

Beyond Managerialism: A Critical Review of Overtourism Governance and the Chinese Challenge

Para além da gestão: uma revisão crítica da governança do sobreturismo e o desafio chinês

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Abstract

Overtourism has become a prominent concept in tourism studies, but its rapid diffusion has not always been matched by equivalent theoretical development. This article argues that overtourism governance research remains largely shaped by a managerialist logic that frames the issue in terms of congestion, visitor pressure, and destination efficiency. Although this approach has generated useful instruments such as visitor caps, timed-entry systems, pricing mechanisms, dispersal strategies and crowd monitoring, it has also narrowed the field's analytical horizon. Adopting a critical review approach, the article synthesises selected scholarship on tourism governance, justice, degrowth, resilience, path dependence, platformisation, spatial governance and relational destination theory. It identifies four limitations in the literature: technocratic and linear framings, insufficient attention to power and political economy, weak recognition of socio-ecological relationality, and limited transferability beyond Western urban contexts. The article further argues that China is a theoretically significant setting for reconsidering overtourism governance. In state-led tourism systems shaped by developmental priorities, administrative hierarchy, public-holiday synchronisation, rapid infrastructure provision and uneven stakeholder participation, overtourism cannot be adequately understood through collaborative and managerial assumptions alone. The paper concludes by proposing a configurational and relational governance perspective that foregrounds justice, path dependence, spatial unevenness, socio-ecological interdependence and the structural conditions under which tourism excess becomes normalised.

Keywords: Overtourism. Tourism governance. Managerialism. China. Spatial governance.

Resumo

O sobreturismo tornou-se um conceito relevante nos estudos de turismo, mas a sua rápida difusão nem sempre se fez acompanhar do devido enquadramento teórico. Neste artigo sustenta-se que a pesquisa sobre governança do sobreturismo continua a ser amplamente moldada por uma lógica gerencialista que perspetiva o problema em termos de congestionamento, pressão dos visitantes e eficácia do destino. Embora essa abordagem tenha produzido medidas importantes, como a limitação do número de visitantes, o sistemas de entrada com horário marcado, mecanismos de precificação, estratégias de dispersão e monitoramento de multidões, ela também restringiu o horizonte analítico do campo de estudo.

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Adotando uma abordagem de revisão crítica, este artigo sintetiza uma seleção de bibliografia dedicada à governança do turismo, à justiça, ao decrescimento, resiliência, dependência de trajetória, plataformação, governança espacial e teoria relacional dos destinos. Na revisão identificam-se quatro limitações principais: enquadramentos tecnocráticos e lineares; atenção insuficiente ao poder e à economia política; fraco reconhecimento da relacionalidade socioecológica e transferibilidade limitada para além de contextos urbanos ocidentais. O artigo indica ainda que a China apresenta um contexto teoricamente significativo para se repensar a governança do sobreturismo. Em sistemas turísticos liderados pelo Estado, moldados por prioridades desenvolvimentistas, hierarquia administrativa, sincronização dos feriados públicos, rápida provisão de infraestruturas e participação desigual dos stakeholders, o sobreturismo não pode ser compreendido apenas com base em pressupostos colaborativos e gerenciais. Por fim, propõe-se uma perspectiva configuracional e relacional de governança com ênfase na justiça, na dependência de trajetória, na desigualdade espacial, na interdependência socioecológica e nas condições estruturais, a partir das quais o excesso turístico se normaliza.

Palavras-chave: Sobreturismo. Governança do turismo. Gerencialismo. China. Governança espacial.

1. Introduction

Since the late 2010s, overtourism has become a central concept in tourism studies and policy debate. It is now widely used to describe situations in which tourism growth negatively affects residents' quality of life, visitor experience and destination sustainability (Koens et al., 2018; Mihalič, 2020). Yet the term's recent popularity should not obscure its older intellectual roots. Concerns about excessive tourism have long been explored through carrying capacity, destination life cycles, host irritation, sustainability limits and the politics of tourism development. What the term "overtourism" added was a more visible and politically resonant vocabulary that connected tourism pressure to urban conflict, resident dissatisfaction and public contestation (Capocchi et al., 2020; Milano et al., 2019).

