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Chinese tourists pose in front of Bangkok's Emerald Buddha Temple.

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How Chinese tourists are changing the world

135 million travellers a year, spending US\$261 billion – numbers that will soon be smashed: Chinese tourists are having a huge impact on destinations everywhere, which welcome the money they pay but not always their ways

BY **ZIGOR ALDAMA**

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“Chinese tourists are the most powerful single source of change in the tourism industry.” Taleb Rifai, secretary general of the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), stresses every word.

He raises his finger and explains: “Not only is it the biggest domestic market in the world, where 4.4 billion trips are made each year, but it’s also the leading global outbound market, with over 135 million international departures in 2016. This number has been increasing in double digits since 2010 and it’s merely the tip of the iceberg.

“The potential of the Chinese market is far greater, because only 6 per cent of Chinese people own a passport. So we expect 200 million Chinese to travel abroad in just a few years’ time.”



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Speaking on the sidelines of the 22nd UNWTO General Assembly, which was held in September in Chengdu, Sichuan province, Rifai points out that, even more important than the number of Chinese tourists – those from Hong Kong and Macau are not included in these statistics – is the fact that they lead the world in terms of expenditure: US\$261.1 billion last year, according to the United Nations agency.

“Chinese travellers spend double the international average, so their impact in local economies can be huge,” Rifai says.

“It may sound strange given their number,” says Eduardo Santander, executive director at the European Travel Commission, “but we believe they can help make the industry more sustainable.” The reason, he says, lies in Chinese tourists’ travel patterns and tastes.



Many Chinese tourists put photo opportunities above respect for nature.

“In the wake of the so-called ‘tourism-phobia’ phenomenon, which we have seen this summer in places like Venice and Barcelona, we need to avoid concentrating crowds at certain places by diversifying our products and services,” says Santander, whose organisation is about to launch the 2018 EU-China Tourism Year. “And also fight seasonality in order to create activity at times when employment in the tourism industry is destroyed. Chinese help to do so because they travel when Europe is not on holidays – the weeks of May and October 1, or the Lunar New Year – and many go to unconventional places.

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"For instance, the place they visit the most in Germany is not Berlin or Frankfurt but a small town in the [Rhineland-Palatinate] region called Trier. Why? Because that's the birthplace of Karl Marx, a man who is in every Chinese student's textbook," Santander says.

42 times tourists were caught behaving badly.

"It's difficult to see where the limit is regarding the number of Chinese tourists," says Victor Wee Eng Lye, professor of hospitality, food and leisure management at Malaysia's Taylor's University and a delegate at the UNWTO assembly. "Because, generally, the cap is in the number in the middle income population and the Asian Development Bank forecasts that that will reach 1.1 billion by 2030 in China. This means that many new destinations can be developed and even niche markets will be enormous."

Santander points at winter tourism as an example: "Nowadays, Germans are the fondest of it, with around 14 million ski lovers. That's about a quarter of the population. We estimate that only 1 per cent of Chinese people like winter activities, but that already equals the number of Germans."

Joe Natuman, a politician from [Vanuatu](https://www.scmp.com/topics/vanuat) (<https://www.scmp.com/topics/vanuat>), is interested in another new breed of Chinese tourist: the cruisers. He believes they can become an ally in dealing with the most dramatic effects of climate change in his small Pacific island nation.



Middle-aged Chinese women pose in kimonos at a temple in Asakusa, Tokyo.

"In 2015, [Cyclone Pam](https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1737441/cyclone-pam-leaves-trail-destruction-pacifics-vanuatu) (https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1737441/cyclone-pam-leaves-trail-destruction-pacifics-vanuatu) destroyed most of our infrastructure. Now, we have shifted our attention to tourism because it can help us rebuild everything in coastal areas with the much higher standards this industry demands. But sea levels are also rising and we will eventually have to relocate some of our population inland. We will need money for that. Chinese spend much more than the rest in the local economy, so we are adapting ourselves to their needs."

Huge cyclone in Pacific devastates Vanuatu

Connectivity is vital, Natuman says, so both seaports and the main airport in Vanuatu are being upgraded.

"We received the first Chinese cruise last year and we hope to launch direct flights to China in the near future. It requires a big investment, but it's vital to secure our future." A single wholesale travel agency in China can deliver up to 30,000 visitors to a destination, equal to 10 per cent of the tourists Vanuatu receives every year.

