

# Exploring the Tourism Space for Russian Cross-border Tourists in Hunchun City from the Perspective of Geopolitical Relations

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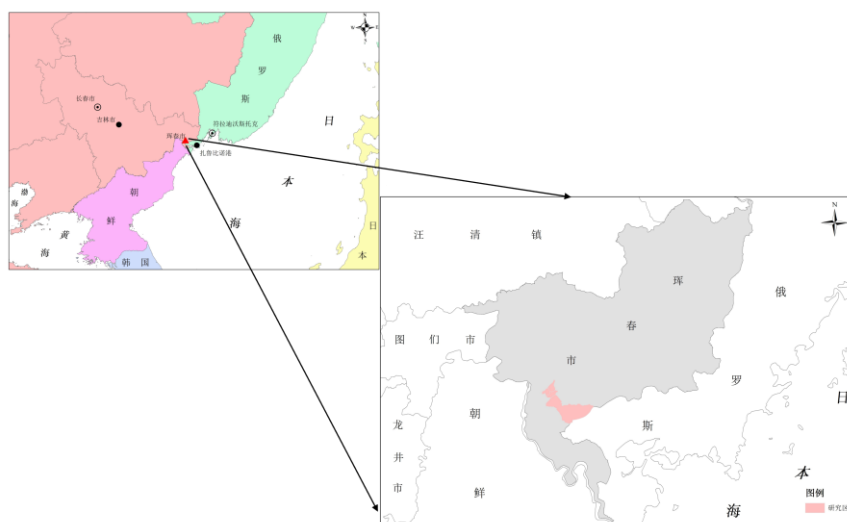
**Abstract:** Driven by economic development, market demand, bilateral cooperation, mutual political needs, and cultural identity, China and Russia have established stable cooperation in promising tourism cities. Under the influence of geopolitical relations, this cooperation has been continuously deepening. In terms of geopolitics, cross-border tourism cooperation policies began to take shape in the 1980s and have developed steadily with the support of stable policies up to the present day. In terms of geopolitical economy, the development of Russia's Far East aligns closely with the revitalization of Northeast China, and the completion of the "Vladivostok No. 2" project has brought the trade relations between the two countries closer. In terms of geopolitical culture, enhancing cross-border ethnic cultural exchanges helps improve China's cultural soft power. With the deepening of China-Russia tourism cooperation, the economic and tourism spaces of border cities are continuously being enriched and expanded. Therefore, exploring the tourism space for Russian tourists in the border city of Hunchun from the perspective of geopolitical relations is of significant importance.

**Keywords:** Geopolitical relations; Cross-border tourism; Hunchun City; Geographical factor

## 1. Introduction

The constant transformation of geopolitical relations between countries has gradually turned border areas from the economic periphery into the frontline of economic development and opening-up. Various economic policies driven by geopolitical relations have been continuously introduced, further promoting the development of border regions and having a profound impact on these areas [1].

Since the proposal of the "Belt and Road Initiative" in 2013, the strategic position of border regions has been continuously enhanced, bringing new opportunities for development. With the acceleration of globalization and China's border region development and opening-up process, the development of geopolitical relations between countries relies heavily on economic means. Using economic methods to promote regional integration is an effective way to improve national geopolitical relations. As an important gateway for national opening-up, border regions hold a crucial strategic position in the country's economic and social development [2].



**Figure.1** International location map of Hunchun City.

Russia is China's largest neighboring country, with a border line extending over many kilometers. The history of Sino-Russian relations is long, dating back more than 300 years, starting from the mid-17th century. According to statistics, from December 1992 to August 2011, there were as many as 31 official government documents between the two countries. These government documents have provided a foundation for the rapid development and deepening of bilateral relations. Notably, the establishment of a strategic partnership for the 21st century in 1996 and the signing of the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001 elevated the relationship to unprecedented heights. Both countries support each other politically and diplomatically, their economic and trade relations are increasingly close, with expanding trade volumes, and military exchanges and cooperation have been strengthened. Therefore, it can be said that Sino-Russian relations are comprehensive and multi-faceted, with both countries holding a very important position in each other's foreign relations.