However, the rapid expansion of the overtourism literature has not been matched by comparable theoretical development. Much of the field still treats overtourism as a problem of imbalance: too many visitors, excessive spatial concentration, inadequate regulation and insufficient coordination. This framing has encouraged a managerial policy repertoire centred on visitor-flow control, access restrictions, pricing, reservation systems, demarketing and destination redesign. While such interventions may be practically useful, they also reveal a deeper analytical tendency. Overtourism is frequently approached as a technical malfunction requiring better calibration, rather than as a political, developmental, geographical and socio-ecological condition rooted in growth imperatives, unequal power relations, spatial restructuring and institutional trajectories (Amore & Hall, 2016; Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Butler & Dodds, 2022).

This limitation becomes especially visible in the Chinese context. Chinese destinations are shaped by state-led tourism development, rapid infrastructure expansion, administrative hierarchy, public-holiday synchronisation and uneven stakeholder participation, which makes many Western-derived governance assumptions difficult to apply without adaptation. China therefore matters not merely as an empirical exten-

sion of the overtourism debate, but as a theoretically important setting that exposes the limits of governance frameworks built around stakeholder equilibrium, collaborative adjustment and managerial calibration.

The article makes three contributions. First, it clarifies that managerial responses to overtourism are not simply incomplete policy tools; they are embedded in a wider growth-oriented governance rationality. Second, it develops the geographical dimensions of overtourism by foregrounding spatial unevenness, territoriality, urban transformation, scale and spatial governance. Third, it proposes a configurational and relational governance perspective in which overtourism is understood as the outcome of historically path-dependent, spatially uneven, politically mediated and socio-ecologically embedded governance configurations. This contribution is conceptual rather than statistical: it aims to sharpen the theoretical language through which future empirical studies can examine overtourism beyond universal “best practice” models.

The article proceeds in six steps. It first clarifies the methodological positioning of the critical review. It then traces the conceptual evolution from carrying capacity to overtourism, examines the dominance of managerial governance, develops the political-economic and geographical dimensions of tourism pressure, and discusses justice, degrowth, resilience, path dependence and relational thinking. The final sections explain why China is theoretically significant and present an integrative framework for future overtourism governance research.

2. Methodological Positioning: A Critical Review Design

In response to the interpretative nature of the argument, this article adopts a critical review design rather than a systematic literature review or meta-analysis. Critical reviews are appropriate when the purpose is not to exhaustively catalogue all publications, but to interrogate concepts, compare assumptions, identify silences and develop a new interpretative position (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019). The review is therefore problem-driven: it asks how overtourism has been governed conceptually, what assumptions have become dominant, and which theoretical resources can help move the field beyond managerial correction.

The literature was selected through an iterative and purposive process. The first cluster consisted of influential overtourism studies addressing definitions, impacts, resident responses and governance instruments. The second cluster covered tourism-governance scholarship, including work on collaboration, meta-governance, sustainability governance and policy failure. The third cluster included critical perspectives on justice, degrowth, political economy, platformisation, resilience, path dependence, relationality and more-than-human approaches. The fourth cluster focused on China-related tourism governance, including state-led development, public-holiday mobility, heritage governance, platformised accommodation and path-dependent destination development. Sources were identified through keyword searches in major academic databases, backward and forward citation chaining, and the inclusion of recent high-impact contributions that directly shaped the debate.

To make the search strategy more explicit, searches were conducted primarily in Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar. Indicative search strings combined terms including “overtourism”, “tourism governance”, “managerialism”, “visitor management”, “degrowth”, “justice”, “platformisation”, “Airbnb”, “short-term rental”, “path dependence”, “spatial governance”, “China” and “state-led tourism”. The search focused mainly on English-language peer-reviewed literature published between 2010 and 2025, while earlier foundational works were retained when necessary to trace conceptual lineage.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) peer-reviewed works that explicitly address overtourism, tourism governance, tourism development pressure or closely related spatial and socio-ecological conflicts; (2) conceptual or empirical studies that illuminate the governance assumptions behind overtourism responses; (3) studies that help theorise power, justice, political economy, spatial unevenness, resilience, path dependence or relationality; and (4) China-focused studies that clarify the institutional and geographical specificity of tourism development. Excluded were purely descriptive destination reports, technical crowd-counting studies without governance implications, media commentary not grounded in academic analysis, and works whose relevance to overtourism governance was only indirect.

The analytical framing followed six sensitising questions: How is overtourism defined as a problem? Which actors are assumed to govern it? At what scale is pressure located? Which spatial relations and territorial effects are recognised or ignored? Which normative criteria are used to evaluate governance success? And how transferable are the implied solutions beyond Western urban contexts? This procedure does not claim the replicability of a systematic review; rather, it strengthens transparency by making explicit how the critical synthesis was bounded, interpreted and transformed into the configurational and relational perspective proposed below.

3. From Carrying Capacity to Overtourism: Continuity and Rupture

The overtourism debate is deeply rooted in older tourism scholarship. Long before the term gained prominence, researchers had already considered the possibility that destinations could exceed ecological, physical and social limits. Carrying-capacity thinking framed the issue through thresholds, while destination life-cycle models explored the consequences of growth, stagnation and decline. More broadly, sustainability scholarship questioned whether tourism expansion could truly be reconciled with long-term environmental and social well-being. In this sense, overtourism is not a complete rupture from earlier theory, but a reframing of longstanding concerns. Mihalič (2020) explicitly conceptualises overtourism through a sustainability perspective, and Capocchi et al. (2020) likewise argue that overtourism is better seen as a new label for an already known phenomenon than as an entirely novel issue.

At the same time, overtourism has introduced an important shift in emphasis. Koens et al. (2018) show that the term gained traction because it captures tourism pressure as a multidimensional social and urban condition rather than a mere numerical excess. Milano et al. (2019) similarly connect overtourism to four decades of local concerns, tourismphobia and contested urban change. Gössling et al. (2020)

add a socio-psychological layer by showing that overtourism is closely related to perceptions of crowding, place change and anti-tourist sentiment. These contributions matter because they move the debate beyond simple counting and toward lived experiences of tourism pressure.

Yet this conceptual broadening has not fully transformed the field's policy imagination. Even where overtourism is defined as multidimensional, the most common responses remain managerial: timed ticketing, reservation systems, tourist taxes, dispersal strategies, crowd analytics and "smart" monitoring systems. Research on digital response systems and quality-of-life management models, for example, still largely treats overtourism as a condition to be technically optimised rather than politically transformed (Camatti et al., 2020; Mihalič & Kuščer, 2021). Such work is valuable for practice, but it can also encourage scholars to ask how pressure can be reduced without asking why destinations become structurally dependent on high-volume tourism in the first place.

This is also where the geographical contribution of the overtourism debate should be made more explicit. Tourism pressure is not evenly distributed across abstract destination containers. It is concentrated in specific streets, neighbourhoods, heritage cores, transport corridors, waterfronts, sacred landscapes and platform-mediated residential areas. The problem is therefore not only how many tourists visit a destination, but how mobility, land use, infrastructure, symbolic value and administrative boundaries combine to produce spatially uneven pressure. This insight links overtourism to broader debates in urban tourism and spatial theory, which show that tourism cannot be separated from the production of urban space, mobility systems and place-based inequalities (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Sheller & Urry, 2006).

4. The Dominance and Limits of Managerial Governance

The dominance of managerialism is one of the clearest features of overtourism governance research. Butler & Dodds (2022), in their "review of failure," show that many overtourism responses remain partial, reactive and politically weak. Their contribution is important because it implies that governance failure is not only a matter of poor implementation; it may also stem from the conceptual narrowness of the dominant policy repertoire itself. Overtourism is often addressed through limited corrections to a growth-oriented tourism model rather than through deeper transformations of that model.

This diagnosis resonates strongly with the broader tourism-governance literature. Bramwell & Lane (2011) argue that governance discourse in tourism can easily become depoliticised, especially when collaboration, coordination and partnership are treated as inherently desirable without sufficient attention to conflict, inequality and competing values. Amore & Hall (2016) deepen this critique by calling for movement from governance to meta-governance, emphasising that governance arrangements are never value-neutral and always reflect power, interests and normative priorities. Hall (2011) further shows that governance types vary significantly in their implications for sustainability. Taken together, these studies suggest that overtourism governance should not be reduced to better coordination alone.

The managerial paradigm rests on three problematic assumptions. First, it assumes that overtourism is primarily a coordination failure. Second, it assumes that stakeholder interests can be aligned through better institutional design. Third, it assumes that the main objective is to preserve destination functionality while reducing conflict. Yet in many places overtourism is not simply a coordination failure; it is a foreseeable result of development strategies that actively reward visibility, branding, revenue maximisation, investment-led place transformation and competitive urban positioning. Under such conditions, governance is not a neutral solution to tourism growth. It is part of the political economy that sustains that growth.

The limits of managerialism are clearer when overtourism is examined geographically. Visitor caps may reduce crowding inside an attraction while displacing pressure to surrounding streets, transport nodes and residential districts. Dispersal policies may protect iconic cores while expanding tourism into neighbourhoods with weaker political voice. Pricing mechanisms may reduce demand while also redistributing access according to income. Smart monitoring may improve flow management while leaving untouched the deeper question of whose space is being reorganised for tourism consumption. These examples show that managerial tools can be necessary, but they are not sufficient when the underlying problem involves territorial conflict, spatial inequality and unequal rights to place.

Specific case studies reinforce this point. Research on Budapest shows that resident resistance is often tied not only to tourism itself, but also to broader urban discontent and development tensions (Smith et al., 2019). Work on Munich similarly demonstrates that local disturbances involve both crowding and changes in everyday social environments (Namberger et al., 2019). These findings complicate the idea that overtourism can be understood simply through visitor numbers or crowd-control thresholds.

5. Platformisation, Spatial Unevenness and the Political Economy of Overtourism

One of the most important developments in the overtourism literature has been the growing recognition of platformised tourism. Research on non-institutionalised accommodation and Airbnb-related change shows that overtourism is often intensified by digital short-term rental markets that reshape neighbourhoods, land use and housing affordability (Minoia, 2022; Sarantakou & Terkenli, 2019). This matters because it reveals that overtourism is not only a matter of destination popularity. It is also connected to platform capitalism, financialised urban change and new forms of extraction from residential space.

The housing question is especially revealing. Evidence on tourism activity and housing affordability shows that tourism intensity can contribute to housing stress and price effects, especially in destinations already structured around tourist demand (Mikulić et al., 2021). Once overtourism is linked to housing, displacement and everyday urban life, the limitations of purely managerial solutions become even more visible. Timed entry, pricing and dispersal strategies may reduce congestion at major attractions, but they do very little to address rent inflation, neighbourhood transfor-

mation or the commodification of living space. This is why platformisation should be treated as more than a side issue. It exposes how tourism pressure is produced through connections between digital markets, real-estate investment, neighbourhood amenities, transport accessibility and place branding. In geographical terms, overtourism becomes a problem of spatial unevenness: some groups benefit from the conversion of urban space into tourism value, while others experience displacement, loss of amenity, rising costs and diminished control over everyday places. Milano (2024) therefore argues that mass tourism, touristification and overtourism must be understood through the inconvenient truths of accumulation, conflict and social contestation rather than being dismissed as temporary disturbances.

A political-economic approach also helps explain why some destinations remain locked into tourism growth even after negative impacts become visible. Tourism development can generate fiscal dependence, employment dependence, investment dependence and reputational dependence. Local governments may know that overtourism is harmful, yet still fear the economic and political consequences of reducing visitor flows. Businesses may support “sustainable tourism” rhetorically while resisting policies that restrict volume. Residents may oppose crowding while depending on tourism income. These tensions cannot be resolved through technical optimisation alone; they require attention to the structural incentives that make tourism excess profitable and politically normal.

6. Justice, Ethics and Resident-Visitor Relations

A major weakness of overtourism scholarship is its uneven engagement with justice. Although many studies document resident irritation, anti-tourist sentiment and protest, these dynamics are not always theorised as distributive, procedural or recognitional injustices. Jamal & Camargo (2014) provide a crucial intervention by advocating the idea of the “just destination,” grounded in an ethic of care. Their work suggests that tourism should not be judged only by efficiency or performance, but also by whether it distributes benefits and burdens fairly and protects vulnerable groups.

This justice perspective has since been strengthened by a wider justice turn in tourism studies. Rastegar (2020) argues that governments play a central role in shaping tourism justice and can use the language of justice in ways that either empower or marginalise communities. Rastegar & Ruhanen (2022) further show that rapid tourism growth can generate injustice across four dimensions: distribution, procedure, recognition and restoration. These contributions are especially relevant to overtourism because they show that the issue is not only crowding, but also who is heard, who benefits, who is displaced and who is expected to absorb the costs of growth.

The resident-visitor relationship literature also deepens this critique. Cheung & Li (2019) show that deterioration in visitor-resident relations under overtourism can have long-term hysteresis effects and that resilience-building requires more than simple crowd management. Gössling et al. (2020) likewise demonstrate that overtourism must be understood through socio-psychological processes related to place change

and social stress. These studies help explain why overtourism governance cannot be reduced to visitor dispersal alone. The problem is relational and political, not merely quantitative.

Once justice is placed at the centre of analysis, the field's core question changes. The issue is no longer just how destinations can manage more tourism with fewer complaints. It becomes whether specific forms of tourism development are socially and ethically legitimate at all. This shift is decisive because it moves the literature away from damage control and toward normative evaluation. At the same time, justice-oriented governance should not be romanticised. Residents are not homogeneous, and their interests may diverge by class, tenure, ethnicity, occupation, age or dependence on tourism income. A justice perspective therefore requires careful attention to internal community differences rather than a simple opposition between "residents" and "tourists".

7. Degrowth, Post-Growth Possibilities and Practical Trade-Offs

The justice critique connects directly to a broader challenge in tourism studies: whether overtourism can be addressed within a growth-oriented paradigm at all. Fletcher et al. (2019) argue that tourism research must seriously engage with degrowth because many socio-ecological harms associated with rapid tourism expansion cannot be solved simply by making growth more efficient. Higgins-Desbiolles (2019) similarly calls for degrowing tourism and rethinking tourism in ways that prioritise local communities over the rights of tourists and capital. Gascón (2019) adds that treating tourism as a right can distort political debate by obscuring conflicts between the rights of travellers and the rights of residents.

These arguments matter because they reveal a structural contradiction in overtourism governance. Many policies seek to preserve destination attractiveness, tourism income and growth momentum while trimming the worst externalities of mass visitation. But if overtourism is generated by growth imperatives themselves, then the problem is not only poor management of growth; it is the social and ecological logic of growth as such. Degrowth scholarship therefore does not merely add another policy option. It reframes the overtourism debate at the level of political economy and moral vision.

However, post-growth or degrowth arguments also require nuance. Destinations differ in their dependence on tourism employment, fiscal revenue and small-business livelihoods. Restricting tourism volume may reduce ecological and social pressure, but it can also create distributive conflicts if costs fall disproportionately on workers, informal vendors or small enterprises rather than on large investors and platform intermediaries. Post-growth governance therefore cannot simply mean reducing numbers. It must ask who bears the burden of transition, what alternative livelihoods are available, how public revenue is replaced, and how decision-making legitimacy is secured. A more balanced approach recognises the necessity of limits while refusing to treat limits as a technically simple or socially neutral solution.

This does not mean that every destination should immediately adopt a strict degrowth agenda. It does mean, however, that overtourism scholarship should engage

more directly with differentiated limits, post-growth possibilities and the political difficulty of reducing tourism dependence. Without that engagement, the field remains trapped within a managerial sustainability orthodoxy that seeks to make growth less disruptive without questioning its underlying logic.

8. Resilience, Path Dependence and Configurational Thinking

Another major weakness of overtourism research lies in its reliance on implicitly linear causal thinking. Much of the literature assumes a simple sequence: tourist growth produces pressure, governance intervenes, and pressure is reduced. Yet destinations are not linear systems. Research on resilience and socio-ecological systems suggests that tourism destinations are shaped by feedback loops, thresholds and changing relationships among social, environmental and institutional variables. Cheung & Li (2019) explicitly frame overtourism through resilience, while Mihalič (2020) highlights socio-political and socio-psychological capacities as part of overtourism diagnosis.

