Geotourism Development in the Yimengshan UNESCO Global Geopark: Current Status and Strategic Implications

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ABSTRACT

Yimengshan UNESCO Global Geopark, located in Shandong Province, China, possesses globally significant geoheritage resources including complete Archean basement rock series recording North China Craton evolution, the first-discovered kimberlite-hosted diamond deposit in China, and the type locality of the Daigu landform. This study conducts a spatial SWOT analysis to assess geo-tourism development across the geopark's five sub parks and their constituent scenic areas, identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats at the unit level. The analysis reveals pronounced spatial heterogeneity in both resource endowment and tourism development maturity. While world-class geological assets exist, their interpretation remains fragmented across administrative boundaries, lacking a coherent park-wide framework. Tourism offerings are predominantly conventional sightseeing models with limited interpretive engagement, resulting in insufficient visitor participation and revenue generation from value-added services. Strategic opportunities include developing interactive educational programs such as diamond appraisal workshops and geological field courses, creating thematic geo-trails linking related features across districts, and integrating geo-interpretation with existing infrastructure. Key threats requiring management include environmental pressures on sensitive geoheritage sites, climate vulnerability affecting water-dependent attractions, and tensions between conservation imperatives and commercialization pressures. The findings demonstrate that future geo-tourism development hinges on transitioning from a collection of disparate scenic areas with isolated attractions to an integrated geoheritage destination. This requires coherent interpretive frameworks communicating regional geological evolution, diversified product offerings beyond conventional sightseeing, and sustainable visitor management practices balancing conservation with engagement. By addressing these challenges, the geopark can fulfill its UNESCO mandate for earth heritage conservation and sustainable development while positioning itself as a premier destination for geotourism and geo-education.

Keywords: Yimengshan UNESCO Global Geopark, geotourism, SWOT analysis, geoheritage, spatial heterogeneity

INTRODUCTION

Yimengshan UNESCO Global Geopark (Yimengshan Geopark) is situated within Linyi City, Shandong Province, China, covering a total planned area of 1,804.76 square kilometers (Fig. 1). The geopark's geological structure is located within the Western Shandong geological unit, west of the Tanlu Fault Zone, rendering it significant for scientific research (Guo et al., 2009). The geopark preserves Archean basement rock series from approximately 2.7 billion years ago (Li et al., 2007; Guo et al., 2009). These rocks offer a complete record of the crustal evolution of the North China Craton and its eastern extension. A notable feature is Money Stone, a hydrothermal alteration product with unique textural characteristics. This area is also the first locality where kimberlite-hosted diamond deposits were discovered in China. Over 1.8 million carats of gem-grade primary ore

have been extracted here, cementing its importance in mineral deposit studies. As the type locality for Daigu landform, the geopark features extensive mesa-shaped mountain clusters (Cai et al., 2019; Cai et al., 2024). These formations are classic examples of tectonic erosion landscapes and hold significant geomorphological value. The geological heritage is complemented by rich ecological scenery, creating a diverse natural landscape system that includes rugged peaks, expansive seas of clouds, and cascading waterfalls.

