

Press Release

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PolyU Study Finds Tourism an Important Contributor to China-Taiwan Relations

As China's global influence continues to grow, the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan is more important than ever, and tourism can make an important positive contribution according to Dr Mimi Li and Shanzhui Qui of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and co-authors. In a recent study that elicited the views of mainland Chinese tourists to Taiwan, the researchers show that the increase in tourism between the two places has already had a positive influence on the "long-term peace-building effort" and that it will "facilitate political reconciliation and mutual recognition" in the future.

The researchers set the scene for their study by explaining that for more than three decades following the political division of China in 1949, tourism between China and Taiwan was non-existent "as a result of military confrontation". Although the restrictions were partially lifted in 1979, the number of mainland Chinese visitors allowed to enter Taiwan remained strictly limited and visits were only allowed for specific purposes, such as visiting family. It was almost another three decades before citizens were permitted to travel freely between the mainland and Taiwan for tourism and business purposes.

According to the researchers, the "remarkable increase" in tourism since Taiwan eased the restrictions on mainland Chinese visitors in 2008 represents a "significant milestone" in cross-Strait relations. They explain that tourism between politically divided states can be regarded as a "peace-keeping mechanism" that can enhance mutual understanding, ease tension and suspicion, reduce political distrust and promote peace.

Although there are still some political and social barriers between the mainland and Taiwan, and the attitudes of the two governments towards tourism still differ, the researchers suggest that it would now be "difficult to reverse" the growing number of travellers between them. They were thus interested in discovering how tourists perceive the opening up of the tourism sector and its potential influence on bilateral relations between China and Taiwan.

To provide a framework for their investigation, the researchers considered the effects of cross-Strait tourism in terms of a "two-track diplomacy system", in which the first track represents official government-to-government diplomacy and the second track represents unofficial, people-to-people diplomacy, including tourism. The second type of diplomacy, they argue, can complement and support track-one diplomacy by "improving mutual understanding and urging compromise between governments".

To assess the "peace-building function and political effect" of cross-Strait tourism, the researchers conducted a survey of package-group tourists from mainland China

returning from visits to Taiwan. The objectives were to explore mainland Chinese tourists' perceptions of cross-Strait development "in terms of the economic, political, cultural, and social impacts of tourism openness on cross-Strait relations" and determine which socio-demographic characteristics influence mainland Chinese support for cross-Strait tourism. The researchers also wanted to discover the "potential effects of tourism openness on bilateral relations across the Taiwan Strait and the possible reunification of Taiwan and mainland China".

Of the 504 surveyed tourists, just over half were female, and more than 70% were over 35 years old. More than half had a college level of education and almost 30% had university degrees. Just over 20% were retired, around 40% had incomes of less than RMB3,000 per month, and only around 12.5% earned more than RMB8,000 per month.

The tourists who responded to the survey held positive views about the opening up of tourism between mainland China and Taiwan. Indeed, the researchers found that the Chinese tourists were highly supportive of tourism development and generally perceived it as beneficial for improving relations between the two places.

The impact of cross-Strait tourism on society and culture was regarded as the "most positive and substantial" of the impacts considered. Tourism gives people on both sides of the Strait a chance to learn more about each other's cultures, which the researchers write facilitates "cultural communication" and enhances "mutual understanding and trust". The views expressed by the mainland Chinese participants support the notion that tourism can potentially "relieve tension and promote peace" by enhancing communication, trust and recognition between the citizens of "two previously hostile regions".

In political and economic terms, the mainland Chinese tourists perceived tourism as generating a considerable positive effect on "relieving tension, facilitating reunification, and improving the economic and political status" of the two regions. Nevertheless, the benefits were not perceived as equal for both sides. The economic benefits, for instance, were perceived as greater for Taiwan than for mainland China. The benefits for the international political status of the two regions were not perceived to be as high as the benefits in other areas.

The researchers were also interested in whether opinions differed according to socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, income and education. Although there were virtually no differences in the views expressed by men and women, there were considerable differences between the views of people of different ages, income groups and levels of education.

Those with incomes of less than RMB3,000, for instance, tended to express more positive views of cross-Strait tourism than those with higher incomes. Similarly, those with lower levels of education were more optimistic about the benefits, particularly the political and economic benefits, of tourism than those with higher levels of education. The researchers argue that people who are more educated tend to become "more rational and mature" in their understanding of political and economic issues, and thus are "more conservative" in assessing the contribution of tourism.

Because the different generations of a country have distinct values, attitudes and behaviour towards political, economic and sociocultural issues, the researchers were interested in whether perceptions towards cross-Strait tourism differed among mainland Chinese tourists of different ages. They discovered that those aged over 55 were much more positive in their views of the benefits of tourism, particularly the political effects.

The researchers explain that the early education of this generation in mainland China was “dominated by political and ideological campaigns” and people of this age also experienced the most hostile relations between the two regions, along with the complete ban on cross-Strait tourism. Such experiences have made this generation much more “sensitive to Taiwan and reunification issues”, and consequently they “strongly support peace and communication” between mainland China and Taiwan. This is in contrast to the opinions of the younger tourists, who expressed more negative views about the potential effects of tourism. The researchers caution that as this younger generation ages, there may be a decrease in the level of support for – or optimism about – unification.

Relations between mainland China and Taiwan have improved through the efforts of track-one diplomacy, argue the researchers, yet this would not have been possible without the support of track-two diplomacy, including tourism, in “promoting peace and reconciliation” and “facilitating the reunification” of the divided state. The researchers conclude that with the generally positive attitudes expressed by the tourists in their study, there will be further increases in the number of visitors to and from Taiwan, which will lead to a “deepening of social and cultural exchange and integration”. Nevertheless, they urge that Chinese government should consider the opinions of the younger generation, the middle class and the more highly educated if it “wants to continue using tourism as its political tool”.

Qiu, Shangzhi, Li, Mimi, Huang, Zhuowei and Dang, Ning. (2015). Impact of Tourism Openness Across the Taiwan Strait: Perspective of Mainland Chinese Tourists. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 20(1), 76-93.

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