As one of the first border cities to open up, Hunchun City was approved for opening to the outside world by the State Council in 1991, and subsequently established a border economic cooperation zone, an export processing zone, and a China-Russia mutual market trade area. In 2009, the State Council approved the "China Tumen River Regional Cooperation and Development Plan — Taking Changjiu as the Leading Development and Opening-up Area," positioning Hunchun City as the "window" city for the development and opening-up of the Changjiu region. In 2012, the State Council approved the establishment of the Tumen River Region (Hunchun) International Cooperation Demonstration Zone. As a small border city, Hunchun requires economic cooperation for its continuous development, and tourism is precisely the means through which rapid economic growth in border regions can be achieved. The basic attributes of tourism determine its potential to promote cultural exchange, improve political relations, and boost the development of related industries. Moreover, cross-border tourism can promote bilateral and multilateral

mutually beneficial exchanges and cooperation, enhancing understanding and trust between countries and fostering cultural identity among their peoples. In addition, tourism has positive effects on spatial optimization, including the optimization of urban space, enhancement of cultural space, and the optimization of ecological, productive, and living spaces. Therefore, exploring the development of consumption space through cross-border tourism from a geopolitical perspective has significant practical importance [3].

## **2. Geopolitical Environment of Hunchun City and Russia**

### **2.1 Geopolitical Environment**

Based on previous research, the development of Sino-Russian cross-border tourism cooperation can be divided into three stages: the late 1980s to 2000, 2001 to 2013, and from 2014 to the present.

In the first stage, documents such as the 1988 "Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Soviet Socialist Republics on Mutual Exchanges," the 1991 "Exchange of Notes between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Socialist Republics on Mutual Exemption of Group Tourism Visas," the 1992 "Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Russian Federation on Mutual Exemption of Group Tourism Visas," and the 2000 "Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Russian Federation on Mutual Exemption of Group Tourism Visas" laid the foundation for China-Russia tourism cooperation, consolidating and promoting the process of cross-border tourism cooperation.

The second stage solidified the foundation of Sino-Russian tourism cooperation. The signing of the 2001 "China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation" elevated bilateral relations to unprecedented heights. In 2009, both China and Russia approved the "Cooperation and Development Plan for Northeast China and Russia's Far East and Eastern Siberia (2009-2018)," and in 2012, China introduced the "Opening-up Plan for Northeast China towards the Northeast Asia Region (2012-2020)," which provided significant opportunities for Sino-Russian cross-border tourism cooperation.

The third stage is marked by the ongoing deepening of tourism cooperation between China and Russia. In 2014, Russia officially expressed support for China's "Belt and Road Initiative." In 2015, the Chinese State Council issued the "Opinions on Supporting the Development and Opening-up of Key Areas in Yanbian," explicitly supporting the construction of cross-border cooperative tourism zones. This plan included several areas adjacent to Russia, such as Yanbian in Jilin, and Heihe and Suifenhe in Heilongjiang. In 2016, the "Notice on the Implementation Plan for Promoting Tourism Development in Jilin Province" emphasized the need to deeply develop cross-border tourism, strengthen the development of Sino-Russian self-driving tours, and establish self-driving tour routes from Hunchun to Vladivostok, as well as a series of tourism products such as road self-driving and railway chartered trains.

## 2.2 Geoeconomic Environment

Hunchun City is an important trade partner for China, Russia, North Korea, and other countries. In recent years, with adjustments in national industrial policies and economic transformation and upgrading, Hunchun has been vigorously developing high-tech industries and the service sector. Additionally, Hunchun has distinctive cultural features, with Korean ethnic culture as a representative example. Traditional costumes, cuisine, and song and dance all carry strong local characteristics, attracting numerous domestic and foreign tourists.

On September 4, 2024, Ivan Zuyenko, Associate Professor of the Department of Oriental Studies at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), in an exclusive interview with RT at the 9th Eastern Economic Forum, stated that China and Russia had reached important agreements on developing multiple resource sites in the Far East.

The Russian Far East is close to the Asia-Pacific region and is considered Russia's gateway to this area. It is one of the richest regions in the world in terms of natural resources. Foreign trade mainly depends on the export of resources, including oil, natural gas, and fish, while there is a large demand for imports of agricultural products, light industrial goods, and more. However, due to factors such as inconvenient transportation, weak infrastructure, sparse population, and frequent natural disasters, the Far East has long been a bottleneck for Russia's economic development. The development of the Russian Far East is highly aligned with China's strategy for the comprehensive revitalization of Northeast China. Since 2016, China and Russia have implemented the "Primorye-1" and "Primorye-2" international transportation corridors. Among them, "Primorye-2" is closely linked to Hunchun City. From Changchun-Jilin-Hunchun to Russia's Makharlino and Zarubino ports, Hunchun serves as an important node connecting China and Russia. The Hunchun-Makharlino railway is a crucial component of the "Primorye-2" corridor. In recent years, the volume of imports and exports has steadily increased, greatly enhancing Hunchun's historical position in both China and Russia.