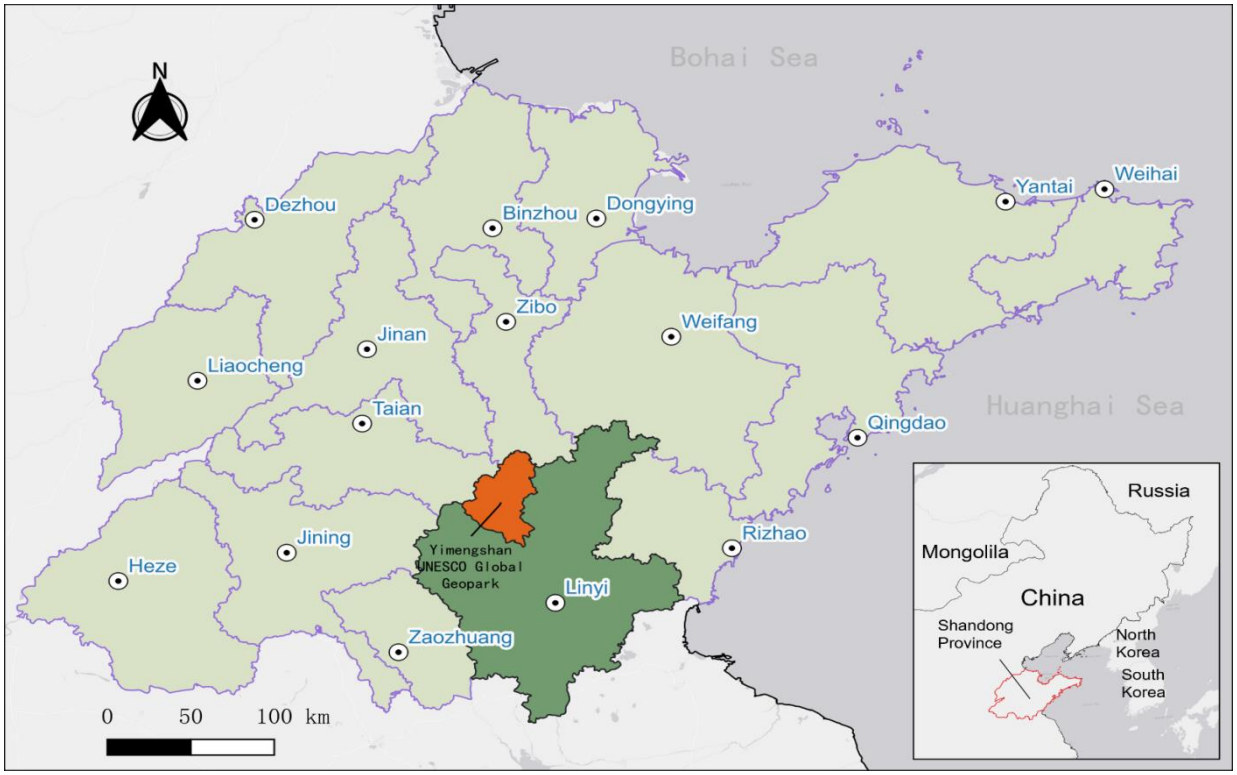

Figure 1. The brief map shows the location of Yimengshan UNESCO Global Geopark

Geotourism, a form of sustainable tourism centered on geoheritage and landscape interpretation (Williams et al., 2020; Štrba et al., 2020), has become a key contributor to regional development within UNESCO Global Geoparks. These designated areas carry a dual mandate: to preserve the Earth's geological legacy and to promote sustainable local development through education and tourism. Located in Shandong Province, China, the Yimengshan Geopark is distinguished by its unique DaiGu landform, rich cultural heritage, and scientifically significant geosites (Yan et al., 2016; Chu and Wu, 2017). Although its UNESCO designation affirms the international importance of its geology, geotourism in the region is still evolving and faces multiple challenges. Key issues include managing the balance between conservation and commercial development, improving the quality of visitor interpretation, and ensuring meaningful benefits for local communities. Previous research has largely focused on the park's geological features or its general tourism potential (Yan et al., 2016; Cai et al., 2019; Lei et al., 2022; Cai et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025). What remains underexplored is a systematic evaluation of its internal strengths and weaknesses, alongside the external opportunities and threats shaping its sustainable path. To address this gap, the present study conducts a comprehensive SWOT analysis to assess the current state of geotourism in the Yimengshan Geopark. By identifying critical strategic factors and examining their implications, this research offers evidence-based insights for policymakers and park managers. The findings aim to support the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of geotourism in the region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

Based on variations in landscape types, resource categories, and distribution patterns, the Yimengshan Geopark is divided into five sub parks: Mengshan, Diamond, Daigu, Menglianggu, and Yunmeng Lake.

