



Moving with the times

YUK WAH CHAN

A SIA'S tourism has experienced tremendous growth in the past decade, the outstanding feature of this growth being the rise in the number of outbound tourists from mainland China. Chinese now comprise the largest tourist group in the world, making over 100 million trips in 2015, with around 89.5 per cent of those being to Asian destinations.

China has now become the top source of non-ASEAN inbound tourists for ASEAN countries, surpassing European visitors. Chinese are also among the largest tourist groups for a number of other Asian destinations, including Hong Kong, Macau, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia and South Korea.

Chinese outbound tourism has been driving the transformation and development of regional tourism in Asia. But besides evidencing growing wealth and the emergence of holiday-making as a cultural trend, Chinese outbound tourism also highlights some of the peculiar features of China's development.

The rapid increase in outbound

Chinese tourism has its origins in the reforms that have led to substantial increases in disposable income for many Chinese families. The more open Chinese economy also brought new liberty of movement, which had previously been strictly controlled by the state.

Before outbound travel came into vogue in the 2000s, the Chinese government deliberately promoted domestic tourism to boost local consumption and encourage economic development. Yet in Asia, the emergence of 'travel' as a popular leisure activity is a relatively new phenomenon. This is particularly the case in China where 80 per cent of the population was agrarian in the 1980s.

Targeted state policies have facilitated the boom in the domestic tourism market. For example, the Year of Leisure and Vacation was introduced in 1996, with the government subsequently announcing three one-week holidays throughout the year—also known as 'Golden Week holidays'. Tourism agencies have also blossomed, offering an abundance of products and packages. By the late 1990s, visiting historic sites had

Chinese tourists disembark from a cruise ship in the northern Taiwan port of Keelung.

become part of China's mass culture.

In addition to the vogue for domestic touring, Chinese people also yearned for a chance to go abroad, which is widely considered to be a symbol of status.

The reasons for the rapid increase in tourism between China's Yunnan province and northern Vietnam in the late 1990s were curiosity about Vietnam and eagerness to go abroad. This is despite the fact that 'going abroad' in that case involved a five minute walk across the border bridge and a half-day tour around the Vietnamese border town. Still, when tourists returned home they could tell others that they had gone overseas.

Outbound tourism got into full swing in 2000s, though the first outbound visits took place in the early 1980s from mainland China to its border cities, Hong Kong and Macau. This was largely to visit relatives. The 1990s saw strong growth in cross-border tourism between China and neighbouring countries such as Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar

and the states of the former Soviet Union. Western countries began to issue group tourist visas for the Chinese in the mid-2000s.

Cross-border commerce has been one result of borderland tourism. The well-reported conspicuous consumption and seemingly endless desire of Chinese tourists to shop have prompted numerous countries to offer preferential visa application processes. In just a decade's time, Chinese tourists have surpassed the Japanese and the Germans to become the biggest tourist spenders in Asia and in the world.

While some Chinese tourists are obsessed with consuming internationally recognised luxury brand items, the majority of Chinese visitors actually purchase day-to-day consumer products, such as shampoo, toothpaste, washing powder, manufactured medicine, diapers and baby food. This is the especially the case for Chinese consumers from Guangdong province and other southern areas who, through the Individual Visit Scheme, can travel solo to Hong Kong and Macau rather than with a group tour and stock up on household essentials.

But this phenomenon also indicates peculiarities in China's development, as many millions of Chinese cross borders in search for higher-quality consumer products to meet their everyday needs. Baby products, for example, have been in high demand ever since the melamine-tainted dairy products scandal of 2008. For many Chinese, travelling to Hong Kong or Macau is now the most time- and cost-efficient way to obtain such items. Hong Kong, which has a population of seven million, hosted more than 40 million Chinese visitors in 2015, with 60 per cent being same-day visitors.

Tourism is also closely related to

intraregional migration. Asia now accounts for most of the world's international and cross-border migration. Many visitors cross the border not for 'tourism' but for short-term work, to tap into overseas investment markets or educational opportunities.

People from less-developed countries tend to seek work and education opportunities in more advanced Asian economies and states, such as the millions of Indonesians entering Malaysia or mainland Chinese going to Hong Kong or Singapore to study. Yet entrepreneurs from advanced and expanding economies are eager to exploit cheaper production resources in less-developed countries, such as Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Many Chinese outbound tourists, for example, are seeking overseas investment opportunities. At the China–Vietnam border, tour agencies often entertain groups composed of Chinese entrepreneurs and merchants. China's new rich also flock to South Korea to secure their investments in the real estate market.

CHINA has a significant cross-border relationship with Hong Kong. Over 40,000 mainland Chinese typically travel to Hong Kong each year for family reunion alone. And, of this group, most conducted multiple temporary visits to Hong Kong over a period of a few years to more than ten years before they could obtain the appropriate resident permit.

Since 1997 an increasing number of Chinese students have enrolled in Hong Kong universities. There are a number of reasons for this trend, including Hong Kong's proximity to China and relatively low fees. Another incentive is Hong Kong's preferential policy which entitles

mainland Chinese graduates of Hong Kong universities to work in Hong Kong regardless of the year that they graduate. Many mainland students also consider Hong Kong a stepping stone for other opportunities abroad. These substantial outflows of talent from China have become a serious concern for the Chinese government.

Vibrant flows of visitors and migrants also spark debates in relation to security, competition with locals, and population quality and dynamics. Migration politics in the region has led to the promulgation of immigration policies that differentiate the status of different kinds of migrant, privileging some (such as mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong) while undermining others' basic human rights (such as migrant domestic workers).

Migration and mass tourism also complicate the dynamics of ethnic relations within destination countries. Increased human flows and intensified interactions across borders, either in the form of migration or tourism, have led to new tensions, both among and between ethnic groups.

Asian mobility encapsulates the entangled relationships between mass tourism, cross-border commerce and trade, and migration. Both source and destination countries will have to develop long-term strategies and policies to better manage these increasing flows of people. Asian populations also need to prepare for the rapidly changing population dynamics of their own territories, and the ever-shifting human landscape from short and long-term cross-border people flows. **EAFQ**

Yuk Wah Chan is an Associate Professor in the Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong.