

## Chinese Tourists in South Asia

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China remains the world's biggest market in outbound tourism, with nearly 150 million (M) Chinese travelling abroad in 2018, up 14.7 percent year-on-year, according to a recent report by the China Tourism Academy and Ctrip.

In 2012, China became the world's top spender in international tourism and continues to lead global outbound travel in terms of expenditure. A report of United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) states the total amount of overseas consumption by Chinese visitors in 2018 was as high as USD 227.3 billion (B), against USA holiday makers in the second position with USD 144 B.

Thailand, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the United States, Cambodia, Russia, and the Philippines were the top 10 destinations for Chinese travellers in 2018. No South Asian country ranks in the top 10. At the same time, however, the sub-continent is seeking increased Chinese visitors in recent years. Countries in South Asia, closer to China than many other countries, are making every effort to attract the rising tide of Chinese outbound tourists.

### Nepal

Since China declared Nepal as an outbound destination for Chinese tourists in 2001, the Himalayan country has witnessed a steady rise in Chinese visitors until 2014, when total Chinese visitors reached 123,805, according to Nepal's Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation.

After the deadly earthquake in Nepal in April 2015, Chinese tourists visiting the Himalayan country slumped to 64,675, but this trend was reversed with tourist numbers reaching 153,633 by 2018, according to the Ministry. China has consistently been the second largest source market for Nepal's tourism in the last several years, after India.

Organising the “Visit Nepal Year 2020” campaign, Nepal aims to boost arrivals from China several-fold to reach the target of attracting two million foreign visitors in the year. The Nepal Tourism Board last year launched its website in Chinese. In July, the two countries revised their air service agreement, to increase bilateral flights to 98 per week. The Nepal-China joint venture airline, Himalaya Airlines, is planning to introduce direct flights to Beijing in October. Nepal’s national flag carrier, Nepal Airlines, is also planning to fly to Guangzhou.

## **India**

India has not been the top destination for Chinese tourists so far, but it also wants to attract Chinese visitors. China stood as the 11<sup>th</sup> largest source market for India in 2017, with the arrival of 247,235 Chinese tourists, according to India’s Tourism Ministry.

Of the total more than 10 million (M) tourists visiting India in 2017, the China market occupied 2.46 percent share of the Indian market. While it is a downturn in arrivals from China compared with 2016, it is a substantial rise from 2014, when a total of 181,020 Chinese tourists visited the country.

India has set up a dedicated tourist office in Beijing to promote its tourism, and has been conducting various promotional activities in China. Training Mandarin-speaking guides and hosting Chinese media are among the measures taken by India. In September last year, former Indian Tourism Minister, K.J. Alphons, told Xinhua that China was the only country where India had hired a public relations agency to advertise Indian tourism in various cities. India seeks to grab at least a one percent share of China’s 150 M outbound travellers, as it plans to double foreign tourist arrival to 20 M by 2020.

## **The Maldives**

China, which has made substantial investment in The Maldives, is also sending a large number of tourists, contributing to Maldives’ economy, and the Island nation is benefiting from a good flow of Chinese visitors in recent years.

According to tourism statistics published by The Maldives government in 2018, more than 300,000 Chinese tourists have visited Maldives four years in a row since 2014. In 2017, a total of 306,530 Chinese tourists visited Maldives. But, over the period, the number of visitors has declined marginally since 2014, when Maldives had welcomed 3,63,626 Chinese visitors.

## **Pakistan**

Chinese tourists also visit Pakistan in increasing numbers. Figures have increased several-fold from 2014 to 2017, according to the Pakistan Statistical Year Book published by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. In 2014, there were only 70,000 Chinese tourists but this increased to 223,000 in 2017. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, once constructed, is expected to further boost Chinese arrivals.

## **Sri Lanka**

The number of Chinese tourists visiting Sri Lanka remains impressive over the period from 2014 to 2018. According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, a total of 128,166 Chinese tourists visited this island nation in 2014. The number increased to 268,952 in 2017, though it slightly decreased to 265,965 in 2018.

According to the Annual Statistics Report 2017, published by the authority, China is the second largest source of tourism in Sri Lanka, after India. In 2017, Sri Lanka attracted 1.41 M tourists and Chinese tourists came in at 12.7 percent of the total foreign tourist arrivals.