The Mengshan Park comprises three scenic areas with distinct characteristics. Guimeng Scenic Area contains the main peak of Mount Meng, standing at 1,156 meters above sea level and ranking as the second highest peak in Shandong Province of China. The mountain resembles a giant turtle resting upon a sea of clouds. The area's geological framework consists predominantly of multi-phase magmatic intrusions formed between 2.7 and 2.5 billion years ago. These geological features provide key evidence for studying the early crustal evolution of the North China Craton (Wang et al., 2025). Yingwo Peak is known for ancient pines growing from sheer cliffs. A suspended plank road winds along steep precipice. Weathering has also produced a realistic turtle-shaped rock formation, creating a distinctive geomorphic landscape.

Yunmeng Scenic Area is characterized by precipitous mountains and deep canyons. The main rock strata are derived from intrusive rock series formed 2.7 to 2.5 billion years ago. The intrusion of diabase 1.62 billion years ago holds particular geological significance. The three main peaks of Yunmeng Peak form a pictographic character resembling the Chinese character for mountain. The China Waterfall creates a spectacular cascade over three levels. The Yuwang Temple, a traditional site for praying for rain, continues to carry forward local folk beliefs.

Mengshan Renjia Scenic Area is located at the eastern foot of Mount Meng. This area exhibits typical characteristics of a mountain settlement, with a network of streams running through the mountains. Geological research indicates that the Shilijingtian River channel developed along the contact zone between the 2.7-billion-year-old granite and the 2.5-billion-year-old monzonitic granite. The former displays distinct banding, while the latter shows typical gneissic structure. Well-preserved traditional villages feature stone buildings scattered across the terrain according to the topography. Relics of farming tools testify to the ingenuity of mountain dwellers, and local residents continue their tradition of simple, honest hospitality.

Diamond Park is located at the foot of the northern slope of Mount Meng, and it is China's first primary diamond deposit hosted in kimberlite. Its open-pit mining scale and resource reserves rank among the largest in Asia. Since formal development began in the 1970s, a total of 1.8 million carats of diamonds have been extracted, providing key material support for China's high-tech industries. The Mengshan No. 1 diamond crystal discovered here still holds the record for the largest single crystal in domestic primary deposits, solidifying its academic status as a National Core Base for Diamond Resources. The area preserves a complete geological section of the kimberlite pipe and mining industrial relics (Chu and Wu, 2017). It has now been transformed into a comprehensive science education base integrating mineral extraction, process demonstration, gem applications, and themed tourism, serving as an important field classroom for studying the formation mechanisms of mantle-derived minerals.

The Daigu Park is a rare cluster of mesa hill landforms formed from Cambrian marine sedimentary sequences, shaped by Cenozoic tectonic uplift and differential weathering. Its typical geological section includes argillaceous rock layers containing trilobite fossils and carbonate rocks with stromatolite structures, completely recording the surface evolution process over the past 60 million years (Zhou, 2016; Cai et al., 2023). As the type locality named after Daigu, its geomorphological model has been incorporated into professional textbooks. Special geological weathering processes also created soil conditions suitable for peach cultivation. This gives the area the dual titles of High-Quality Peach Production Area and National-Level Beautiful Town. The periodically presented ecological landscapes—spring peach blossom belts and autumn harvest scenes—together with the scattered mesa landforms, create a natural and cultural picture with regional identity.

The Menglianggu Park is located on the southern flank of the Mount Meng tectonic belt. Its main body consists of Neoarchean monzonitic granite. The rheological structures and plastic deformation fabrics preserved in the rocks provide typical examples for studying early crustal evolution in North China (Guo et al., 2009). The tectonic joint system developed in the area forms special tabular rock bodies. Geological phenomena such as xenoliths formed during magma intrusion have significant educational value. As the site of an important battle during the War of Liberation, a systematic revolutionary memorial facility complex has been established, preserving the battle command system and combat terrain features. Currently, the district integrates granite landforms, battle site relics, and ecological resources to build a composite functional system encompassing earth science education, red cultural heritage transmission, and eco-tourism.