As a border area, economic development is inseparable from external development and opening-up. The mutual support between the two countries, along with their historical foundations, has created a space for consumption. In terms of tourism, since 2020, Sino-Russian cross-border tourism has been impacted to some extent by the pandemic and is in urgent need of recovery. According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's notice on August 8, 2023, it was announced that travel agencies would fully resume the operation of group tours from Russia to China without requiring visas. Since the resumption of the visa-free policy, the number of Russian tourists received by travel agencies has returned to the levels of the same period in 2019. The influx of Russian tourists has boosted the recovery of Hunchun's restaurant and accommodation industries. With the implementation of the group tour visa exemption agreement between China and Russia, Hunchun, as the only port city in Jilin Province with a direct connection to Russia, has continuously improved its tourism infrastructure, strengthened tourism market supervision, and enhanced its tourism service capacity, leading to the rapid development of the tourism industry. The number of tourists traveling across the border through Hunchun Port has steadily increased.

In terms of trade, Hunchun's international border trade city has developed well, with goods primarily from China, North Korea, and Russia. In recent years, as interactions between the two countries have become closer, Hunchun, as a gateway city, has seen a steady increase in railway freight volume year by year. It has formed industrial clusters in seafood processing, fresh seafood, energy, and other sectors, with economic cooperation thriving and flourishing.

### 2.3 Geocultural Environment

Hunchun City is deeply influenced by Russian culture due to its land border with Russia. The two countries have long-standing economic cooperation and business exchanges, which have facilitated cultural integration, creating a cultural state where both cultures coexist and interact. According to Progg's tourist psychology model, most tourists tend to prefer destinations that lie at the intersection of similar cultures and societies, where boundaries are easier to cross, and are drawn to destinations that lie between familiarity and unfamiliarity [4]. Hunchun, with its geographical proximity to Russia, cultural similarities, and complementary economies, has a strong demand for tourism, which has promoted cross-border tourism between Chinese and Russian tourists.

In Hunchun, one can frequently see distinct Russian cultural elements, such as signboards with Russian inscriptions, bus and train stations with Russian architectural styles, and popular Russian products favored by local residents.



**Figure 2.** shows Russian shops  
Photo credit: The author



**Figure 3.** A wide range of Russian goods in a supermarket Photo credit: The author

### 3. Tourism Motivation of Russian Tourists and Spatial Differences in Tourism in Hunchun from a Geopolitical Perspective

The tourism route planning by Russian travel agencies and the extent to which Hunchun City accommodates the demands of incoming tourists determine the composition of the tourism space for Russian cross-border tourists, as well as the number of spatial elements in different regions.

### 3.1 Tourism Routes of Russian Travel Agencies

Hunchun Port is the only land border port in Jilin Province that is open to Russia. The exchange of tourists between the two countries primarily relies on land transportation through Hunchun Port. It takes about 8 hours to travel from Hunchun to Vladivostok by land, with customs clearance taking 2-3 hours. In terms of transportation, Hunchun's international passenger station offers direct buses to Vladivostok for tourists.

Through in-depth interviews with Russian tour guides, it is known that there are two main ways for Russian tourists to travel to Hunchun. The first route involves arriving in Hunchun on the first night, where tourists can enjoy the night view of Hunchun near the Hunchun Bridge or Modern Department Store. During the peak tourist season, on the following day, tourists can visit picking gardens to pick apples, strawberries, etc., visit the Ostrich Park in the Hunchun City Cooperation Zone to watch and ride ostriches, and enjoy experiential activities. In the evening, they visit Hunchun Riverside Park and the Ethnic Garden Hotel. On the third day, tourists travel from Hunchun to Yanjing City to enjoy hot springs at Piyan Mountain. On the fourth day, they visit Dunhua City to see the Six Ding Mountain Buddha. On the fifth day, they return to Hunchun. This plan includes a day of free time for tourists to buy souvenirs, daily necessities, and other items. The free time is decided by the tourists, typically on the third or fifth day of their return to Hunchun.