Path dependence strengthens this critique. Ma and Hassink's (2014) study of Guilin shows that tourism development is historically sedimented through path creation, lock-in and attempted renewal. Destinations do not simply "become over-touristed" in a sudden, ahistorical way. Rather, they are often pushed into high-pressure situations through long-term policy choices, infrastructural commitments, branding strategies and institutional routines that normalise further growth.

The implication is methodological as well as theoretical. Similar overtourism outcomes may be produced by different combinations of factors. One destination may be overwhelmed by short-term rental growth and real-estate pressure; another by infrastructure-led mass domestic tourism; another by weak regulation combined with aggressive place branding; and another by the temporal synchronisation of public holidays and transport systems. This means that overtourism governance should be studied configurationally rather than through one-size-fits-all models. The relevant question is not which single variable matters most, but which combinations of institutional, market, social, spatial and ecological conditions generate tourism overload under different circumstances.

Configurational thinking is especially useful because it avoids two common simplifications. It avoids the managerial simplification that the same tools can be transferred across destinations with minor adjustment. It also avoids the critical simplification that all overtourism is reducible to the same logic of growth. Instead, it invites comparative research into different pathways: platform-led urban touristification, heritage-core congestion, infrastructure-driven mass mobility, island or mountain ecological overload, and state-led development lock-in. Each pathway may require a different governance response.

9. Beyond Anthropocentrism: Relational and More-than-Human Approaches

A further frontier in overtourism research lies in the treatment of nature and materiality. Much of the literature remains anthropocentric, treating destinations as spaces to be managed for human use and environmental degradation as an externality to be corrected after growth. Matteucci et al. (2022) challenge this logic by proposing a new materialist governance paradigm for tourism destinations. Their argument is that the Anthropocene requires destinations to be understood as assemblages of human and non-human relations, rather than as passive settings for economic activity.

This perspective is especially useful for overtourism because many affected destinations are ecologically fragile: island systems, mountain landscapes, coastal zones, heritage environments and blue-green urban infrastructures. Under a managerial paradigm, ecological stress is often treated as a matter of carrying capacity or better monitoring. Under a relational paradigm, however, environmental harm is not secondary. It is constitutive of the politics of tourism development itself. Pernecky (2024) likewise argues for a stronger relational turn in tourism studies, questioning whether tourism research has paid sufficient attention to the interdependencies through which tourism worlds are assembled and governed.

For China, this is highly relevant. Many iconic destinations are landscape-dependent and ecologically sensitive, yet they are simultaneously embedded in strong state-led development agendas. A relational and more-than-human perspective therefore helps move the analysis beyond stakeholder coordination toward a fuller recognition of landscape vulnerability, ecological limits and the material consequences of developmental tourism. It also strengthens the geographical orientation of the article by showing that overtourism is produced through relations among bodies, infrastructures, landscapes, mobility systems and administrative territories.

10. Why China Matters Theoretically

China should be treated as theoretically significant for overtourism research, not merely as an additional empirical setting. The Chinese case reveals that many assumptions embedded in Western overtourism governance literature, especially those centred on stakeholder equilibrium, collaborative adjustment and managerial calibration, are historically and institutionally contingent rather than universally applicable. Tourism development in China has long been closely shaped by the state through policy direction, infrastructural provision, investment stimulation, regulation, promotion and interdepartmental coordination, which means that tourism pressure is often embedded in broader developmental agendas rather than emerging simply from market failure or weak destination management (Qiu et al., 1999; Yan & Bramwell, 2008). In ethnic and heritage destinations, different levels of government frequently play distinct and unequal roles in regulating investment, production and representation, further complicating any simple expectation of balanced stakeholder participation (Yang et al., 2008).

