

Article

Assessing the Synergistic Cooperation Potential and Influencing Factors for Sustainable Inbound Tourism Development Among Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong SAR, Macao SAR, and Taiwan Region

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Abstract

The tourism industries of the Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong SAR, Macao SAR, and the Taiwan region are globally competitive yet diverse, but persistent developmental disparities have hindered robust inbound tourism cooperation. This study assesses the synergistic potential and driving factors of the joint inbound tourism market among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Using panel data from 16 source countries (2000–2021), we construct a coupling framework for the inbound tourism relationship circle. We develop an inbound tourism relationship index and employ text analysis alongside ArcGIS Pro3.4.1-based spatiotemporal mapping to reveal the dynamic evolution of coupling coordination. A panel model is then applied to examine six influencing factors: economic, geographic, population, cultural, visa, and institutional. The results indicate that the coupling coordination degree remains generally high, though with stage-specific variations. Population, visa, and institutional factors exert significant positive effects, while economic and geographic factors show significant negative effects—economic because smaller-economy source countries are more likely to treat the four regions as a combined destination, facilitating inter-regional synergy, and geographic because greater distance raises travel costs and reduces visitor flows, thereby weakening coordination. Cultural factors are insignificant. Future efforts should prioritize visa facilitation and institutional building, providing a reference for market promotion, national integration, and sustainable regional cooperation.

Keywords: Chinese Mainland; Chinese Taiwan; Hong Kong SAR and Macao SAR; inbound tourism relationship circle; spatio-temporal coupling evolution; influencing factors; sustainable tourism development

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1. Introduction

Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Macao Special Administrative Region and the Taiwan region (hereinafter referred to as the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) constitute a unique and inseparable whole, characterized by territorial integrity, shared cultural heritage, and deep economic interdependence [1,2]. Under the framework of Chinese sovereignty, these four regions operate as distinct

customs territories within a single sovereign state. Although each has developed separate customs regimes and immigration policies, they are fundamentally integral parts of one country, which provides the basic premise for analyzing them as an interconnected system. Their divergent historical trajectories have given rise to distinct inbound tourism relationship circles and heterogeneous resource endowments, which in turn create potential for complementarity and synergy. This interconnectedness underpins regional cohesion and has significant implications for the sustainable development of the broader tourism system across the four territories. Despite their close geographical proximity and common cultural roots, these four regions operate under distinct customs regimes, immigration policies, and tourism governance frameworks [3,4]. These institutional divergences, shaped by different historical trajectories, have led to notable variations in their inbound tourism development paths, market positioning, and policy priorities. Over the past decades, each region has developed a mature and globally competitive inbound tourism industry, yet their evolution has remained largely parallel rather than integrated [5], posing challenges to the long-term sustainability of regional tourism growth and cooperation. This interconnected network of tourist flows and market linkages constitutes what this study terms the inbound tourism relationship circle.

The four regions share a substantial number of common source countries—such as Japan, the United States, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines—which consistently rank among the top origin markets for all four destinations. This overlapping market base represents a valuable yet largely underutilized asset for regional tourism cooperation. However, despite existing cooperation foundations and complementary advantages, tourism resource development and marketing efforts across the four regions remain fragmented [6], lacking effective coordination and systematic integration. The synergistic potential of jointly cultivating these common source markets has not been fully realized, and the policy frameworks necessary for deeper collaboration remain insufficiently developed. This fragmentation not only constrains the efficient use of tourism resources but also hinders the sustainable and coordinated evolution of the regional inbound tourism system. In the context of deepening globalization, regional tourism integration has become an inevitable trend for enhancing overall competitiveness. Nevertheless, existing studies remain insufficient in systematically examining the synergistic mechanisms and coupling dynamics among these four regions, leaving the potential pathways for coordinated development largely unclear.

Therefore, systematically assessing the synergistic cooperation potential and identifying the key influencing factors of the inbound tourism relationship circle among these four regions is essential. Such an inquiry will not only provide empirical evidence for understanding the interactive dynamics and structural evolution of inbound tourism across these regions, but also offer practical guidance for optimizing collaborative strategies, fostering complementary advantages, and promoting the sustainable and coordinated development of their joint inbound tourism market.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Tourism Cooperation from a Relational Perspective

From a relational perspective, tourism cooperation is a dynamic process through which multiple stakeholders coordinate interests, integrate complementary resources, and co-create value based on trust and reciprocal interactions [7]. Such relationships strengthen collaborative governance and destination management capacity [8,9]. Within the sustainable tourism paradigm, research has expanded from inter-organizational cooperation to multi-stakeholder governance involving governments, businesses, communities, and tourists, underscoring the role of cross-sector partnerships in advancing economic, social, and environmental sustainability [7–9]. Digital transformation has further

fostered collaborative ecosystems characterized by data sharing, platform coordination, open innovation, and stakeholder co-creation [10,11]. Recent studies increasingly emphasize the dynamic evolution of collaborative networks and their impact on destination branding, governance effectiveness, and sustainable competitive advantage under shifting institutional and geopolitical contexts [11–13].

As a specific operationalization of the relational perspective in the tourism field, the “Inbound tourism relationship circle” denotes a network formed through tourism activities among destinations within a country/region and with those abroad. In this circle, tourism resources, market demand, and policy support interact, forming a complex ecosystem. Based on Ruibo Zha et al.’s multi-layer Outbound and Inbound Tourism Relationship Circle (OITRC) model [14], this paper applies and develops the model to the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. This study takes the inbound tourism relationship circle as an entry point, constructs a model for the regions, and discusses development status, potential, and challenges. Using coupling coordination analysis, it quantifies inbound tourism integration and reveals cooperative and competitive relationships. Finally, policy recommendations and development strategies are proposed to promote coordinated development and achieve mutual benefits.

2.2. Research on Inbound Tourism on the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan

Research on inbound tourism across these regions has largely developed along separate tracks. For Taiwan, existing studies mainly focus on cross-strait cooperation [15,16], seasonal variation [17], and specific source market dynamics [18–20]. For Hong Kong, research centers on source market analysis [21,22], tourism demand forecasting [23], and market impact factors [21]. Macao has received considerable attention in the context of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, with studies covering source markets [24], tourism satisfaction [25], and destination competitiveness [26,27]. The Mainland has become an important research subject, with studies on inbound tourism market characteristics [28], attractiveness [29], flows [30], and industry [28]. Research methods include geographic information systems (GISs) [4], social network analysis [30], spatial econometrics [28] and statistical methods, providing a scientific basis for tourism planning and policy formulation. Despite this rich body of work, the reviewed studies are largely region-specific and treat each area’s inbound tourism in isolation. Few have examined the four regions as an interconnected system, and even fewer have employed quantitative methods to measure the coupling dynamics among them. Consequently, the synergistic potential and interaction mechanisms within this multi-destination network remain poorly understood.

2.3. Research on the Coupling of Inbound Tourism

The term “coupling” originated in physics, denoting interaction intensity and inter-system dependencies. It has been widely applied in mathematics, information science, and geography [31]. However, in inbound tourism, studies on coupling and coordinated evolution between source areas and destinations remain insufficient. Most previous research focused on the unidirectional relationship between inbound tourism and the tourism economy, neglecting mutual interaction and interdependence [31]. Tourism coupling involves tourism systems with economic, social, cultural, and other related systems [32], serving as a tool to understand complex relationships. Nevertheless, existing coupling studies have predominantly addressed bilateral relationships (e.g., between a single destination and its source markets) or sectoral interactions (e.g., tourism–economy), leaving the coupling coordination among multiple destinations—particularly across the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan—largely unexamined. Taking the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan as an example, this paper reveals interaction and

interdependence among their inbound tourism systems by constructing a coupling coordination model, providing a theoretical basis for regional integration. It also explores the spatiotemporal evolution path of the inbound tourism relationship circle, offering insights into development trends and future directions to support sustainable tourism. This study extends the coupling framework to a multi-destination context and contributes to a more integrated understanding of regional inbound tourism cooperation.

2.4. Literature Summary

Inbound tourism research has yielded substantial findings in tourism economics, geography, and management. However, existing studies mainly focus on bilateral relationships among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, lacking an overall perspective. Although coupling theory has been applied in tourism research, its use in examining inbound tourism synergy across the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan remains limited. Therefore, this study explores the inter-embedding and synergistic relationships of inbound tourism activities and their influencing factors from a coupling perspective. This is significant for promoting coordinated tourism cooperation and fostering a Chinese inbound tourism community.

3. Theoretical Model, Research Methods, and Data Sources

3.1. *The Theory of the Differential Order Pattern of the Inbound and Outbound Tourism Relationship Circle*

Most current research on interpersonal relationship theory in tourism focuses on micro-settings like rural and community tourism, overlooking the macro-social relationship attributes of inbound and outbound tourism. Zha et al. introduced the differential pattern of interpersonal relationships [33,34] into inbound/outbound tourism geography, drawing an analogy between regional tourism relations and mobile communication ties among individuals. In social networks, individuals are differentiated by relational distance (e.g., family, acquaintances, strangers), forming a concentric circle structure of varying intimacy; similarly, in tourism systems, origin–destination relationships are differentiated by the intensity of tourist flows and market linkages, ranging from closely connected “internal” partners to more distant “external” ones. Based on this, they proposed the OITRC theory [35], finding that cross-border tourism flows exhibit characteristics of the Chinese interpersonal network differential pattern from a global perspective. This theory conceptualizes the relationship which conceptualizes tourism relations as a differentiated structure of communication intimacy from a global perspective.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, this study operationalizes the OITRC framework by establishing a structural correspondence between interpersonal relational circles and the origin–destination tourism system (Figure 1). The model conceptualizes tourism relations as a concentric structure, wherein tourist destinations occupy the core position, while source regions are hierarchically arranged into successive layers—strong-tie, medium-tie, weak-tie, and unrelated system regions—according to the declining intensity of their tourism linkages. This layered configuration echoes the differential pattern of interpersonal relationships, with relational intimacy decreasing as the circle expands outward. Moreover, the degree of relational closeness at the interpersonal level corresponds structurally to the intensity of inter-regional tourism interactions, thereby embedding the logic of the differential pattern into the spatial structure of tourism relations.

Drawing on the classification of influencing factors commonly employed in both interpersonal relationship research and international relations studies [36], and integrating this with geopolitical theory [12], this study further introduces a “soft–hard” relationship framework to contextualize the formation and evolution of the inbound tourism

relationship circle. Beyond this core configuration, the model further incorporates two categories of contextual factors—soft relationships (cultural, institutional, and visa dimensions) and hard relationships (geographical, economic, and population dimensions)—which jointly condition the formation and evolution of the inbound tourism relationship circle. By analogy between interpersonal network theory and tourism geography, this conceptual framework provides an integrated analytical lens for systematically identifying the structural patterns and driving mechanisms of inbound tourism cooperation across the four regions. The OITRC framework identifies the relational structure among the four regions, while the coupling coordination model quantifies the dynamic evolution of their interdependencies—the former provides the structural lens, and the latter provides the empirical metric.

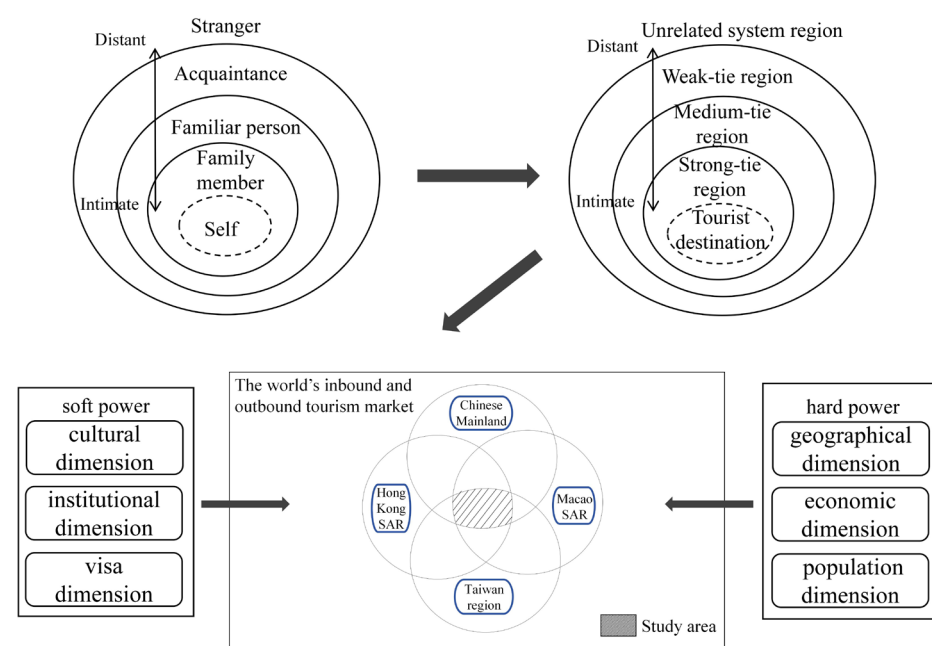


Figure 1. Conceptual model of inter-embedding coupling of tourism relations among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

3.2. Inbound Tourism Relations Index and Measurement

Inbound tourism flow is the dominant manifestation of tourism demand, based on the theory of the inbound tourism relationship circle [35] and on the method of evaluating interpersonal relationships through mobile communication flows, this study proposes a framework that conceptualizes inbound tourism relationship intensity through three interconnected dimensions. As Figure 2 shows, the framework conceptualizes inbound tourism relationship intensity through three interconnected dimensions. The internal perspective—market share of each origin within a destination—parallels the position of “others” in “one’s own” contact list. The external perspective—origin preference for a destination—corresponds to “one’s own” position in “others’” contact lists. The overall perspective—global market importance—parallels the social standing of others in the wider network. Integrating these three dimensions allows for a comprehensive measurement of inbound tourism relationship intensity between any origin–destination pair, thereby laying a foundation for analyzing the spatiotemporal evolution of inbound tourism relationship circles.