Yunmeng Lake Park, the second-largest artificial reservoir in central Shandong Province. Constructed in the mid-20th century, it has a total storage capacity of 782 million cubic meters. Protected by terrain on three sides, its catchment area covers various lithological strata. Its superior water quality makes it an important water conservation area in the Yimeng Mountains. Through ongoing infrastructure optimization, this area is gradually developing into a distinctive tourism zone centered on the lake ecosystem, integrating surrounding geological relics and mountain landscapes. The research value of its lakeshore ecosystem and hydrological regulation functions is becoming increasingly prominent.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative SWOT analysis to assess geotourism development in the Yimengshan Geopark. The framework helps identify internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats relevant to sustainable tourism. Data came from multiple sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 stakeholders, including 6 park officials, 5 tourism operators, 5 local residents, and 9 visitors. These interviews took place between September and December, 2025. Additional data were collected from policy documents, management plans, statistical reports, and previous studies on the region.

The analysis proceeded in several steps. Interview transcripts and documents were first analyzed using thematic content analysis. Key factors were then sorted into the four SWOT categories. Internal factors were those the geopark can control, while external factors were trends or events beyond its direct control. A SWOT matrix was then developed to explore strategic options by matching strengths with opportunities and addressing weaknesses in light of potential threats.

To ensure reliability, preliminary findings were reviewed by selected participants. Peer debriefing among the research team also helped reduce interpretive bias. This approach provides a solid basis for developing context-specific recommendations and offers a method that can be applied to other UNESCO Global Geoparks.

RESULTS

To provide a systematic assessment of the current state of geo-tourism development within the Yimengshan Geopark, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis was conducted. This analysis utilizes the five administrative districts and their constituent scenic areas as the fundamental analytical units, enabling a detailed examination of the spatial heterogeneity and developmental potential across the park's diverse geological and cultural landscapes.

Strengths

Yimengshan Geopark possesses exceptional geological heritage value, as evidenced by its complete Archean basement rock series recording the crustal evolution of the North China Craton, its status as the first discovered kimberlite-hosted diamond deposit in China, and its role as the type locality for the internationally recognized Daigu landform. The geopark exhibits remarkable spatial heterogeneity in resource distribution across its five administrative sub parks. Mengshan Park integrates multi-phase magmatic intrusions with well-preserved Taoist architectural complexes and ancient mountain worship cultural relics, creating a composite landscape of considerable scientific and cultural significance (Liu, 2019; Cai, 2020). Diamond Park preserves intact kimberlite pipes and mining industrial remains, anchored by the record-holding Mengshan No.1 diamond crystal, offering unique value for mantle mineralogy research and geo-heritage tourism. Daigu Park features Cambrian marine sedimentary sequences containing trilobite fossils and stromatolite structures, upon which distinctive mesa hill landforms have developed through Cenozoic tectonism, now complemented by seasonal peach blossom landscapes that enhance aesthetic appeal. Menglianggu Park combines Neoarchean monzonitic granite with rheological deformation fabrics and significant revolutionary war site, presenting opportunities for integrated geo-heritage and cultural heritage interpretation. Yunmeng Lake Park functions as a major artificial reservoir with superior water quality and surrounding mountain scenery, contributing hydrological landscape diversity to the park's portfolio.

Weaknesses

Despite abundant resources, the geopark exhibits considerable spatial imbalance in tourism development intensity and product sophistication across its constituent units (Cai, 2020; Lei, 2022). Guimeng Scenic Area within Mengshan Park remains dominated by conventional sightseeing modalities with limited visitor participation mechanisms, while its rich Taoist heritage and ancient state cultural resources await deeper interpretive elaboration and dynamic presentation. Yunmeng Scenic Area demonstrates ecological advantages but its tourism offerings display homogeneity relative to competing mountain destinations, and significant geological features such as the diabase dike lack effective public interpretation. Mengshan Renjia Scenic Area, though possessing well-preserved rock contact zone sections ideal for field teaching, suffers from inadequate infrastructure and tourism carrying capacity, with red tourism presentation methods insufficiently engaging for younger demographics. Diamond Park, despite its unique scientific status, offers predominantly static displays with limited interactive or experiential components such as gemstone processing demonstrations or diamond appraisal workshops, resulting in restricted public awareness beyond specialized academic circles. Daigu Park exhibits insufficient connectivity between nature-based tourism and village-based experiences, with service facilities requiring substantial upgrading to match its national-level designation. Menglianggu Park demonstrates weak integration between its geological and red tourism resources, with granite landform features receiving minimal interpretive attention. Yunmeng Lake Park faces inherent contradictions between its water source protection status and tourism development aspirations, constraining permissible recreational activities.