China is also important because overtourism pressures are often intensified by the country's holiday system and mass domestic mobility. Research on China's holiday reform shows that the institutional design of public holidays has contributed to the excessive concentration of domestic tourism demand in particular periods, rather than distributing travel more evenly across the year (Shen et al., 2018). Related work on holiday travel further demonstrates that crowding is especially salient during Golden Week-type peak periods, when tourists' emotional responses and satisfaction are strongly shaped by congestion and density (Liu & Ma, 2019). This temporal concentration matters theoretically because it shows that overtourism in China is not only a spatial issue of overloaded destinations, but also a politically and institutionally produced problem of synchronised mobility.

A further reason China matters is that it highlights the need for a configurational rather than uniform understanding of overtourism. Chinese destinations do not all face the same pressures. In some heritage and politically symbolic destinations, hierarchical governance structures shape sustainability outcomes through both vertical tensions between levels of government and horizontal conflicts among local actors, as shown in research on red tourism (Wang et al., 2022). In some scenic mountain and World Heritage areas, governance outcomes vary significantly according to institutional arrangement and the extent of meaningful local participation, as evidenced by research in the Huangshan mountain area (Qian et al., 2016). In rapidly urbanising tourism cities, meanwhile, platformised accommodation has introduced another pressure configuration: short-term rental growth has become increasingly embedded in urban tourism space, linking tourism expansion to broader changes in housing, amenities and urban land use (Sun et al., 2021, 2022). These differences suggest that "the Chinese case" should not be treated as a single governance model, but as a set of distinct causal combinations through which tourism overload is produced.

The case of Guilin remains especially revealing because it captures the historical-institutional depth of the problem. Ma & Hassink (2014) show that Guilin's tourism development followed a path-dependent trajectory structured by contingent beginnings, resource endowments, institutional lock-in and later attempts at renewal. This is important because it complicates the idea that overtourism can be solved through better visitor redistribution or technical management tools alone. If tourism growth has already been sedimented through branding, infrastructure and long-standing development routines, then managerial interventions may soften symptoms without transforming the structural conditions that reproduce pressure. More broadly, scholarship on tourism resistance in China also reminds us that local communities are neither passive nor homogeneous; they negotiate, contest and sometimes resist tourism development in ways shaped by livelihood strategies, ethnicity and political position (Cornet, 2015). China therefore does not simply add geographical diversity to overtourism research. It exposes the incompleteness of a literature that too readily treats collaborative equilibrium as the normal condition of destination politics.

11. Toward a Configurational and Relational Governance Perspective

The foregoing discussion suggests that overtourism research must move beyond managerialism in four interconnected ways.

First, it must become configurational. Rather than searching for universal best practices, scholars should investigate how different combinations of state capacity, market structure, platform penetration, ecological fragility, resident mobilisation, spatial morphology, public-holiday systems and institutional path dependence produce overtourism under different conditions. This means treating destinations as complex causal assemblages rather than relying on linear relationships between visitor numbers and governance outcomes.

Second, overtourism governance must become relational. Destinations should not be understood simply as bounded containers of tourism activity, but as evolving constellations of residents, visitors, infrastructures, institutions, housing markets, mobility systems and ecological processes. A relational approach helps explain why overtourism cannot be captured adequately by crowding indicators alone. What matters is how tourism reorganises social and material life within place.

Third, overtourism governance must become spatially explicit. It should examine how pressure is produced across scales, from global platform economies and national holiday systems to municipal zoning, neighbourhood land use, heritage-site circulation and landscape vulnerability. Spatial governance is not simply a matter of mapping crowding; it is a matter of understanding how authority, mobility, investment and access are territorially organised.

Fourth, overtourism governance must become normatively explicit. Policies should not be judged only by whether they restore order, reduce crowding or maintain tourism revenues. They should also be assessed according to whether they advance justice, ecological viability and democratic legitimacy. In this sense, better crowd control is not enough if the underlying tourism model remains socially unequal and ecologically extractive.

As shown in Figure 1, this perspective links structural drivers and spatial-temporal conditions to configurations of overtourism pressure, while distinguishing between narrow managerial correction and broader relational governance pathways.