The second route involves using Hunchun as a transit station, where tourists stay briefly in Hunchun before continuing their journey to other cities.

#### ***Lina (Tour Guide):***

*During the peak season, around 1,500 to 2,000 Russian tourists come to Hunchun daily. In the off-season, the number is about 100 to 200 per day, with each bus carrying around 40 people. Since there are fewer tourism activities during the off-season, most tourists engage in free travel. In summer, on the first evening, we arrive in Hunchun and go to the Hunchun Bridge or Modern Department Store for dinner and to enjoy the night view. On the second day, tourists visit the picking gardens to pick fruits and the Ostrich Park to ride ostriches. Russian tourists tend to enjoy these hands-on, experiential activities. Afterwards, we visit Hunchun Riverside Park and the Ethnic Garden Hotel. On the third day, we depart for other cities. My tour groups mainly go to Yanjing for hot springs and to Dunhua to visit the Six Ding Mountain. Other tour groups may also stay in Hunchun for one night before continuing their journey to farther cities.*

#### ***Nadasha (Tour Guide):***

*Our tour groups stay in Hunchun for a relatively short time because we have to continue our journey to other cities. The cities we mainly visit are farther away, including Harbin, Dalian, Qinhuangdao, and Weihai, with a small number of tourists traveling to Sanya.*

### 3.2 Tourism Motivation of Russian Tourists

Figures 4 and 5 are promotional brochures obtained during the author's in-depth survey from Russian travel agencies, which include maps of Hunchun City and uniquely Chinese experiential activities. The



areas displayed on the maps represent the main activity zones recommended for tourists by Russian travel agencies. The text on the brochures generally covers three types of activities: beauty treatments, massage, and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). This clearly highlights the main purposes and interests of Russian tourists visiting Hunchun City. During the author's research, it was found that these three categories were not the only ones that sparked interest in Russian tourists. Medical services, shopping, and the role of Hunchun as a transit hub also contributed significantly to tourists motivations.



**Figure 4. Figure 5.** Russian travel agency leaflet

Photo credit: The author

During the in-depth interviews, it was found that Russian tourists frequently appeared in souvenir shops, fast food restaurants, cafés, bars, department stores, and other places.

**Ms. Wen (Local Resident):**

*When shopping, I often see Russian tourists strolling around the stores near the Modern Department Store. Women are more likely to buy clothes in clothing stores, while men are often seen in souvenir shops, buying cultural and creative products, such as fridge magnets with Chinese characters or local specialties from mainland China, like sausages. Personally, I frequently see Russians eating at places like KFC and McDonald's. Every time I pass by or enter, the stores are always filled with Russian tourists. They also seem to like Luckin Coffee and Starbucks, perhaps because they enjoy coffee as well.*

**Ms. Zhai (Local Resident):**

*I mainly notice Russian tourists frequenting the bathhouses in Hunchun, where they get massages, cupping therapy, and other treatments. When buying medicine, there are often Russian tourists in the pharmacies. I've also noticed that Russian tourists often visit the Hunchun Dental Hospital or the Chinese Medicine Department at the Eurasia Hospital for treatment. In terms of dining, I rarely see them eating in Chinese restaurants. While shopping along the streets, I mainly find them eating in Russian restaurants, where they likely enjoy Russian cuisine.*

**Mr. Wang (Bar Owner):**

*Russians really enjoy alcohol, so they often visit my bar. On average, around 200 people come in a week, sometimes more than the Chinese customers. Since I run a cocktail bar, some customers who find the cocktails expensive tend to order beer, but cocktails are still the main choice. I feel that Russians come here with a very clear purpose—they come to drink. If there are a lot of people, they might sit down and chat, but if there are only a few, they might just ask me to pack their drinks to go in a takeaway cup.*

The findings suggest that Russian tourists are more interested in clothing products and souvenir-type tourism products. In terms of dining, they are more inclined towards Western fast food, Russian cuisine, and coffee. Russia's alcohol culture is widely known, and Russians are often referred to as the "warrior nation." Even when they come to China, Russian tourists continue their love for alcohol, showing a particular fondness for various alcoholic beverages. Moreover, Russian tourists also have a strong interest in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) culture. As mentioned earlier, the brochures feature advertisements for acupuncture, massage, and gua sha, and in the interview, it was noted that Russian tourists often visit hospitals with Chinese medicine departments, indicating their fondness for TCM.