Opportunities

Several strategic opportunities exist to enhance the geopark's scientific tourism value and international competitiveness (Liu, 2019; Cai, 2020; Cai et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2024). The deepening integration of cultural and tourism sectors nationally provides impetus for developing specialized products combining geological heritage with Taoist wellness culture in Mengshan Park and with ancient sacrificial traditions at Guimeng Scenic Area through digital reconstruction technologies. The growing domestic demand for forest wellness and Geo-educational program aligns favorably with Yunmeng Scenic Area's high forest coverage and medicinal plant resources, enabling premium market positioning. Diamond Park possesses strong potential for national mining heritage site designation, which would substantially elevate its international profile, while development of diamond-themed educational programs targeting youth markets could expand visitor demographics. Daigu Park's status as the type locality for a major landform category position it favorably for World Heritage nomination consideration, with seasonal photography tourism and geological field courses representing viable development pathways. The comprehensive resource advantages of Menglianggu Park create opportunities for Culture-Geo Education Base development, integrating revolutionary historical narratives with their geological contextual settings. Across the park, advancing technologies in augmented and virtual reality offer tools for immersive interpretation of geological processes and cultural-historical scenarios, potentially enhancing visitor engagement and educational outcomes.

Threats

The geopark faces multiple challenges that could impede sustainable geotourism development. Balancing conservation imperatives with tourism infrastructure expansion presents persistent tensions, particularly in ecologically sensitive zones such as Yunmeng Scenic Area where forest fire risks accompany increased visitation, and in Yunmeng Lake Park where water quality protection mandates strict development controls. Commercialization pressures threaten the authenticity of cultural experiences, especially in Mengshan Renjia Scenic Area where traditional village depopulation may undermine living heritage authenticity, and in Guimeng Scenic Area where Taoist architectural settings could be compromised by inappropriate development. Climate variability poses material risks to water-dependent attractions such as the China Waterfall in Yunmeng Scenic Area and seasonal floral displays in Daigu Park, potentially affecting visitor satisfaction and destination loyalty. Competitive pressures from analogous mountain and geo-heritage destinations within Shandong Province and neighboring regions may dilute market share, requiring distinctive positioning strategies. Policy dependencies inherent to red tourism at Menglianggu and Mengshan Renjia Parks introduce vulnerability to shifts in political education priorities and funding allocations. Agricultural-tourism land use conflicts in Daigu Park may intensify as peach cultivation expansion competes with tourism facility development. Finally, post-resource depletion

sustainability represents a fundamental long-term challenge for Diamond Park, necessitating proactive transition strategies beyond mineral extraction-themed attractions.

DISCUSSION

The SWOT analysis reveals a fundamental characteristic of the Yimengshan Geopark: it possesses globally significant geoheritage resources, yet exhibits pronounced spatial heterogeneity in both resource endowment and tourism development maturity across its constituent districts. This heterogeneity presents both opportunities and challenges for integrated geo-tourism development, a common issue for large, serial UNESCO sites.

The park's geoheritage portfolio—including the complete Archean basement rock series recording North China Craton evolution, the first-discovered kimberlite diamond pipe in China, and the type locality of the Daigu landform—provides a substantive foundation for scientific tourism and geo-education (Cai et al., 2024). These assets align closely with the core mission of UNESCO Global Geoparks to promote earth heritage conservation and sustainable development through tourism. However, the analysis indicates that these globally significant resources are currently underutilized for geo-tourism purposes. While Diamond District preserves the Mengshan No. 1 diamond crystal and intact kimberlite pipes, its tourism offerings remain predominantly static displays with limited interpretive engagement. Similarly, the Daigu landform's scientific value as a geomorphological type locality has yet to be fully translated into compelling visitor experiences that communicate its significance in landscape evolution.