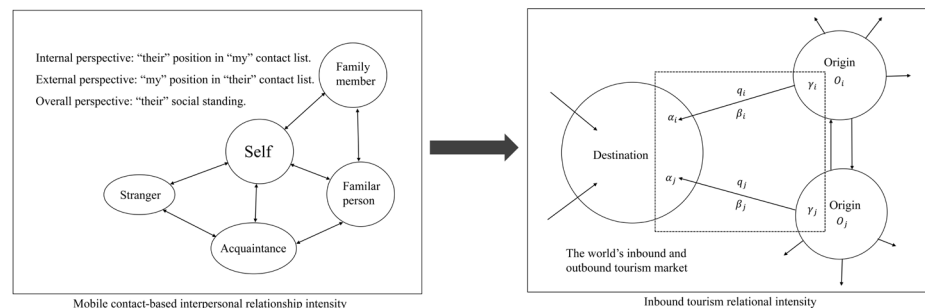


Figure 2. Inbound tourism relationship intensity index model.

This study proposes that an inbound tourism relationship index can be established from three perspectives—external, internal, and overall—to assess the development level of inbound tourism across different regions. Specifically, the inbound tourism relationship index assesses the development of inbound tourism relations among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan from the perspectives of the internal destination tourism visit rate, external tourist preference, and the overall global market position. The calculation steps are as follows:

① External perspective: tourist preference rate from the tourist source area. Market preference (β) refers to the ratio of the number of visitors (q_i) to a destination from the i -th source market to the total number of outbound tourists (OT_i) in that source market, indicating the degree of preference of tourists in the source market for traveling to the destination. A higher β value reflects a stronger inclination of the source market toward the destination, which helps identify priority markets for targeted destination promotion. The formula is as follows:

$$\beta_i = q_i / OT_i \times 100\%$$

② Internal perspective: Market share (α) refers to the ratio of the number of inbound tourists (q_i) from the i -th source area to a destination to the total number of inbound tourists to that destination (DTI). This indicator reflects the relative importance of the source market to the destination—a higher α means the destination is more dependent on that source market, which aids in evaluating market concentration and diversification. The formula is as follows:

$$\alpha_i = q_i / DTI \times 100\%$$

③ Overall perspective: the importance of the tourist source market. Market importance (γ) refers to the ratio of outbound tourists from the i -th source market to the total outbound tourists worldwide, indicating the market's position in the global outbound tourism market. OT_i is the total number of outbound tourists from the i -th source market, and WOT is the total number of outbound tourists in the world. This dimension captures the global weight of a source market; larger γ values indicate markets with greater international influence, which deserve strategic attention from multiple destinations. The formula is as follows:

$$\gamma_i = OT_i / WOT \times 100\%$$

④ The inbound tourism flow relationship index (U_j) refers to the strength of the inbound tourism relationship between source case country/region i and destination j ; a larger U value indicates a stronger tourism relationship between the source case area and the destination. The composite index is calculated as the weighted average of the three dimensions—external (β_i), internal (α_i), and overall (γ_i). The weight coefficients for the three dimensions are specified to be equal, and $w_\alpha + w_\beta + w_\gamma = 1$. As a composite metric,

U enables cross-country and cross-period comparisons of relationship intensity. The formula is as follows:

$$U_j = w_\beta \beta_i + w_\alpha \alpha_i + w_\gamma \gamma_i$$

3.3. Coupling Analysis

Coupling is a concept derived from physics and refers to a phenomenon in which two or more systems or forms of motion influence each other through various interactions [37]. When a system or its internal elements cooperate effectively and develop harmoniously, this is referred to as benign coupling; otherwise, it is termed malignant coupling. Coupling degree is used to measure the degree of interaction between systems or elements. Coordination refers to the relationship of harmonious interaction and virtuous cycle between systems or elements. Drawing on the existing literature [38], the formulas are as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{coupling degree: } C &= \left\{ \frac{U_{CTW} \times U_{MA} \times U_{CML} \times U_{HK}}{[(U_{CTW} + U_{MA} + U_{CML} + U_{HK})/4]^4} \right\}^{1/4} \\ \text{comprehensive coordination degree: } T &= \alpha U_{CTW} + \beta U_{MA} + \gamma U_{CML} + \delta U_{HK} \\ \text{coupling coordination degree: } D &= \sqrt{C \times T} \end{aligned}$$

where U_{CTW} , U_{MA} , U_{CML} and U_{HK} are the values of the inbound tourism flow relationship index values for the Taiwan region, Macao, Chinese Mainland, and Hong Kong, respectively, each distributed on the interval $[0, 1]$; the system coupling degree $C \in [0, 1]$, with values closer to 1 indicating a higher degree of system coupling and lower dispersion; the system coupling coordination degree $D \in [0, 1]$, with larger values indicating a more coordinated coupling relationship between the systems; T is the weighted linear sum of the comprehensive evaluation values of each subsystem, reflecting the overall development level of the system; and the undetermined coefficients α , β , γ and δ are generally set to 1—the coefficients α , β , γ and δ are each assigned a value of 0.25 in this study. Meanwhile, referring to Liao Chongbin's "five-stage division method" and the classification of coupling degree and coordination degree levels by multiple scholars [39,40], the coupling degree is divided into five stages: low-level coupling interval $(0, 0.3]$, resistance stage interval $(0.3, 0.5]$, running-in stage interval $(0.5, 0.8]$, high-level coupling interval $(0.8, 1)$, and benign resonance interval $[1]$. This widely adopted classification provides a standardized framework for interpreting coupling stages and ensures comparability with existing studies. The distribution function method is adopted to determine the classification of coupling coordination degree: extremely dissonant interval $(0, 0.1]$, severely dissonant interval $(0.1, 0.2]$, moderately dissonant interval $(0.2, 0.3]$, mildly dissonant interval $(0.3, 0.4]$, nearly dissonant interval $(0.4, 0.5]$, barely coordinated interval $(0.5, 0.6]$, primarily coordinated interval $(0.6, 0.7]$, intermediately coordinated interval $(0.7, 0.8]$, highly coordinated interval $(0.8, 0.9]$, and completely coordinated interval $(0.9, 1]$.