"We make a big mistake when we think of the Chinese as weird people with completely different customs. We want to take their money but we don't like them, and there is certainly a racist component in that"

- Carlos Sentís

In Zimbabwe, where Chinese faces are already familiar as Chinese companies construct key transport infrastructure, the government wants visitors from China to also fill its national parks.

"They spend much more than the average US\$1,250 per trip," says Walter Mzembi, the African country's tourism minister. "If those dollars find circulation in the country, they can become a good tool to fight poverty in line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. We can't forget that the world's bottom billion survive on less than a dollar per day. So, the dollar tip that is given to a waiter or any service provider makes a huge difference."

The good, bad and ugly sides to African safaris

Alberto Alves, vice-minister of tourism in Brazil, concurs. "The first wave of Chinese tourists was interested in world-famous cities, luxury and shopping. But now we see a growing interest in nature destinations. For us, at a moment of economic crisis, that is a blessing." And that's with just 1 per cent of Chinese tourists choosing South America as a destination.

"Obviously, the long distance is a problem," Alves says. "We are trying to get more air connections between the two countries, so travel can be more comfortable. Right now, most come via Lisbon and Madrid, which takes around 30 hours.

"We are also introducing the five-year e-visa as an incentive," he adds.

Many countries are making it easier for Chinese tourists to obtain visas, or have waived them altogether.

"This can also help in tailoring pan-American routes, because when they travel so far, the Chinese want to see the most famous sights of all Latin America," says Alí Padrón, vice-minister of tourism in Venezuela. "We need to coordinate among governments to make sure this is feasible."



Taleb Rifai, secretary general of the World Tourism Organisation.

Changes in visa policy are possible because, Santander says, “the era of the Chinese illegal immigration is over and, although we understand the need to keep our countries safe, it’s obvious that the Chinese are not terrorists. We need to make visa policies still more flexible for them.”

Says Mzembi: “The world needs to become Chinese friendly and get ready to receive them”, and many share the Zimbabwean’s views.

“But adapting to Chinese tourists doesn’t mean you need to scrap all the rooms with the number four in a hotel because it sounds like death in Mandarin,” says Carlos Sentís, head of the Spain-China Project at consulting company Henkuai. “We make a big mistake when we think of the Chinese as weird people with completely different customs. We want to take their money but we don’t like them, and there is certainly a racist component in that. We must learn how to communicate with them, the same way we did before with the British or the Germans, who actually make much more trouble and generate less revenue in ‘sun and beach’ destinations like Spain.”

Who are the world’s worst tourists? Six nations that stand out - you may be surprised

The surge in the numbers of Chinese travellers is a great challenge even beyond the overcoming of racial prejudice.

“Because of their sheer volume and homogenous shopping habits, Chinese tourists’ demand can influence the domestic market of certain items they like, whether it’s baby formula in Hong Kong or smart toilets in Japan, where they have also pushed up prices in the business hotel sector,” says Kumi Kato, deputy director of the Faculty of Tourism at Japan’s Wakayama University.

“And the fact that many are first-time tourists becomes a challenge because they are perceived as unruly,” she says. “But in Japan they are also taken advantage of by unethical operators and businesses: they get cheated, overcharged or even denied service, just because they are Chinese.”

Thailand is the Chinese outbound tourist’s favourite destination and has seen its fair share of controversy, but the government has swiftly taken action, says Kobkarn Wattanavrangkul, the country’s tourism minister.

“Last year, we received 8.7 million Chinese tourists out of a total of 32.85 million international arrivals. And this year, up to September, we have already received more than six million. China is, by far, our No 1 source of visitors, but we are more interested in quality than in quantity,” says Kobkarn.



A tourist poses for a photo with a hand on a Thai ladyboy's breast.

"We need to make sure that people who come to Thailand do so in an orderly and sustainable manner. That's why we banned the so-called 'zero-dollar tours' last year," the minister says, referring to Chinese companies that offer package tours so cheap they are of little benefit to either the tourists or the Thai businesses catering to those tourists.