A critical weakness identified is the fragmented interpretation of geoheritage resources across administrative boundaries. The spatial analysis reveals those geological narratives of regional significance—such as the multi-phase magmatic intrusions in Mengshan Park and the rheological structures in Menglianggu granite—are presented in isolation within individual scenic areas, lacking a coherent park-wide interpretive framework. This siloed approach diminishes the potential for visitors to comprehend the broader geological history recorded across the entire geopark, a challenge frequently observed where administrative divisions disrupt natural system integrity. The limited integration between geological features and their landscape contexts further constrains the educational impact of geo-tourism offerings (Liu, 2019).

The analysis also identifies threats that could impede sustainable geo-tourism development. Environmental pressures on sensitive geoheritage sites, particularly in ecologically vulnerable areas such as Yunmeng Lake and the precipitous terrain of Yunmeng Scenic Area, underscore the need for carrying capacity assessment and visitor management strategies. Climate vulnerability, exemplified by the dependence of the China Waterfall on precipitation patterns, poses additional risks to the consistency of geo-tourism experiences. Furthermore, the predominance of conventional sightseeing models across most districts limits revenue generation and visitor engagement, creating pressure to pursue infrastructure development that may compromise geoheritage conservation.

Conversely, the identified opportunities point toward strategic pathways for enhancing geo-tourism outcomes. The development of interactive geo-educational programs—such as diamond appraisal workshops in Diamond Park and geological field courses in Daigu Park—could transform passive sightseeing into engaged learning experiences. The creation of thematic geo-trails linking related geological features across administrative boundaries (e.g., connecting the Archean basement exposures in different Mengshan scenic areas) would provide a coherent interpretive framework that communicates regional geological evolution. Additionally, the integration of geoheritage interpretation with existing tourism infrastructure—such as positioning geological narratives within the context of revolutionary history at Menglianggu—can create multi-layered visitor experiences without requiring extensive new development.

In summary, the spatial SWOT analysis demonstrates that the future development of geo-tourism in Yimengshan Geopark hinges on transitioning from a collection of disparate scenic areas with isolated geological attractions to an integrated geoheritage destination. This requires a deliberate strategy to develop coherent interpretive frameworks, diversify geo-tourism products beyond conventional sightseeing, and implement sustainable visitor management practices that balance conservation with engagement. The park's inherent geological diversity,

currently manifested as management fragmentation, can be transformed into its greatest competitive advantage through strategic integration and targeted product development.

CONCLUSION

This spatial SWOT analysis of geo-tourism development across Yimengshan Geopark reveals both significant potential and critical challenges. The geopark possesses world-class geoheritage resources of considerable scientific value, including complete Archean basement rock series recording North China Craton evolution, the first-discovered kimberlite-hosted diamond deposit in China, and the type locality of the Daigu landform. These resources provide a substantive foundation for developing distinctive geo-tourism products aligned with the core mission of UNESCO Global Geoparks. However, pronounced heterogeneity exists in both resource endowment and tourism development maturity across the park's five districts. While globally significant geological features are present, their interpretation remains fragmented across administrative boundaries, lacking a coherent park-wide framework. Tourism offerings are predominantly conventional sightseeing models with limited interpretive engagement, resulting in insufficient visitor participation and revenue generation from value-added services.

Strategic opportunities for enhancing geo-tourism include developing interactive educational programs such as diamond appraisal workshops and geological field courses, creating thematic geo-trails linking related features across districts, and integrating geo-interpretation with existing infrastructure. These approaches can transform passive scenic sighting into engaged learning experiences without requiring extensive new development. Key threats requiring management include environmental pressures on sensitive geoheritage sites, climate vulnerability affecting water-dependent attractions, and tensions between conservation imperatives and commercialization pressures. The future development of geo-tourism in Yimengshan Geopark hinges on transitioning from a collection of disparate scenic areas with isolated attractions to an integrated geoheritage destination. This requires coherent interpretive frameworks, diversified product offerings beyond conventional sightseeing, and sustainable visitor management practices that balance conservation with engagement. By addressing these challenges, the geopark can fulfill its UNESCO mandate while positioning itself as a premier destination for scientific tourism and geo-education.

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