3.4. Spatial Autocorrelation Analysis: Global and Local Moran's I

To investigate whether the coupling coordination degree (D) of inbound tourism among the four regions (the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) exhibits spatial dependence across the 16 source countries, this study employs the global Moran's I statistic. Let D_{kt} denote the D value of source country k in year t , where $k = 1, 2, \dots, n$ and $n = 16$. The global Moran's I for year t is computed as follows:

$$I_t = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^n \sum_{l=1}^n w_{kl} (D_{kt} - \bar{D}_t)(D_{lt} - \bar{D}_t)}{\sum_{k=1}^n \sum_{l=1}^n w_{kl} \cdot \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k=1}^n (D_{kt} - \bar{D}_t)^2}$$

where $\bar{D}_t = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k=1}^n D_{kt}$ is the mean D value across all source countries in year t , and w_{kl} denotes the spatial weight between source countries k and l . In this study, W is defined as

a binary queen–contiguity matrix based on geographical adjacency: $w_{kl} = 1$ if countries k and l share a common border or vertex, and $w_{kl} = 0$ otherwise, with $w_{kk} = 0$.

A positive Moran's I indicates that source countries with similar D levels tend to cluster geographically (high–high or low–low), whereas a negative Moran's I suggests a checkerboard-like dispersion pattern, where high-value countries are surrounded by low-value neighbors.

3.5. A Framework of Influencing Factors of Inbound Tourism

3.5.1. Influence Factor Analogy Hypothesis

Based on the “soft–hard” framework [36], this study selects six factors—hard factors refer to tangible, structural conditions that directly affect tourist mobility, including economic scale, geographical distance, and population size; soft factors refer to intangible, institutional conditions that shape destination attractiveness and accessibility, including cultural distance, visa policies, and governance quality—to examine their influence on the coupling coordination development of the inbound tourism relationship circle among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Hard power factors: Economic and trade factors refer to the closeness of exchanges between source countries and destinations [41]; inbound tourists prefer destinations with closer economic cooperation to their home countries [42]. Geographical factors include spatial distance [43] and transport convenience. Population factors cover demographic characteristics [44] (size, age structure, education, income); source country population size limits potential tourism flows. Soft power factors: Cultural factors involve differences in history, culture, religion, language, and values between source and destination [45,46]. Institutional factors refer to disparities in social systems and governance capacities [36]. Visa factors denote the convenience of visa policies between source countries and destinations [47,48].

3.5.2. Panel Analysis

Because the research object, research questions, and related data of this study involve multi-year data from multiple countries and regions, which exhibit certain differences in geospatial and temporal evolution processes, this study adopts a two-way fixed effects model (FE model) for panel model analysis. The formula is as follows:

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \lambda_i + \mu_t + \beta x_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

where y_{it} , the dependent variable, denotes the observed value of the i -th individual in period t ; α is the intercept term, representing the baseline level of the dependent variable when all explanatory variables and fixed effects are zero; μ_t is the individual fixed effect, which controls for time-invariant characteristics of individual i ; λ_i is the time fixed effect, which controls for time-varying factors commonly faced by all individuals in period t ; x_{it} is a vector of explanatory variables that vary across individuals and time, while β is the corresponding coefficient vector, reflecting the degree of influence of the explanatory variables on the dependent variable; and ϵ_{it} is the error term, encompassing the unexplained part of the model, typically assumed to have zero mean, constant variance, and no serial correlation.

3.6. Study Area

3.6.1. Overview of the Study Area

The Chinese Mainland, the Taiwan region, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and Macao Special Administrative Region are all within China's sovereignty. Although inseparable, historical reasons have led to quite different development processes and inbound tourism policies across the four regions. With globalization and regional

integration, the four regions are increasingly interconnected and mutually influenced in geography, economy, and culture; the deep integration and coordinated development of their inbound tourism market is of great importance.

3.6.2. Study Sample and Time Period Division

This paper selects 16 overseas source countries/regions with statistical data for the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan from 2000 to 2021 (Table 1). The study period is divided into six stages based on major economic and political events that have significantly influenced international tourism flows and regional tourism cooperation [6,13]: Stage 1 (2000–2003, from pre-WTO to the Mainland–Hong Kong “free travel” policy); Stage 2 (2004–2008, from free travel to the global financial crisis); Stage 3 (2009–2012, from post-crisis to the 18th CPC National Congress); Stage 4 (2013–2016, from the 18th Congress to the US-launched trade war); Stage 5 (2017–2019, from trade war to the COVID-19 outbreak); Stage 6 (2020–2021, during the pandemic). By comparing these six stages, this paper analyzes the spatiotemporal evolution characteristics of the inbound tourism relationship circle among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

Table 1. List of 16 inbound tourist source countries for the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

	Asian Region	American Region	European Region	Oceanic Region	South Africa
source countries	Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, Thailand, Singapore, India	USA, Brazil, Canada	Germany, France, Russia, Italy, UK	New Zealand	South Africa

3.7. Data Sources

3.7.1. Inbound Tourism Index System and Coupling Model Data Source

The inbound tourism data for the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan are primarily sourced from the China Tourism Statistical Yearbook, China Regional Economic Statistical Yearbook, Statistical Yearbook of Taiwan, Hong Kong Annual Statistical Yearbook, and Macao Yearbook, published respectively by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China, the Department of Comprehensive Statistics of the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics of the Executive Yuan of Taiwan, the Census and Statistics Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the Government Information Bureau of the Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region, covering the period 2000–2021. The data on outbound tourists from the 16 tourist source areas and on the total number of inbound and outbound tourists worldwide for the period 2000–2021 are mainly obtained from the official websites of the World Bank and the World Tourism Organization.

3.7.2. Panel Analysis Data Sources

Data for institutional factors were obtained from the World Governance Indicators (WGIs) database. With respect to hard power indicators, geographical factor data were measured using the straight-line distance (in kilometers) between the capitals of the destination and source countries, sourced from CEPI. Economic factor data were derived from UN Comtrade, using the product of per capita gross national product and per capita total import–export trade volume of the source country (with data for Taiwan obtained from the statistical authorities of Taiwan). Population factor data were calculated as the product of the Human Development Index (HDI) and total population size, sourced from the official website of the United Nations Human Development Report. For soft power

indicators, cultural factor data were obtained from the Hofstede website <https://hofstede-insights.com/> (accessed on 20 June 2026), with the cultural distance index computed by synthesizing six cultural dimensions—Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation versus Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence versus Restraint—based on the Kogut–Singh (KS) index method [49]. Institutional factor data were also sourced from the WGI database <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators> (accessed on 20 June 2026), with a composite index derived from five WGIs—Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption—using the KS index method. Visa factor data were quantified by examining the types of visas and duration of stay permitted between the destination and source countries; the degree of visa convenience was categorized on a six-level ordinal scale: prohibited (0), application required (1), visa on arrival or e-visa (2), visa-free within 30 days (3), visa-free for 30–90 days (4), and visa-free for over 90 days (5) [36].