"We also discourage big tour groups, because they take tourists to the same old spots and treat them badly," Kobkarn says. "And in places like Chiang Mai University – famous among the Chinese for the movie *Lost in Thailand* (<https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/1139475/film-review-lost-thailand>). [2012] – we have decided not to turn away visitors, which created tension with the local community. On the contrary, we have designed a route around the campus so they can visit the place in peace and without disturbance, even on a new tram. So everybody is happy."

Chinese tourists may not be considered violent but they do have a reputation for being noisy, rude and uncivilised. Photos and videos that have gone viral on social media underline that view.

Seven tourist stereotypes – which one fits you?

"The arrival of Chinese tour groups has been key to compensating for the decrease in the number of tourists of other nationalities due to the global crisis, but most Filipinos don't like them," says Benigno, the manager of a small hotel on Boracay island who would prefer the name of his establishment were not mentioned.

"Some are new rich and treat people like animals. They give orders and never say thanks. Others seem to have just left the jungle: they shout, fight for food at the buffet and make everything dirty."

John Kester, director of statistics, trends and policy at the UNWTO, says, "Chinese travellers may overwhelm other visitors if they are not managed properly." He advises destination countries to use both capacity and marketing to help spread visitors throughout time and space. "The best scenario is having a good mix of nationalities and to avoid creating ghettos."

Rifai believes Chinese travellers are willing to learn. "That's why we have chosen the slogan, 'Travel, enjoy, respect' for the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development in 2017. We need to respect the cultures and interact with them. The Chinese government is well aware of that and has put a wide array a measures in place, from guidebooks and even pre-travel classes for tourists to blacklists for troublemaking air passengers."



Chinese tourists pose in front of Bangkok's Emerald Buddha Temple.

Says Thailand's Kobkarn: "We got the help of the Chinese embassy to design signboards with dos and don'ts but it's not only Chinese tourists who have to get used to the behaviour in the places they are going. Locals must also try to accommodate and communicate, to learn how to manage the flow and benefit from it. Confrontation is just bad for everybody."

Fortunately, says the Thai minister, "Now 60 per cent to 70 per cent of Chinese arrivals are independent travellers. They use the internet to arrange their own trips. They book the hotel and air travel first, and then they use their mobile devices to choose where to go and where to eat or shop."

"A couple of years ago, the China National Tourism Administration forecast this trend, but we didn't believe it would happen so fast."

[Dos and don'ts for Chinese tourists visiting Singapore: no whistling at the theatre and don't steal stuff from the plane](#)

Approved destination status (ADS) was first granted by Beijing in 1983, to Hong Kong and Macau. In November that year, citizens from Guangdong province were allowed to visit the still foreign cities on a trial basis. Five years later, Thailand was granted ADS, but it applied only to those Chinese who had relatives in the country.

“At that time, nobody had a passport,” remembers Zhang Caixiang, a senior citizen in Zhengzhou, Henan province, who has only recently taken his first flight. “Travelling abroad wasn’t even a dream because nobody thought about it.”

According to UNWTO statistics, just 10.47 million mainland Chinese crossed the nation’s borders in 2000, most on official trips or family visits. Even students were closely monitored by political commissars. In 2004, the doors swung open and China awarded ADS to most of Europe and Asia.

“Along with the country’s astonishing economic development, Chinese tourism exploded in 2009 and the record mark of 100 million outbound travellers was broken in 2014,” Kester says. “Such exponential growth has never been seen before and will never happen again.”



A couple kiss in front of the Louvre, in Paris, Europe's top destination for Chinese.

Since 2010, I've been joining Chinese tours to the Mekong river delta in Vietnam and to forests in the Philippines, and sailing with Chinese tourists around the islands of southern Thailand. All have been bittersweet experiences.

“My parents think that I should see as many sights in the shortest time possible, and buy lots of things, but I want to feel the experience”

- Zhang Ran, backpacker

Seeing the constant amazement of middle-aged people has been heart-warming. A couple of grandparents recalled the Cultural Revolution in tears while watching Vietnamese farmers in conical hats, and all on that tour incessantly shot photos of a blue sky that was “hard to see in China nowadays”.

But the disregard for regulations and lack of respect for the environment have been appalling. Most of the tourists I have accompanied have littered beaches and forests without a second thought. Some turned a deaf ear to requests not to interact with endangered species such as the world’s smallest primate, the tarsier, on Bohol island, in the Philippines.