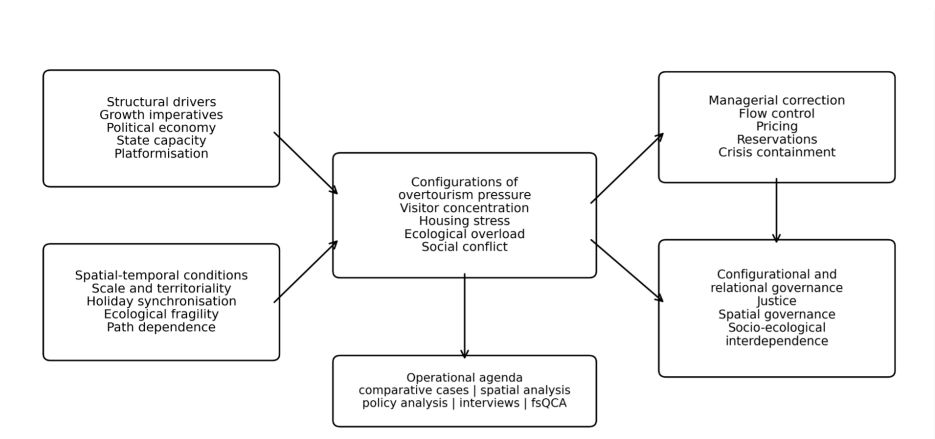


Figure 1. A configurational and relational governance perspective on overtourism. The model summarises how structural drivers and spatial-temporal conditions combine to produce specific configurations of overtourism pressure, which can be addressed either through narrow managerial correction or through a broader relational governance orientation.

The proposed perspective is not intended to replace practical management tools. Pricing, access restrictions, zoning, platform regulation, demarketing and visitor-flow monitoring may all remain necessary in particular contexts. The argument is that these instruments need to be embedded in a broader framework that addresses structural drivers, institutional lock-in, unequal rights to place and socio-ecological interdependence. Otherwise, overtourism governance risks becoming an increasingly sophisticated form of crisis containment rather than genuine transformation.

Operationally, this framework can guide empirical research in at least three ways. Comparative case studies can identify different pathways through which tourism pressure is produced. Spatial analysis can examine how crowding, housing pressure, transport bottlenecks and ecological vulnerability are distributed across territories. Configurational methods such as fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis can test whether different combinations of governance capacity, market pressure, ecological sensitivity and resident mobilisation are associated with more or less severe overtourism outcomes. The framework therefore aims to be both conceptual and operational: it clarifies what should be studied and how future research might study it.

12. Conclusion

The overtourism literature has made a major contribution by drawing attention to the visible harms of excessive tourism growth. Yet its governance agenda remains strongly constrained by managerialism. The field has been more successful at diagnosing pressure than at theorising the developmental, institutional, geographical and political conditions that produce that pressure. As a result, many governance responses remain reactive, technocratic and normatively thin.

This review has identified four central weaknesses in the literature: linear and technical framings, weak attention to power and political economy, insufficient engagement with justice and ecological relationality, and limited sensitivity to non-

Western governance contexts. China is especially important because it concentrates these issues and demonstrates why overtourism theory must move beyond Western collaborative assumptions. The Chinese case highlights how state-led development, public-holiday synchronisation, infrastructure investment, spatial concentration, platformised accommodation and path-dependent destination development can combine to normalise tourism excess.

The future of overtourism research should therefore move from managerial correction to configurational explanation, from stakeholder rhetoric to political analysis, from destination containers to spatial governance, and from narrow sustainability metrics to a broader relational and justice-oriented governance framework. The most important question is no longer simply how destinations can manage excess more efficiently, but how they can transform the conditions under which excess becomes normal, profitable and politically acceptable.

Future studies should develop this agenda empirically. First, comparative research should examine different overtourism configurations across urban, heritage, island, mountain and rural destinations. Second, mixed-methods work should combine spatial data, policy analysis, resident and visitor surveys, interviews and platform data to connect visible crowding with deeper political-economic drivers. Third, China-focused studies should move beyond single-destination description and examine how administrative scale, fiscal incentives, holiday institutions, platform economies and ecological vulnerability interact across regions. Finally, future research should evaluate not only whether governance reduces visitor pressure, but whether it redistributes rights, responsibilities and benefits more justly. These directions would help transform overtourism governance from a problem of technical management into a field of critical, geographical and socio-ecological inquiry.

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