4. Analysis of Research Results

4.1. Regional Development Analysis

This study analyzes the inbound tourism flow relationship index among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan (2000–2021) and presents a line chart (Figure 3). The comparative analysis reveals two key patterns. First, the four regions' indices exhibit a discernible positive correlation. As illustrated in Figure 3, the temporal trajectories are broadly synchronous: upward phases (e.g., 2004–2007, 2010–2013) and downturn phases (e.g., 2003, 2009, and the sharp drop in 2020–2021) occur consistently across all four regions, suggesting that common source market dynamics and shared external shocks drive their indices in the same direction. This synchronicity indicates interdependence and interaction in inbound tourism development. Second, differences exist in both the values and growth rates of indices across regions. Data for Macao and Taiwan show similar fluctuations and an overall upward trend, reflecting continuous growth in their inbound tourism. In contrast, the index between Hong Kong and the Mainland exhibits a relative decline, suggesting slightly weaker development vitality in recent years. However, the indices of Hong Kong and the Mainland with the 16 source countries remain generally high. Among source countries, Malaysia, Japan, the US, the Philippines, and Singapore have relatively higher indices with these regions, while Italy, New Zealand, and India have lower indices. Notably, all indices declined sharply during 2020–2021, highlighting the significant impact of major public health events like COVID-19.

4.2. Coupling Degree and Coupling Coordination Degree Analysis of Inbound Tourism Relationship Circle

4.2.1. Spatiotemporal Evolution of the Coupling Degree

This study measures the coupling degree of inbound tourism among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, revealing their interactive relationships (Table 2). From 2000 to 2021, low-level coupling and resistance stages gradually decreased, while running-in and high-level coupling stages increased, with high-level coupling dominating the distribution across all periods. This upward trend reflects the cumulative effects of deepening regional tourism cooperation, infrastructure connectivity, and market integration. None of the four regions reached benign resonance, which represents an ideal state of coordination that remains a goal for future development. Notably, Japan maintained a coupling degree of 0.99 during 2000–2019, very close to the benign resonance level, indicating that sustained policy coordination and market integration can move systems

toward higher coupling. Except for 2020–2021, source countries in the resistance stage existed in all other years. Nevertheless, the overall coupling degree remained relatively high, with only brief low-level coupling during 2000–2003 and 2004–2008. These brief low-level episodes coincided with external shocks—the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis and the 2003 SARS outbreak in the earlier period, and the lagged adjustment following the 2004 Individual Visit Scheme implementation during the latter—which temporarily disrupted regional coordination. Notably, 13 of 16 source countries exhibited high-level coupling during 2017–2019, which may relate to the construction of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, as infrastructure integration and coordinated promotional efforts under this framework likely enhanced the regions’ collective attractiveness to international source markets.

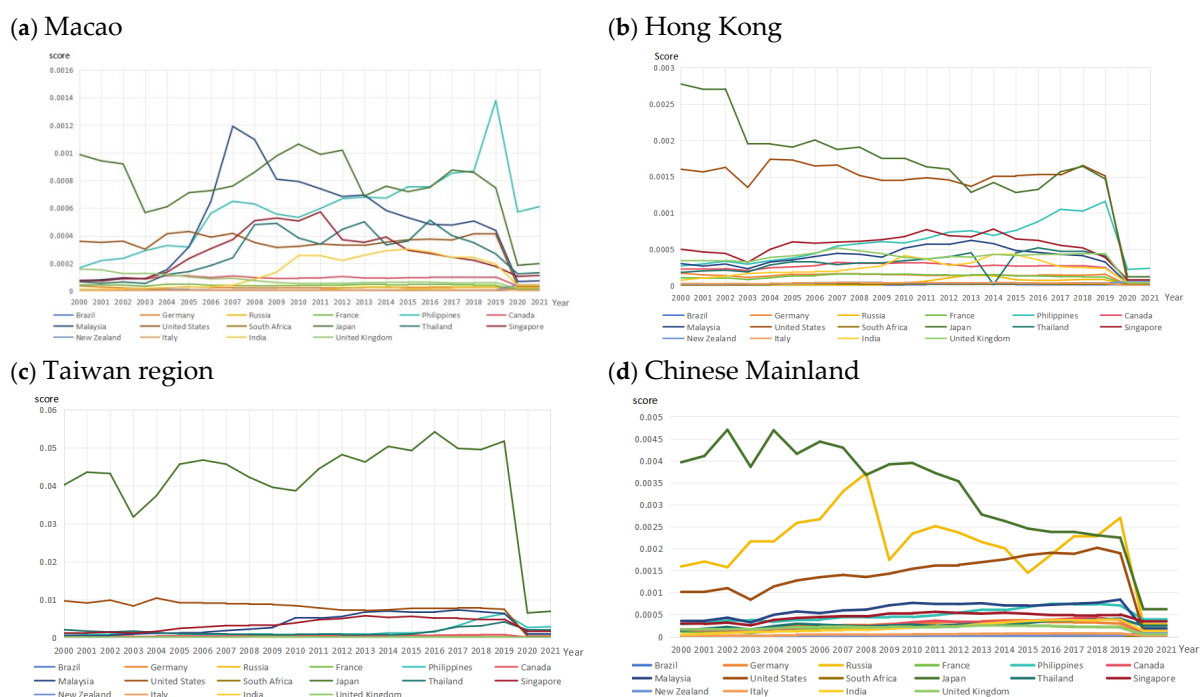


Figure 3. Line chart of the inbound tourism flow relationship index for the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

Table 2. Types of coupling degree and number of case sites.

A Particular Year	Low-Level Coupling	Resistance Stage	Running-in Stage	High-Level Coupling	Benign Resonance
2000–2003	1	1	2	12	0
2004–2008	1	1	3	11	0
2009–2012	0	1	4	11	0
2013–2016	0	1	4	11	0
2017–2019	0	1	2	13	0
2020–2021	0	0	5	11	0

The study used ArcGIS Pro to generate a spatiotemporal evolution map of coupling degree (Figure 4), illustrating changes in interaction intensity between 16 source countries and the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Among Asian countries, inbound tourism interaction with the four regions is strong for Malaysia, Japan, Thailand, and Singapore, but relatively weak for the Philippines and India—a pattern likely attributable to geographical proximity, economic ties, and cultural linkages. In the Americas, the coupling degree for the United States fluctuates over time, while Canada and Brazil remain

relatively stable. U.S. volatility may be associated with its sensitivity to exchange rate shifts and geopolitical factors. In Europe, Russia's coupling degree has gradually shifted from low-level coupling to the resistance stage, whereas other countries remain stable. Russia's rise likely reflects the gradual strengthening of bilateral tourism cooperation and visa facilitation. New Zealand and South Africa show relatively stable coupling degrees. During 2020–2021, despite local fluctuations, overall stability was maintained.

