

Inbound Tourism Development at the Western Border Region of China

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Abstract Based on literature review and statistics of National Tourism Administration of China and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) Tourism Bureau, this article examines the trends of inbound tourism development in the region. The results show that the inbound tourists in the XUAR are only a tiny portion of the Chinese, and the regional total which mainly is made up of domestic tourism originated from the coastal areas. Among the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has become the largest inbound tourism market of the XUAR. The article further suggests that it is worth to investigate whether the inbound tourism development of the region is affected by the geopolitical and geo-economic situations and the national strategic interests of respective neighboring countries.

Keywords Inbound tourism · Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region · Central Asia

Introduction

Tourist travel usually involves crossing both subnational (i.e., municipal, township, county, provincial, and state) and international boundaries. Subnational borders do not greatly affect tourist flows; however, this is not the case when travelers cross an international boundary [18]. There are noticeable differences concerning the barriers and constraints for cross-border tourist flows, for example, there are heavily restricted tourist flows between many African and Middle Eastern neighboring countries; tourist flows between South Korea and the North are often prohibited; while among EU countries, tourist flows are almost unrestricted.

Borders have become much more open to international tourism through the liberalized trade agreements and economic cooperation that have been encouraged by

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globalization [3] and geopolitical changes [13]. In this context, China's international tourism, which includes outbound and inbound tourism, has been growing rapidly since the "open door policy" which strengthened China's diplomatic ties with countries around the world. In this article, inbound tourism refers to "nonresidents traveling in a given country" ([16], p.18).

More concretely, after the economic reform and "open door policy" that took place under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, inbound tourism in China has been growing rapidly. International tourist arrivals have increased from 1.18 million in 1978 [6] to 106.6 million in 2011 [8]. Foreign exchange earnings from inbound tourism has increased from \$263 million in 1978 [21] to \$48.5 billion in 2011 [8]. Wen and Sinha [20] claim that from 1980 to 2006, China's inbound tourist arrivals and tourism receipts grew at an average annual rate of 11 and 14%, respectively. China is expected to become the top tourist destination of the world in 2020 by hosting 130 million tourists annually [20].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China quickly established full diplomatic relations with all of the Central Asia's newly-independent governments and gradually opened up the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region's (XUAR) border to these countries. This has made it possible to develop Sino-Central Asian cross-border tourism. The main purpose of this article is to explore the inbound tourism development situation of the XUAR.

Inbound tourism development in the XUAR

Situated in the northwest of China, the XUAR represents about one-sixth of the total territory of the country, making it the largest region and province of China. The XUAR shares borders with eight countries (Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India), and there are 15 border crossing posts opened to five of these countries—four to Mongolia, seven to Kazakhstan, two to Kyrgyzstan, one to Tajikistan, and one to Pakistan [19] [17] (Table 1). There are also two international airports, namely, Urumqi airport, which is connected to Sharjah, Istanbul, Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Islamabad, Novosibirsk, and Moscow, and Kashgar airport, which is connected to Istanbul.

The Silk Road, which used to promote the economic and cultural interchange between East and West, crosses the XUAR. The local residents of both sides of the border region, especially Uyghurs, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks, share a common socio-cultural and historical heritage. The border residents from these mentioned groups have a common Islamic faith and are Turkic-speaking (except the Tajiks who speak a Persian language). Overall, the XUAR's geographical proximity to Central Asia, unique natural landscapes (arid and semi-arid areas), and rich history provides opportunities for the development of tourism.

In addition, against the background of significant differences in income distribution between coastal and inland regions of China, inbound tourism is considered a tool for achieving a balanced economic development among the regions with its economic contribution through foreign exchange earnings [5] [12]. While the coastal regions cover three municipalities (i.e., Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai) and nine provinces (i.e., Liaoning, Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, and