Sri Lanka has taken a number of measures, including increased flight connections, welcoming more Chinese tour guides accompanying the tour groups, and teaching the Mandarin language, as well as organising various tourism promotion activities in China.

## **Bangladesh**

Statistics are sparse as most arrivals are for business purpose, although the leisure segment is increasing year-on-year, as more Chinese visitors provide good information about the availability of touristic attractions

of the country. General feedback is that Bangladesh is a “green” tourist destination, unspoilt and rich in cultural and historical heritages.

## **Bhutan**

Bhutan’s popularity amongst Chinese tourists grew after one of Hong Kong’s leading celebrity couples, actors Tony Leung and Carina Lau, were married in Paro in a Buddhist-inspired ceremony in 2008, said Dr Kalyan Raj Sharma, whose Kathmandu-based company has been sending close to 1,000 Chinese tourists to this Himalayan nation annually.

According to the Bhutan Tourism Monitor Report 2018, published by the Tourism Council of Bhutan, China is among the larger source markets for Bhutanese tourism. While India is predominantly the largest source market, China came fourth in 2018. India sent 191,836 tourists in 2018 while there was a total of 6,878 Chinese tourists in the same year.

The number of arrivals remain significantly low and, in the past five years, Bhutan received only around 45,000 Chinese tourists. According to a travel agent in Thimphu, the number of tourists visiting Bhutan from its northern giant neighbour had been declining over the past two years, despite China’s booming outbound tourism.

It goes without saying that something is wrong with Bhutan’s tourism industry and many respondents interviewed by this writer provided their analyses and answers.

## **Politically Isolated**

Between 2013 and 2018, China entered a “new era”, under the leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping, with a commitment to “build a community with a shared future for humanity” through the “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” and other ways. As a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development, BRI is so popular that more than 150 countries and international organisations have signed agreements with China.

Keeping aloof from the Belt and Road cooperation, Bhutan inevitably is at a disadvantage while doing business with China, a global economic driver.

Some Thimphu-based travel agents attribute the down flow of Chinese visitors to this factor.

In comparison, Yogesh Kumar Bhattarai, Nepal's newly appointed Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, told this writer that Nepal aims to attract more than 500,000 Chinese tourists in 2020 to realise the goal of Visit Nepal Year 2020 campaign of two million foreign visitors. With Chinese President Xi Jinping possibly paying an official visit this coming October, Nepal's China arrivals are bound to achieve this target.

### **Misunderstandings and Communication Gap**

If it were not for the fun of anticipating the pleasure of travel and the fun of talking about your journey when you get back, nobody would ever venture very far from home. One reason for Chinese holiday makers not choosing Bhutan as their destination is a misunderstanding caused by a communication gap.

When this writer shared his pleasure of travel to Bhutan in October, 2015, many friends living in the Chinese mainland were surprised, because they thought it was meaningless to visit Bhutan which, in their impression, was not different from China's Tibet, where they had already visited. People living in the modern cities of the Chinese mainland fail to differentiate between Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal.

### **High Tariff and Low Services**

According to the Minimum Daily Package Price (MDPP), an international visitor has to pay USD 200 per person per night during the lean season and USD 250 per person per night during peak season. This charge is for a stay in a three-star hotel, while tourists can enjoy excellent hotels at this price in other countries. Because of this, some tourists think the tariff they pay to visit Bhutan is not comparable to the service they get, according to Dr Sharma, Managing Director at Adventure Outdoor of Nepal. His comment is echoed by William Ma, a tourism entrepreneur in Nepal, who has been sending tourists from across the world to Bhutan for several decades. According to him, the quality of three-Star hotel category used as the basis of this tariff is not standardised. Room sizes, amenities and services available in hotels differ in every location. Despite Bhutan's focus

on bringing in high-end tourists, their focus also revolves around Indian tourists who are exempted from the royalty and need no visas to enter the country.

### **Other Complaints**

Not having enough air and land connectivity between two neighbours is a bottleneck to increase tourism. Visitors from the Chinese mainland have to transit and spend nearly four days to reach Bhutan, and this is a considerable time for short-stay packages, according to William Ma who added that, while most Chinese visitors are happy with their Bhutan travel, some complain about meal standards and repetitive menu.