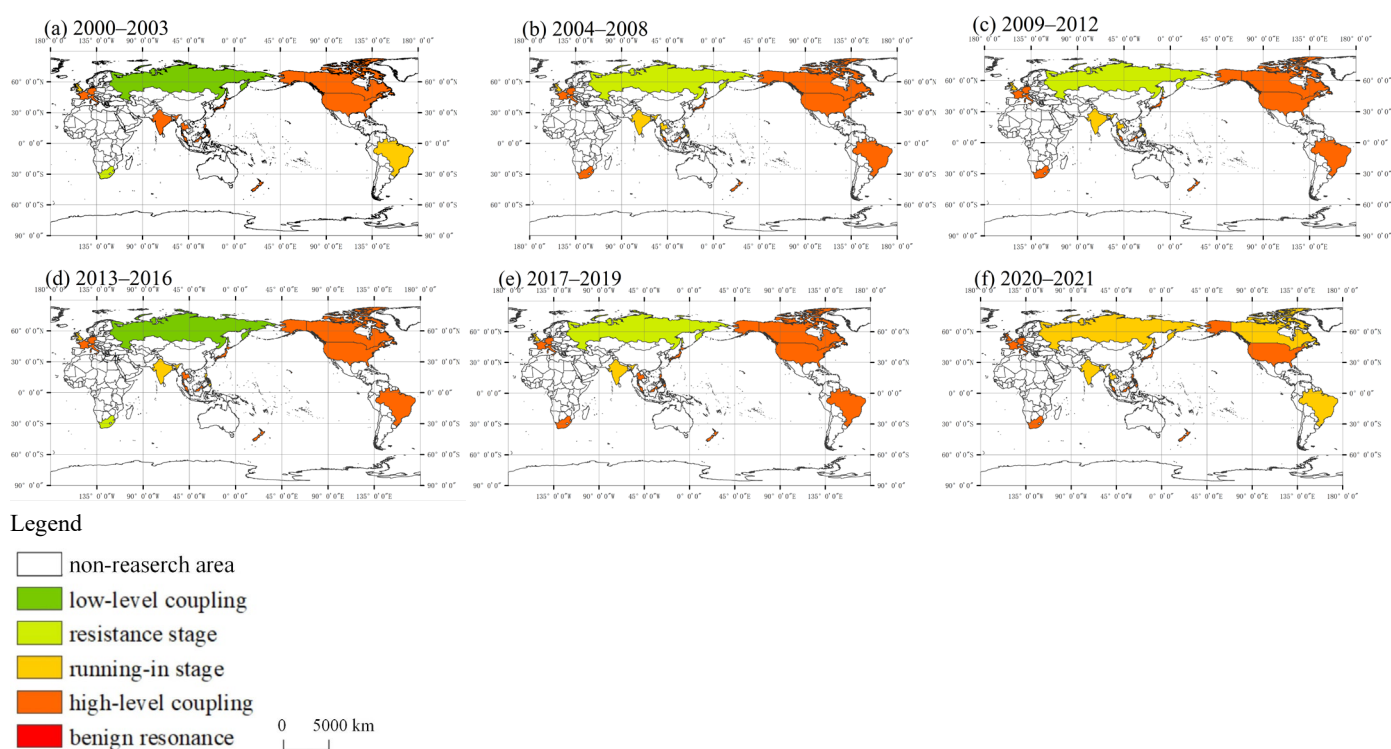


Figure 4. Spatiotemporal evolution of the coupling degree of inbound tourism among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Note: drawn based on the standard map of the website of the Standard Map Service of the Map Technical Review Center of the Ministry of Natural Resources of China (Review No.: GS(2016)1665); the boundary of the base map has not been modified. The map was visualized using ArcGIS Pro 3.4.1.

The results indicate that inbound tourism among these regions is highly interrelated and mutually influential. This interconnectedness can be attributed to shared source markets and growing regional tourism integration. However, this coupling relationship remains susceptible to external shocks (e.g., policy changes, COVID-19), which may introduce temporary instability.

4.2.2. Coupling Coordination Degree

Table 3 shows the distribution of the coupling coordination degree across different periods. Although generally good, the degree is mostly concentrated in severe, moderate, mild, and near imbalance categories for most periods, with particularly high incidences of severe and mild dissonance during 2000–2003 and 2004–2008. This can be attributed to the fact that, in the early 2000s, the four regions operated under separate tourism policy regimes with limited cross-border coordination, compounded by the Asian financial crisis aftermath and the 2003 SARS outbreak. During 2004–2008, although the Individual Visit Scheme was implemented between the Mainland and Hong Kong, its spillover effects on Macao and Taiwan were limited, and regional integration mechanisms remained underdeveloped. From 2017 to 2019, barely coordinated and primary coordinated states began

to increase, indicating improvement. However, during 2020–2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the degree fluctuated again, and the incidence of moderate imbalance rose. Overall, despite fluctuations across periods, the coupling coordination degree exhibits a gradually increasing trend. This indicates that the interaction and mutual influence among inbound tourism in these regions are gradually increasing.

The ArcGIS Pro method was employed to generate spatiotemporal evolution diagrams of the coupling coordination degree for each stage (Figure 5). The analysis results show that, overall, the coupling coordination degree of the 16 source countries exhibits an upward trend. Canada and Russia gradually transitioned from severe imbalance to mild imbalance, with this improvement is likely attributable to visa policies and enhanced bilateral tourism promotion. Although the coupling coordination degree of the United States fluctuates, it consistently remains at a relatively high level, consistent with its large and stable outbound tourism market. In Asia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, Thailand, Singapore, and India exhibit good coupling coordination, reflecting geographical proximity and strong cultural–economic ties. During 2020–2021, the coupling coordination degree between the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan did not change significantly, and the overall coordinated development status of the 16 source areas remained stable.

The results show that, despite periodic fluctuations, the coupling coordination degree exhibits a gradually increasing trend. This clearly indicates that the coupling coordination degree among these regions is progressively strengthening, providing a useful reference for promoting the coordinated development of inbound tourism across the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