Table 1 Border crossing posts in the XUAR

| Name (English/Chinese) | Location in the XUAR | Type | Opened year | Flight destination or bordering country |
|------------------------------|----------------------|--|-------------|---|
| Urumqi airport (乌鲁木齐飞机场) | Urumqi | Air | 1973 | Sharjah, Istanbul, Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Novosibirsk, Moscow |
| Kashgar airport (喀什飞机场) | Kashghar | Air | 1993 | Istanbul |
| Lao yemiao (老爷庙) | Kumul | Road | 1992 | Mongolia |
| Ulastai (乌拉斯台) | Changji | Road | 1992 | Mongolia |
| Bulgan (塔克什肯) | Altay | Road | 1989 | Mongolia |
| Hong shanzui (红山嘴) | Altay | Road | 1992 | Mongolia |
| Khorgos (霍尔果斯) | Ili | Road and railway/open to third country residents | 1983 | Kazakhstan |
| Dostyk—Ala Tav (阿拉山口) | Börtala | Road and railway/open to third country residents | 1990 | Kazakhstan |
| Bakhty (巴克图) | Chöchäk | Road/open to third country residents | 1994 | Kazakhstan |
| Maikapchagai—Zhemina (吉木乃) | Altay | Road | 1994 | Kazakhstan |
| Kolzhat-Dulart (都拉塔) | Ili | Road | 2005 | Kazakhstan |
| Alekseevka—Aheyubiek (阿黑土别克) | Altay | Road | 1994 | Kazakhstan |
| Narynkol—Muzart (木扎尔特) | Ili | Road | 1994 | Kazakhstan |
| Torugart (吐尔尕特) | Kizilsu | Road | 1950 | Kyrgyzstan |
| Irkeshtam (伊尔克什坦) | Kizilsu | Road/open to third country residents | 1997 | Kyrgyzstan |
| Kulma—Karasu (卡拉苏) | Kashghar | Road/open to third country residents | 2004 | Tajikistan |
| Khunjerab (红其拉甫) | Kashghar | Road/open to third country residents | 1982 | Pakistan |

Source: [19] [17]

Hainan), inland regions, including the border provinces such as the XUAR, cover the remaining 19 provinces of China. The regional income of the border provinces (Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, the XUAR, Tibet, Yunnan, and Guangxi) is below the national average concerning per capita annual income levels of urban households and per capita net annual income levels of rural households in 2010 [2].

Thus, in recent years, China adjusted its regional development policies that shifted from focusing on coastal provinces to less developed and marginalized border provinces, and this policy corresponds with the implementation of the state's strategy to reduce the uneven development among the regions [15]. Therefore, the governments of

China's less-developed provinces such as the XUAR government placed tourism, including inbound tourism, as their policy priority with the support of the "Open up the West" (*Xibu dafaiifa*) policy. Pratt [12] suggests that tourism can be an attractive source of economic development in the less-developed inland regions by providing job opportunities and generating income. Li [5] argue that tourism development in the less-developed inland regions should be highlighted as a tool for achieving a balanced regional economic development.

Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China quickly established full diplomatic relations with all of the Central Asia's newly-independent governments and gradually opened up the XUAR's border to these countries. This has made it possible to develop Sino-Central Asian cross-border tourism, specifically the inbound tourism to the XUAR.

There are deficits in the statistical data about inbound tourism to the XUAR. Ma [7] claimed that each year tourists from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, accounted for 30% of the inbound tourism market share of Xinjiang. In the years 2002, 2003, and 2007, the XUAR hosted more tourists from CIS countries in recent years (i.e., 1999–2008) that accounted for about 50% of the total number of inbound tourism in the XUAR.

According to the statistics of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Tourism Bureau [22], among the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has become the largest inbound tourism market of the XUAR. The Central Asian countries include Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In 2015 (until December), the XUAR hosted 1.27 million tourists from Kazakhstan which is 75.5% of the whole inbound tourism market of the XUAR of 1.68 million persons.

According to Peyrouse [10], cross border shopping tourism, which referred in this article as a type of inbound tourism, is one of the main categories of the Sino-Kazakhstani trade. The main categories of the Sino-Kazakhstani trade include shopping tourists, organized trade by the Xinjiang Production and Constructions Corp. (XPCC: *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan* in Chinese), and private entrepreneurs. The "shopping tourists", also known as "shuttle trade" or "suitcase traders", is organized by specialized tourist agencies that provide translation services, hotel reservations, transportation, and customs assistance, and is run by unemployed engineers and service industry workers who were left jobless due to the collapse of the goods trade from Moscow after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Among the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has become the most important trade partner of China, and the trade between Kazakhstan and the XUAR makes up 70% of all Sino-Central Asian trade [11].

Free-trade zones (*Bian min hu shi mao yi qu* in Chinese) have been established alongside Sino-Kazakhstan border posts in order to encourage cross-border trade including shopping tourism. The existing visa regime between China and the Central Asian states has been simplified gradually in order to encourage trade [11]. For example, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan opened consulates in Urumqi to facilitate the visa process for Chinese businessmen who were otherwise obliged to travel to Beijing. Border populations are allowed to make day-trips to the free-trade zones without a visa. According to Peyrouse ([10], p. 37) "in 1992, approximately 700,000 Kazakh citizens crossed the Chinese border to buy common consumer items in China with the intention of reselling them back home. In 2002, shop tourism reportedly still provided

employment for nearly half a million Kazakhs, who are estimated to have spent more than \$1 billion in Xinjiang between 1989 and 2003”.

The Sino-Kazakhstan border has become the busiest, at least in 2006, border of the XUAR. In 2006, 493,000 persons crossed the Khorgos border post located between China and Kazakhstan that made up 59% XUAR’s total crossings [17], though there is no evidence to support the presumption that they were shopping tourists. Peyrouse [10] claims that more than 3 million people passed through the Khorgos border post in 2007. The Xinjiang Statistical Information Net [23] shows that in 2007 alone almost 10% of the XUAR’s inbound tourists traveled through the Khorgos post. Overall, there is conflicting statistical data concerning cross-border crossings at the XUAR—Kazakhstan border posts—and there is no conclusive evidence to support that recorded border crossings involve tourists.

Consequently, according to the statistics of the National Tourism Administration of China [8], inbound tourists in the XUAR in 2011 only accounted for a tiny portion of the Chinese total (0.53% of total visits). This statistic is not in line with the acknowledgement that the XUAR is one of the regions with much potential for tourism development in China. Thanks to the XUAR’s abundant tourism resources and favorable location close to the Central Asian and European countries.

Within the total XUAR tourism market, inbound tourism only accounts for a tiny portion of the regional total and is concentrated heavily on the capital area, Urumqi. Between the years 1998 and 2012, inbound tourism comprised only 2.6% of the total number of tourists, and 6.0% of the total tourism income of the XUAR, although there is fluctuation among the years [22]. The biggest changes in tourist numbers happened during years of natural disaster (i.e., the SARS disease in China in 2003) and connected to the political instability of the region (i.e., the 2009 Urumqi riots). Between the years 1999 and 2008, inbound tourists in the XUAR were concentrated mainly in Urumqi (52.62%), Ili Autonomous Prefecture (12.05%), Turpan Prefecture (10.74%), and Kashghar Prefecture (8.83%) [7].

Discussion and implication

In recent years, promoting tourism in the border regions, which includes the XUAR, of China is considered as a countermeasure to reduce the enlarging regional development gap between inland and coastal areas [2] [5] [12]. Furthermore, China’s gradual opening of the XUAR’s border to Central Asian countries following the disintegration of the Soviet Union made it possible to develop the Sino-Central Asian cross-border tourism specifically the inbound tourism in the XUAR.

However, the inbound tourists in the XUAR are only a tiny portion of the Chinese total. XUAR’s inbound tourism development is unstable and only accounts for a tiny portion of the regional total, which mainly is made up of domestic tourism originated from coastal China. Though, the XUAR authorities has upgraded and/or constructed transport facilities (i.e., airports, railways, and roads) that stretch from coastal China to Western Europe, introduced international and domestic luxurious 5-star hotels, and promoted annual international tourism fairs since 2002. Also, along Sino-Central Asian borders, China mostly has promoted cross-border trade (i.e., shopping tourism) with Kazakhstan due to

its gradually stabilized and strengthened political and socio-economic conditions.

Thus, although this article mainly examines the trends of inbound tourism in the XUAR, it is worth to investigate whether the inbound tourism development of the region is effected by the geopolitical and geo-economic situations, and national strategic interests of respective neighboring countries in border regions. As, "...the national interests of the respective neighboring countries can undermine the potential benefits to be derived at the regional level from transfrontier collaboration" ([4], p. 137). In other words, in reality, the promotion of cross-border tourism between the XUAR and Central Asian countries may not be at the top of the Chinese state agenda.

More specifically, China and the Central Asian countries economically complement each other. While China needs new markets in Central Asian for its labor-intensive light industry manufactures, the former Soviet republics are eager to benefit from the trade (i.e., shopping tourism) and investment that come from China and to develop their raw materials (i.e., oil and minerals) and energy-related infrastructure construction with Chinese aid. Thus, China has utilized economic, diplomatic, and political mechanisms (i.e., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) to enhance its geopolitical and economic influence in the Central Asian countries. However, the unstable geopolitical and geo-economic situations of bordering countries that surround the XUAR might "...pushed the Chinese national state to consolidate economic and cultural ties between Xinjiang and the coastal provinces in order to further wrestle Xinjiang to the ground" ([15], p. 1224) that partially reflected in the ascendancy of domestic tourism in the region that mostly originated from the coastal China.

The strengthened influence of global powers (i.e., the USA, Russia) in Central Asia has been undermining China's eagerness to maintain leadership during the process of economic development and security cooperation with the Central Asian governments [1]. In other words, "Central Asia is still—and will most likely remain—comparatively marginal to Beijing's international economic relations (energy included), not only because of its objective economic constraints but also because of political obstacle, both internal (i.e., related to concerns of the local governments) and external (i.e., related to competition, mainly by Russia)" ([14], p.73). Additionally, in the XUAR, China has to negotiate a fine balance between economic development and keeping stability. The later referring to the fight against so-called "separatist movements and terrorist attacks" [9] [10] that China asks support from the Central Asian countries which seek, in return, a counterweight to the Russian thrust and force with the diplomatic and economic support of China.

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