation, e.g. kayaking, fishing, hiking and biking (Osland et al., 2021). In our study only 2 groups of independent visitors chose hiking activities although the participants stressed that these were not physically demanding. Instead, they pointed out that their activity involved a non-strenuous walk around a small hill (B9) or an easy hike within a national park (B4).

Overall, the behavior exhibited by the Chinese tourists in our sample aligns closely with patterns reported in recent Chinese media (Tan, 2023) and industry analyses (Fastdata, 2024), which document notable shifts in travel behavior in the post-pandemic period. An increasing proportion of Chinese travelers appear to prioritize rest, relaxation, and psychological restoration from demanding everyday routines, often adopting highly flexible and low-pressure travel itineraries. For example, some tourists describe intentionally avoiding setting their alarms too early and minimizing pre-trip planning to maintain a relaxed pace during their stay (Tan, 2023). Tan (2023) also highlights that family travelers with young children frequently prefer slower, less structured forms of tourism. This preference was also reflected in our sample, where some participants reported spending part of the day outdoors and the remainder resting at their accommodation (B6). This emerging orientation toward 'slow tourism' provides a plausible explanation for why Chinese tourists in our study favored predominantly passive activities over more physically demanding or traditional Swedish outdoor pursuits. Their choices suggest a broader trend in which travel is increasingly framed as an opportunity for restoration rather than seeking active experiences, i.e. 'lay-down' or 'lying flat' tourism, as picked up by media (www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/trending-china/article/3229978).

In summary, our semiotic analysis suggests the following points:

- *Chinese tourists in our sample demonstrated a strong interest in cultural tourism attractions.* Well-preserved historical architecture, particularly structures perceived as "exotic" or distinct from familiar Chinese urban environments, was seen as contributing to an authentic experience of Sweden.

- *Museums emerged as key cultural attractions*. For package tourists, the Vasa Museum was typically the sole heritage site included in their itineraries, whereas independent travelers visited multiple museums for educational purposes, both for themselves and for their children.

- *The notion of "Nordic style" played an important role in shaping the Swedish tourist experience*. Two distinct expressions of this aesthetic were evident in the visual material: colorful building façades evoking fairy-tale imagery, and the minimalist Scandinavian design associated with globally recognized brands such as IKEA, which holds strong symbolic value in China.

- *With respect to natural attractions, nature-based elements located within urban settings were particularly prominent*. Images captured by participants highlighted water features, green spaces, blue skies, snow-covered landscapes, and encounters with urban wildlife, illustrating the perceived coexistence of nature and urban life.

- *Classical Swedish outdoor activities (e.g., skiing, kayaking) were largely absent from the visual data, reflecting tourists' preference for predominantly passive forms of engagement*. Food-related activities, including dining experiences and visits to markets, were especially popular. Other activities documented in the sample included watching the changing of the guards at the royal palace, participating in beginner-level hiking experiences, and, for some individuals, visiting a sauna.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates a clear divergence between the destination image promoted by Swedish tourism stakeholders and the image constructed by Chinese tourists. Whereas Sweden is frequently marketed, and internationally perceived, as a destination characterized by pristine wilderness and outdoor recreation (Soraya, 2024), the Chinese tourists in our sample constructed a far more urban and culturally oriented image of the country. Their visual and textual representations foregrounded well-preserved historical environments, architectural styles perceived as "exotic," and a range of cultural institutions, particularly museums. This aligns with earlier findings indicating that Sweden's presence on Chinese social media is strongly connected to architecture, education, and distinctive cultural practices (COTRI, 2018).

The travel blogs also reveal that although participants engaged primarily with urban cultural attractions, they consistently incorporated images of natural elements within cityscapes. These representations suggest that Chinese tourists valued proximity to nature rather than seeking nature-based activities requiring specialized skills. This preference resonates with broader post-pandemic trends among Chinese travelers, who increasingly prioritize relaxation, low-intensity activities, and restorative experiences (Tan, 2023; Fastdata, 2024). The imagery of colorful Swedish buildings, often interpreted through the lens of Nordic fairy-tale aesthetics, further highlights the tourists' attraction to symbolic and stylized expressions of "Nordicness," including Scandinavian design encountered in accommodations, cafés, and retail spaces.

Activity patterns in the sample further underline this shift toward passive engagement. Food-related activities, such as sampling local cuisine and visiting markets, were particularly dominant among independent travelers. Despite package tour itineraries offering limited exposure to local gastronomy and often framing such experiences as luxury, independent travelers emphasized everyday food encounters, associating them with cultural immersion and memory-making through social media sharing. Other commonly documented activities, such as

watching the changing of the royal guards, reinforce the centrality of accessible, low-effort urban experiences.

Comparison with broader Chinese tourism trends (ACT, 2023) provides additional interpretive insight. Our findings mirror national-level data indicating that cultural landscapes and museums constitute core attractions. The proportion of cultural images in both package-tour advertising (54%) and independent blogs (44%) closely match the 2023 figure of 48% for culture-related preferences. Similarly, the prominence of urban tourism in our sample aligns with national trends (19% in 2023 compared with 22–24% in our study). These similarities suggest that Sweden's cultural and urban tourism assets are well aligned with the established preferences of the Chinese outbound market. However, a notable discrepancy arises regarding natural landscapes. National data show that 24% of Chinese outbound tourists are motivated by natural attractions, yet our sample contained very low number of nature images (2% for package tour advertisements and 9% for independent blogs). This suggests that, despite Sweden's international reputation as a nature destination, its natural tourism offerings may not be sufficiently visible, accessible, or compelling within the Chinese market. This represents a missed opportunity, particularly given the strong demand among Chinese tourists for safe, aesthetically pleasing, and photogenic natural settings.

To conclude, this study examined how Chinese outbound tourists perceive Sweden's destination image and how these perceptions diverge from Swedish tourism branding strategies. The findings indicate that Chinese tourists predominantly view Sweden as a cultural and urban destination, shaped by interactions with historical architecture, museums, and symbolic "Nordic style" elements. Their activities were largely passive and centered on cultural consumption, culinary exploration, and urban sightseeing. Although natural elements within urban environments were appreciated, few tourists in the sample engaged with Sweden's more remote or activity-intensive natural attractions.

These findings have several implications for DMOs and other tourism stakeholders. First, Swedish DMOs may benefit from continuing to emphasize cultural, urban, and gastronomy tourism when targeting the Chinese outbound market, as these

offerings align closely with demonstrated preferences. Second, "Nordic style", including fairy-tale aesthetics and Scandinavian design, represents a powerful symbolic resource that can be further leveraged to create compelling destination imagery for this market segment. Finally, the marked underrepresentation of natural landscapes in Chinese tourists' own visual narratives suggests a need for improved visibility, interpretation, and accessibility of Sweden's natural environment. Targeted marketing strategies that address perceived barriers and highlight low-intensity, easily accessible nature experiences may help attract a larger share of nature-motivated Chinese travelers.

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