***Lina & Nadasha (Tour Guides):***

*The consumption within our tour groups mainly revolves around medical supplies and daily necessities. The items that our guests spend the most money on are light industrial products, such as clothing, home textiles, small appliances, and daily goods. In addition, many tourists buy medicine at pharmacies—about 25% of passengers on each bus visit the pharmacy, which is roughly 10 people per bus. There are also guests who go to Chinese medicine clinics for massages, acupuncture, and cupping therapy, and the number of these guests is similar to or possibly higher than those buying medicine. Finally, there are those who visit dental clinics. Russian tourists have a lot of trust in Chinese dental hospitals, but since they are visiting for medical treatment, only those with dental issues typically go. This group accounts for about 10% of the tourists.*

The Russian Medical Tourism Association's press office has stated that China was one of the most popular countries for Russian medical tourists in 2016, with medical tourism becoming a major point of interest for Russian tourists visiting China.

To attract Russian tourists, Hunchun City in Jilin Province has focused on developing its dental clinics, Chinese medicine treatments, beauty and wellness industries. The Hunchun Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Hospital has collaborated with public hospitals in neighboring Russian regions, regularly offering free medical consultations in Russian hospitals. Since 2008, the hospital has also launched TCM health care programs specifically for Russian tourists. Furthermore, Hunchun City established an International Talent Service Liaison Center, and since 2014, several hospitals have hired Russian-speaking translators and set up dedicated areas for Russian patients. Over ten government agencies have joined forces to implement star ratings for foreign medical institutions to improve service levels and meet the medical needs of Russian tourists. In recent years, Russian tourists have shown a strong preference for TCM services such as acupuncture, massage, and fumigation, as well as dental care services, including treatments and repairs.



Through interviews with various groups, some common points have emerged, such as Russian tourists' preference for purchasing daily necessities, their strong interest in Chinese medicine, and their trust in China's dental care. These overlapping interests are the real attractions driving Russian tourists to Hunchun for tourism activities. In response to these findings, Hunchun City should actively explore and leverage its tourism resources, develop products more suited to tourists' tastes, and capitalize on the city's geographic advantages.

### 3.3 Spatial Differences in Tourism in Hunchun City

Through the in-depth interviews with Russian tour guides mentioned earlier, it was found that the most attractive tourism products for Russian tourists are light industrial products, followed by medical clinic services. As a result, the surrounding areas have developed consumption spaces specifically targeting Russian cross-border tourists.



**Figure 6. Figure 7.** Location map and nuclear density analysis of Russian tourists' preferred consumption places in Hunchun City

Figure 6 shows the locations where Russian tourists most frequently engage in consumption behavior, based on the interviews and field research conducted by the author. Using ArcGIS, a map of Hunchun's streets was created, and a kernel density analysis map (Figure 7) was drawn to represent the tourism consumption space. Among the 57 most frequented shops by Russian tourists, which include those selling home textiles, clothing, electronics, and medical clinics, most are concentrated along Longyuan West Street and Wenhua Road, as can be observed in the kernel density map (Figure 7). Other areas with similar consumption spaces are relatively few.

For these two streets, the combination of cultural facilities, various groups of people, and cultural activities in the tourism space forms a specific tourism space. This space also encompasses the unique cultural values and regional characteristics of Hunchun City, attracting tourists who are interested in these consumption spaces to participate, gather, and engage in cultural consumption practices, ultimately promoting the development of the tourism space in the area.

## 4. Existing Problems and Suggestions for Improvement

### 4.1 Existing Problems

Through the author's field research, several issues were identified regarding cross-border tourism in Hunchun City for Russian tourists:

#### (1) Inefficient Customs Clearance Routes

Due to the Russian border crossing being located in a remote area, there is a lack of effective coordination between the customs area and the city center. The number of security check devices and personnel is significantly insufficient in relation to the actual number of cross-border tourists, resulting in a large amount of wasted time. Additionally, the “container-style” security checks negatively affect the tourists' overall travel experience.