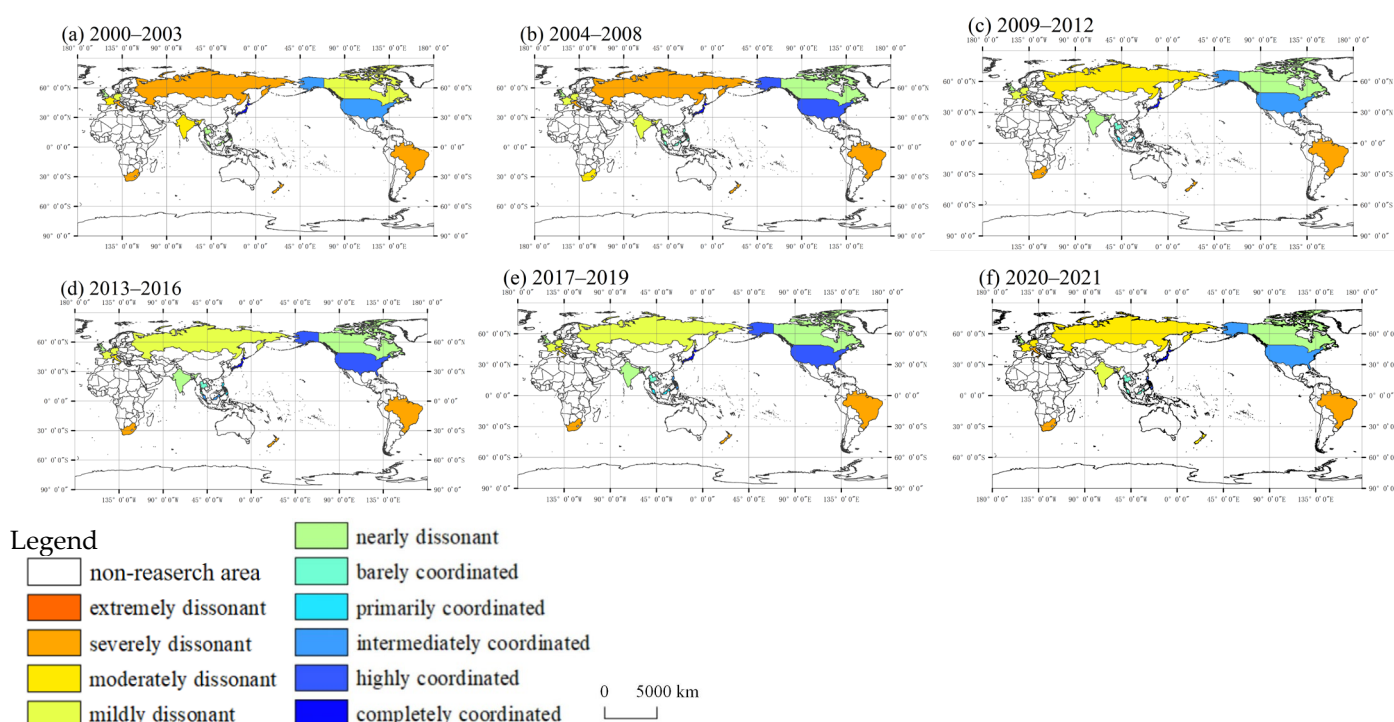


Figure 5. Spatiotemporal evolution diagram of the coupling coordination degree of inbound tourism among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Note: drawn based on the standard map of the website of the Standard Map Service of the Map Technical Review Center of the Ministry of Natural Resources of China (Review No.: GS(2016)1665); the boundary of the base map has not been modified. The map was visualized using ArcGIS Pro 3.4.1.

Table 3. Types of coupling coordination degree and number of case areas for the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

Stage	Extremely Dissonant	Severely Dissonant	Moderately Dissonant	Mildly Dissonant	Nearly Dissonant	Coordinated Interval	Primarily Coordinated	Intermediately Coordinated	Highly Coordinated	Completely Coordinated
2000–2003	0	5	2	2	5	0	0	1	0	1
2004–2008	0	4	1	3	3	3	0	0	1	1
2009–2012	0	3	2	2	3	2	2	1	0	1
2013–2016	0	3	1	3	3	1	2	1	1	1
2017–2019	0	3	1	3	3	1	2	1	1	1
2020–2021	0	3	4	1	3	2	0	1	2	0

4.3. Spatial Autocorrelation Analysis of the Coupling Coordination Degree

The global Moran's I estimates for the coupling coordination degree (D) are presented in Table 4. The values are consistently positive across the six periods, increasing steadily from 0.092 in 2000–2003 to 0.319 in 2017–2019, followed by a slight decline to 0.300 during 2020–2021—likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Spatial autocorrelation became statistically significant from 2009 to 2012 onward ($p < 0.05$), peaked in 2017–2019 ($Z = 1.997$, $p = 0.031$), and remained significant in 2020–2021 ($Z = 1.882$, $p = 0.043$). These findings indicate progressively strengthening spatial clustering of similar D values among neighboring source countries, which peaked before the pandemic and moderately weakened thereafter.

Table 4. Global spatial autocorrelation of the coupling coordination degree across 16 source countries, 2000–2021.

Stage	2000–2003	2004–2008	2009–2012	2013–2016	2017–2019	2020–2021
Moran's I	0.092	0.166	0.292	0.314	0.319	0.300
E(I)	−0.067	−0.067	−0.067	−0.067	−0.067	−0.067
SD(I)	0.177	0.186	0.190	0.193	0.192	0.194
Z	0.903	1.256	1.886	1.962	1.997	1.882
p-value *	0.146	0.092 *	0.040 **	0.034 **	0.031 **	0.043 **

Note: ** and * represent significance levels of 5% and 10% respectively.

The LISA cluster maps (Figure 6) reveal spatial heterogeneity in the coupling coordination degree across source countries at different stages. The number of countries in high–high and low–low clusters increased gradually, suggesting enhanced local spatial agglomeration. High–high clusters were predominantly concentrated in East and Southeast Asian countries, reflecting stronger coordination with the four regions, while low–low clusters were mainly located in European and South American countries. During 2020–2021, the local clustering pattern became less pronounced, with more non-significant units and high–low outliers, indicating that the pandemic-induced external shock disrupted the stable local spatial structure formed prior to the crisis.

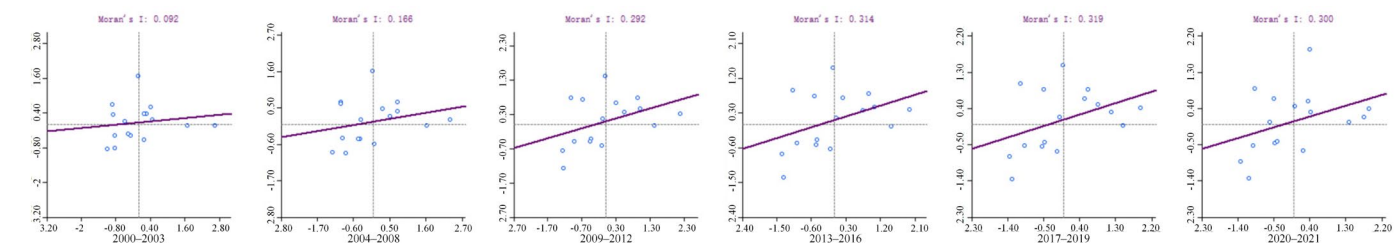


Figure 6. Local spatial clustering patterns of the coupling coordination degree across 16 source countries.