“Chinese are selfish and only care for their photos. We often have trouble with them, so we decided to keep their tours farther from the animals. They think nature is just a backdrop for selfies. They do as they please, not as they’re told,” one of the managers of the Tarsier Conservation Area told me in 2014.

Chinese tourists warned not to illegally fly drones in France

Rooms at hotels were often left in a mess and fights for food were comical if seen from afar. Some tourists made towers of food on their plates, which they couldn’t finish eating.

“But now the young generation is taking over,” Kester says. “Independent tourists account for about 25 per cent of the total in China and their number is growing way faster than organised tours.”

This is nothing short of a revolution, and the Zhangs, in Zhengzhou, are a good example of how it’s being shaped.

Zhang Caixiang took to the air for the first time to visit Xian, to see the Terracotta Warriors with a group of old friends.

“I was scared,” he admits, with a loud laugh.

Holiday rip-off: Chinese tourists forced to pay 10 times more for beach equipment in Okinawa

His 32-year-old daughter, however, has already visited three countries in Asia.

“Thailand is my favourite. I went there for the first time in 2013, and I chose to join a group because I was afraid and it was much more convenient,” recalls Zhang Ran, a sales manager at a telecommunications company. “I loved the place and the people, but shopping trips were annoying because they kept us for a long time at places we had no interest in, so the guides could get commissions, and then we had to hurry at all the sights.”

That’s why, a year later, she returned to Thailand on her own, “It was exciting to drive a motorbike around Phuket. I felt free. Although I would never do it, I also understood why so many Westerners choose to sunbathe on the beach. It’s very laid back,” she says. “My parents think that I should see as many sights in the shortest time possible, and buy lots of things, but I want to feel the experience.”

Two Chinese tourists arrested after making Nazi salutes in Germany.

She's not the only one. A UNWTO report titled "Penetrating the Chinese Outbound Tourism Market", released last month, stresses that "millennials perceive travel as more for enjoyment and gaining an authentic life experience than as purchasing a product".

And Santander says that the main mistake European countries make in regard to Chinese tourists is to treat them as a homogeneous mass.



Chinese friends pose with a "guard" at a palace in Seoul.

"There are huge differences between cities and across ages. The Chinese will travel in as many different ways as we do," he forecasts. "And it will happen very soon."

Diao Dongmei, a 26-year-old nurse from Chengdu I keep in touch with via WeChat, is currently backpacking around Europe, leaving two years' worth of savings in the bunks of cheap hostels, the seats of low-cost airlines and the burger wrappers of fast-food chains.

"I've arranged everything myself through the mobile phone," she tells me, proudly.

Going cash free: why China is light years ahead in the online payment revolution

The UNWTO report adds that Chinese millennials "are the forerunners of mobile applications and revolutionary payment methods", and, Kobkarn believes, the youngsters of China will bring a technological revolution to the tourism industry.

"We need to adapt fast or we may miss this train," the Thai tourism minister says.

"In the tier 1 tourist-generating regions, there are increasing demands for high-end and luxury tour products," the UNWTO report states. "In-depth tours of single destinations are becoming popular among experienced tourists and repeat travellers who require a unique experience of local history and culture."

Rifai uses the Maldives as an example of how tourism agents have misunderstood Chinese tourists: "I was there four years ago and there were hardly any Chinese at all. When I discussed the potential of the Chinese market, people told me that [the Chinese] don't like sun and the beach. I returned last year and 65 per cent of the visitors are already Chinese. They go there not to get tanned, but to associate themselves with a high quality of life."

'It's the Gucci handbag of holidays': Maldives tops Chinese travellers' wish list

Nonetheless, some also point to the dangers of relying too much on Chinese visitors, not least because the Communist Party uses tourist flows as a political weapon. It has done so when tensions have arisen with countries such as the Philippines and Japan, and is repeating the exercise this year with South Korea. Beijing is unhappy at Seoul's deployment of a United States-designed missile shield, so tours have been scrapped and Korean businesses hurt.

"China is not the only one doing this. Most of the travel advisories in place are politically motivated," Rifai says. "But it's true that some countries have a higher control over where their population travels, and China is one of them. We oppose all kinds of travel restrictions unless they are genuinely enacted to protect the safety of travellers."

Still, Rifai has no doubt about the general direction of Chinese tourism. "Whether we like it or not, it's the future. And we can't afford to turn our backs on it."

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