#### (2) Limited Variety of Tourism Products

Apart from the Russian cultural space, the truly localized cultural space in Hunchun is the Korean ethnic culture. However, during the field investigation, it was found that, in terms of architecture, the main tourist spaces for Russian cross-border tourists are still dominated by buildings and European-style architecture. In terms of food, Western fast food, Russian cuisine, and coffee are the main offerings. This limits the tourists' ability to deeply experience the local culture rooted in Hunchun, making it less attractive and unable to meet the diverse needs of tourists.

#### (3) Short Stay Duration

A significant portion of Russian tourists choose to visit Hunchun because of its role as a transit hub before heading to other large cities. Interviews also revealed certain consumption habits of Russian tourists. It is noteworthy that the travel routes do not cover popular tourist destinations in Hunchun, such as Fangchuan, Honglian Pond, and Zhanggufeng. This phenomenon ultimately results from the fact that Hunchun's existing tourism products do not meet the needs of Russian tourists, leading them to redirect their travel enthusiasm to other cities.

### 4.2 Suggestions for Improvement

#### (1) Facilitate Cross-border Customs Clearance

A significant portion of Russian tourists choose to visit Hunchun because of its role as a transit hub before heading to other large cities. Interviews also revealed certain consumption habits of Russian tourists. It is noteworthy that the travel routes do not cover popular tourist destinations in Hunchun, such as Fangchuan, Honglian Pond, and Zhanggufeng. This phenomenon ultimately results from the fact that Hunchun's existing tourism products do not meet the needs of Russian tourists, leading them to redirect their travel enthusiasm to other cities.

#### (2) Develop Diversified Tourism Products

Based on the existing tourism resources in Hunchun, more distinctive tourism products should be developed. Additionally, tourism products that are more easily accepted by Russian tourists can be created by incorporating a mix of features. For example, events such as rice wine banquets or hands-on traditional kimchi-making activities could be offered. Scenic areas can also be divided into zones, with a

"Russia-specific channel" in the tourist areas, where the history and culture of Hunchun City, as well as the current Korean-Chinese cultural integration, are introduced in Russian. This will help Russian tourists better understand and appreciate the unique culture of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, deepening their enthusiasm for tourism in Hunchun.

### (3) Enhance Cultural Identity in Hunchun

Hunchun's local popular tourist attractions are primarily centered around red tourism. To attract foreign tourists and generate interest in red culture, the core issue is to enhance cultural identity. Strengthening cultural identity will allow tourists to immerse themselves in exploring exotic cultures and improve the competitiveness of the tourism destination. On a deeper level, this will enhance soft power, which is crucial for improving the international status of Hunchun City, transforming it from a transit hub into a favored tourist destination.

## 5. Conclusion

On the geopolitical level, it is important to continue strengthening the development space for cross-border tourism cooperation, enhancing the bilateral cross-border tourism cooperation mechanism with Russia, and working with customs, border inspection, and border management to promote the interconnectedness of cross-border policies, laws, regulations, and industry standards. This will provide policy assurance and support for the development of cross-border tourism.

On the geopolitical economic level, efforts should be made to promote the integration of cross-border tourism by reasonably allocating tourism resources and elements, building cross-border tourism cooperation zones, and making both sides of the border mutual tourist destinations and source markets. This would allow for the free flow of tourists and tourism production factors across borders. Transnational tourism companies should be nurtured, and direct investment should be used to promote the introduction and export of domestic and international products. This can help reduce trade barriers and improve the competitiveness of cross-border tourism products.

On the geopolitical cultural level, the focus should be on enhancing cultural soft power and strengthening cultural identity. By utilizing the Korean ethnic cultural heritage, a cultural tourism circle can be created. Governments, businesses, and society should actively promote cross-border tourism activities, continually deepening ethnic cultural exchanges and integration, strengthening cultural identity, and improving cultural soft power to elevate the international standing of China.

Viewed through a geopolitical lens, the development of cross-border tourism consumption space has practical significance for shaping the tourism space of Hunchun City. As cross-border tourism is an important means for Hunchun's economic development and external opening-up, it should be regarded as a pillar industry for the city. The integration of cross-border tourism and regional economic integration will continuously merge geography with cross-border tourism, promoting research on both geopolitical relations and cross-border tourism. This will not only improve the local tourism space but also contribute positively to the process of regional integration.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, author-ship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Data Sharing Agreement**

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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