A travel agent in Thimphu said most Chinese tourists visiting Bhutan are impressed but they face a language barrier, and food is the main problem. According to sources from the Guides Association of Bhutan, there are approximately 30 Chinese language tour guides in Bhutan. Very few language training institutes in its capital offer Chinese language training for local tour guides.

### **How to Turn the Table?**

It is reported that Bhutan's new government has plans to expand diplomatic relations. If true, China should come first in the diplomatic circle expansion. As the Chinese government pays great attention to the safety and security of its travelling citizens, the lack of consular services is a chief concern. In case of contingencies and calamities, Chinese visitors can reach out for help without having to worry about too many linguistic issues and bureaucratic hassles, if there is an office.

Buddhism being the widely practiced religion in Bhutan and China, having more than 244 M Buddhists, both countries could leverage Buddhism to strengthen their ties and promote religious tourism through people-to-people approaches. Exchange of visits by monks and nuns could be organised periodically, while Bhutanese scholars should be invited to China and Chinese visitors should visit Bhutan to hold seminars on various issues of mutual interests. Cultural exchange programmes could also further strengthen ties of both countries at the people-to-people level.

The Chinese government could offer scholarships to Bhutanese students and Bhutan should welcome Chinese students and researchers willing to expand their knowledge and understanding of the land dubbed the Last Shangri-la.

Enhancing air connectivity is a must. Thimphu should try to link Bhutan with China through direct flights. It should also build, improve and expand a good road network in and around Bhutan for overland visitors from its neighbouring countries such as Nepal, India, China, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

Bhutan should train more Chinese speaking tourist guides. Currently, with only 30 trained Chinese speaking guides, how can Bhutan cater to around 9,000 Chinese tourists annually?

### **Adopt Culinary Diplomacy**

Since a majority of Chinese tourists have expressed disappointment over the unavailability of Chinese cuisine in Bhutan's hotels and restaurants, the Bhutanese tourism officials could adopt culinary diplomacy to attract more Chinese, who believe that "Food is God for the people".

Hotels and restaurants in touristic spots in Bhutan should incorporate Chinese dishes in their menu, preferably with authentic Chinese taste. More chefs could be trained in Chinese culinary skills, or Chinese chefs could be appointed in hotels with high Chinese occupancy. Thus Bhutan, as a host, could reach out and win the hearts of Chinese visitors by way of catering to their food preferences.

### **Creative Marketing**

Dr Sharma said that Bhutan's promotion of itself as an unspoilt destination is working, but it is yet to reach an international level for the services it provides. A unique, creative, appealing and customised marketing strategy should be implemented by the Bhutanese private tour operators as well the concerned tourism agencies.

Bhutanese tour operators should organise more tourism promotional events, not only in the Chinese capital city, but also in other parts of the country, aggressively and strategically, to attract more and more Chinese tourists, especially targeting the people of Buddhist faiths, whose number stands at 244 M in China.

The Bhutanese private tour operators as well as Bhutanese tourism agencies could also leverage ICT to attract targeted Chinese populace, since more than half of their population has access to Internet, and China's online penetration stands at 55.8 percent, as unveiled by the Internet Society of China in 2017.

### **Highlight Bhutan's Unique Charms**

Bhutan, a country with 71 per cent forest cover, could brand itself as an exotic hideaway for the growing number of luxury travel seekers in China, just a stone's throw away from Bhutan. The ultra-high value individuals, especially the urban ones who seek to escape the hustle and bustle of their cities and hectic lives, could consider Bhutan for weekend retreats, given the proximity of the country, its lush greenery and serene natural environment.

Professor Di Fangyao, Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies at Tibet University for Nationalities, who travelled to Bhutan for the first time for few days this June, said that tourism promotion has not developed, despite the original ecological forest landscape of the southern slope valley of the Himalayas, which is unique with rare species rich in vegetation. These are unique natural scenery and cultural characteristics of Bhutan that should be brought to the notice of Chinese travellers.

*Some friends, including William Ma, contributed to this article.*