5. Panel Analysis of Influencing Factors on the Coupling Coordination Degree of the Inbound Tourism Relationship Circle.

Using SPSS 26.0, this study analyzed the influence of soft and hard factors on the coupling degree D value between the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan and 16 source countries (2000–2021; Table 5). The F-test for overall model significance ($F = 9.275$, $p < 0.01$) confirmed its statistical validity. The within-group R^2 (0.373) substantially exceeded the overall R^2 (0.011), indicating that the model primarily captures temporal variation within source countries rather than cross-country differences. While the overall R^2 is relatively low, the within-group R^2 suggests that the model performs reasonably well in explaining the temporal dynamics of coupling coordination. Panel model analysis showed that institutional factors ($t = 2.076$, $p < 0.05$) and visa factors ($t = 3.23$, $p < 0.01$) have positive effects, indicating that institutional optimization, governance capacity, and visa facilitation enhance coupling. Cultural factors ($t = 0.842$, $p > 0.05$) show no significant effect, likely reflecting the limited cultural distance between source countries and the four destinations; historical ties—particularly those involving Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan—along with the cross-cultural integration driven by globalization in major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, have fostered a high degree of cultural openness and tolerance. Among hard factors, population ($t = 3.321$, $p < 0.05$) exerts the most significant positive effect, implying that larger populations with higher socioeconomic development foster better inbound tourism coordination. Economic ($t = -1.969$, $p < 0.05$) and geographical ($t = -2.172$, $p < 0.05$) factors have a significant negative effect. Source countries with larger economies tend to have more purpose-driven tourists (e.g., business or specialized leisure), thus limiting shared tourist flows and weakening coordination. Conversely, source countries with smaller economies are more inclined to treat the four regions as a combined destination, facilitating inter-regional synergy [50,51]. Conversely, the negative effect of geographical distance arises from the combined distances between source countries and the four regions, which increase travel costs and reduce visitor flows, thereby weakening coordination. Therefore, future policy should prioritize facilitating population mobility (e.g., relaxing visa policies) and optimizing institutional frameworks, while strengthening inter-regional economic cooperation to improve inbound tourism coupling coordination.

Table 5. Panel model analysis results.

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	P	Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	P	R ²	F
const	−0.251	0.167	−1.499	0.135	const	−0.251	0.167	−1.499	0.135	within = 0.373 between = 0.008 overall = 0.011	F = 9.275 p = 0.000 ***
P	0.025	0.012	2.076	0.039 **	E	0.000	0.000	−1.969	0.050 **		
SP	0.076	0.090	0.842	0.402	HP	0.727	0.219	3.321	0.001 ***		
V	0.049	0.015	3.23	0.001 ***	G	−0.000	0.000	−2.172	0.032 **		

Dependent variable: D value. Note: *** and ** represent significance levels of 1% and 5% respectively.

6. Conclusions and Prospect

6.1. Conclusions

This paper introduces the inbound tourism relationship index and adopts the coupling coordination degree model, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. With ArcGIS Pro, it empirically analyzes the coupling and coordinated development of the inbound tourism relationship circle among the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Six influencing factor systems are constructed and examined via SPSS 26.0. The results show:

- (1) From 2000 to 2021, the coupling coordination degree among the four regions exhibited a gradual upward trend despite periodic fluctuations, indicating progressively strengthening inter-regional tourism linkages. Against complex domestic and international backdrops, this integration holds strategic importance for national unity, offers a new perspective on the economic value of regional tourism cooperation, and provides impetus for further collaboration. To sustain this momentum, efforts should focus on deepening cross-regional tourism cooperation frameworks and promoting joint destination branding, while addressing institutional fragmentation through gradual policy alignment.
- (2) Spatiotemporal analysis reveals that Asian source countries have higher coordination levels than European ones, with the United States and Japan remaining higher than others over an extended period. Although disturbed by policy adjustments and the COVID-19 pandemic, the coupling coordination degree generally exhibits a close correlation. The pandemic caused greater fluctuations during 2020–2021, highlighting the need to address external risks to ensure stable cooperative development. To enhance resilience, the four regions should strengthen joint crisis response mechanisms and diversify source market portfolios to reduce over-reliance on any single region, while maintaining close monitoring of geopolitical and public health developments.
- (3) Population, visa, and institutional factors are core drivers of the coupling coordination degree. Economic factors and geographical factors show a negative effect. Based on these empirical findings, future inbound tourism development should focus on facilitating visa policies with source countries and strengthening institutional coordination among the four regions.

For example, building on the existing “240 h visa-free transit” policy, a collaborative customs clearance facilitation mechanism could be established. Drawing on the Australia–New Zealand model—where a valid visa from one country grants simplified entry to the other—the four regions could establish a collaborative pilot program for streamlined customs clearance at selected ports of entry (e.g., Hong Kong International Airport, Macao Ferry Terminal, Guangzhou Baiyun, and Shenzhen Bao’an), allowing tourists holding a valid visa for any one of the regions to apply for a short-term electronic travel authorization (ETA) for the others upon arrival. In parallel, AI-powered visa processing systems could be piloted at high-volume ports to shorten processing times and improve user experience. In terms of transport and payment integration, cross-airline baggage through-checking agreements could be expanded among carriers operating multi-regional routes, and a unified cross-border QR code payment standard could be promoted to enable seamless financial transactions for international visitors across the four territories. To mitigate the negative effects of economic disparities and geographical distance, joint promotional campaigns targeting multi-destination itineraries should be designed for larger-economy source markets, while intra-regional transport connectivity should be improved to reduce travel friction for international visitors.

6.2. Limitations and Prospect

Although this study has achieved certain results, several issues remain. Data coverage should expand to include emerging Asian markets and post-2021 periods, as incomplete pandemic-era statistics currently constrain sample size and limit formal testing of structural breaks. The geographical-adjacency-based spatial weight matrix, while standard, could be complemented by alternative specifications (e.g., economic or tourism flow proximity) in future work. The cultural distance index, though widely used, relies on static national-level dimensions; more context-sensitive indicators could refine its measurement. Additionally, the panel model analysis, while providing valuable insights into the influencing factors of coupling coordination, exhibits a relatively low overall R^2 (0.011), indicating that the selected six factors explain only a limited proportion of cross-country variance. This suggests that other unmeasured variables—such as geopolitical factors, destination branding effectiveness, or air transport connectivity—may also shape the coupling coordination degree across source countries. Future research could expand the variable set to include these factors and employ alternative model specifications to improve explanatory power. Beyond the macro-level quantitative approach, future work could employ questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and big data mining (e.g., social media check-ins, mobile positioning data, and online search behavior) to investigate micro-level research questions, such as the impact of major policy changes on inbound tourism flows, the evolution of tourism relations under different institutional contexts, and the heterogeneity of tourist responses to cross-regional integration measures. These complementary methods would enrich the understanding of the underlying mechanisms identified in our current analysis.

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Data Availability Statement: The data used in this study are derived from publicly available sources, including the China Tourism Statistical Yearbook, China Regional Economic Statistical Yearbook, Statistical Yearbook of Taiwan, Hong Kong Annual Statistical Yearbook, Macao Yearbook, and official databases of the World Bank and the World Tourism Organization. The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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