

# Tourism between Taiwan and China: Bridge or Obstacle to Cultural and Political Dialog?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article examines the complex interplay between tourism and political relations between Taiwan and China. It analyzes how tourism, often touted as a bridge for cultural understanding, has instead become entangled in the ongoing political conflict, serving as both a tool for economic influence and a reflection of deep-seated tensions. The authors trace the development of tourism flows in both directions, highlighting periods of increased exchange alongside significant setbacks due to political events and policy changes. The core argument revolves around the ambivalent nature of tourism in this context: while offering economic benefits and potential for cultural exchange, it simultaneously reinforces political divisions and serves as a means of political leverage, ultimately leaving the future of cross-strait tourism uncertain.

## Introduction

Tourism is often praised as a universal mediator - a driver of rapprochement that promotes understanding and tolerance through intercultural encounters. Travel enables people to discover new ways of life, adopt unfamiliar perspectives and thus break down prejudices. At the same time, tourism is an important economic factor that benefits entire regions. Whether in Las Vegas, Dubrovnik or the Maldives - the travel industry is not only an integral part of social life, but also a guarantor of economic stability.

But what happens when travel is characterized not only by a thirst for adventure and cultural interest, but also by political and historical tensions? What if the bridge that tourism is able to build is in fact crossed by deep rifts? A current and particularly explosive example of this is the exchange between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. In this case, tourism becomes a touchstone for the question of whether mutual visits really lead to understanding or whether they rather deepen existing tensions when economic interests and political agendas dominate.

This article deals with the question: To what extent can tourism promote dialog and mutual understanding in conflict-laden relations such as between Taiwan and China, and to what extent does it become an instrument of political and economic power games? This complex and tense relationship thus raises the question of whether tourism can actually build bridges in such contexts - or whether it is ultimately more of an obstacle than a solution.

## Tourism development: between exchange and tensions

### Tourism from China to Taiwan

The Chinese Civil War and the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949) led to decades of isolation between China and Taiwan. Direct travel was prohibited and contact was limited to rare family visits via unofficial channels. It was not until the late 1980s, with the beginning of Taiwan's democratization, that this strict separation was relaxed. Taiwan allowed its citizens to visit relatives in China, which laid the foundation for the first easing of travel restrictions and cultural exchange.

The 1990s saw the first direct charter flights, and from 2005 China offered group tours to Taiwan - under strict regulation. With the election of Ma Ying-jeou (Kuomintang, KMT) in 2008, relations improved considerably: regular scheduled flights were introduced and Chinese tourists were granted permission to visit Taiwan. In the first year alone, over 300,000 mainland Chinese traveled to Taiwan. Visitor numbers rose rapidly, peaking at

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around 4.2 million in 2015 - almost half of all tourists to Taiwan. The economic benefits were enormous, particularly for the retail, restaurant and hotel sectors.

However, political tensions dampened the upswing: following the election of Tsai Ing-wen (Democratic Progressive Party, DPP) in 2016 and her rejection of the “one-China principle”, Beijing drastically reduced the number of group tours. Chinese visitor numbers fell significantly, while Taiwan tried to compensate for the losses by increasing advertising in countries such as Japan and South Korea.

The COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 brought international tourism to an almost complete standstill. Taiwan only received 1.38 million tourists, including less than 200,000 from China. Even after the slight recovery in 2021, the numbers remained low: in 2023, Taiwan counted only 226,269 visitors from the mainland. Despite announcements to promote exchange, tourism remains far below previous peaks due to ongoing tensions.

## **Tourism from Taiwan to China**

Before 1987, Taiwanese were prohibited from traveling to China due to martial law. In order to maintain connections, many took the detour via third countries such as Hong Kong or Macau. It was only when the travel ban was lifted in 1987 that certain groups, including veterans and people with family ties to China, were officially allowed to visit the mainland. By 1988, China already had around 473,000 Taiwanese tourists, as Ian Rowen describes in his book *One China, Many Taiwans*.

A serious setback for travel occurred in 1994 with the incident at Qiandao Lake in Chun'an County in the Chinese province of Zhejiang, in which 24 Taiwanese tourists lost their lives. This tragedy led to a temporary halt in group travel and a slump in tourist exchange. Nevertheless, the figures recovered quickly: by 1999, Taiwanese visitors accounted for 9.6 percent of all foreign arrivals in China and generated 15.6 percent of the country's tourism revenue.

With the gradual easing of restrictions on leisure and individual travel, the number of trips grew rapidly: 1.2 million in 1992, 3.7 million in 2004 and, according to Chinese figures, an impressive 6.1 million in 2019. Interestingly, the official statistics on both sides diverge widely here. While Chinese sources put the number of Taiwanese tourists significantly higher, Taiwan's Tourism Administration reported just four million visitors for 2019. For 2023, Taiwan reported 1.8 million trips to China - a decline that is due to both the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing political tensions.

The economic influence of Taiwanese tourists on China remains limited, as they only make up a small proportion of the total flow of visitors. Nevertheless, outbound tourism from Taiwan to mainland China plays a multifaceted role. As Ian Rowen argues, it not only serves to promote economic relations and cultural exchange, but also reflects political tensions, particularly the ongoing sovereignty conflict between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. A comparative study by Larry Yu and Moo Hyung Chung emphasizes similar dynamics in tourism between Taiwan and China as well as between North and South Korea, where travel also fulfils a dual function as a bridge and an area of conflict.

## **Tourism as a means of exerting influence and a bridge of understanding**

Academic literature often emphasizes that China strategically uses economic instruments, including tourism, to strengthen Taiwan's economic dependence and to gain long-term political control. In this context, Ian Rowen describes how China began sending millions of Chinese tourists to the island in 2008, coinciding with an increased military presence near Taiwan. Rowen interprets this measure as an attempt by the Chinese government not only to intensify economic relations through the influx of tourists, but also to influence public opinion in Taiwan in favor of closer relations with the mainland.

A central aspect of this strategy is the deliberate instrumentalization of tourism as a means of political power, embodied in the slogan “Yi shang cu zheng, yi min cu guan” (“Doing politics through business to influence the government through the people”). Under then President Hu Jintao, this tactic was aimed at deepening Taiwan's economic dependence. However, this did not happen in isolation, but was accompanied by a massive military presence, which raised doubts about the peace-promoting intention of economic integration.

A concrete example of the political dimension of tourism was the economic pressure to which the Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung was subjected in 2009. Following a visit by the Dalai Lama and the screening of a film about a Uyghur leader in exile, Kaohsiung recorded a significant drop in Chinese tourist numbers - a reaction by Beijing to these events, which were perceived as a provocation. The economic losses and pressure from the tourism industry ultimately led to a “goodwill tour” to improve relations with China and to a reduction in funding for the film festival. This event impressively demonstrates how China uses tourist flows as leverage to influence political decisions in Taiwan.

At the same time, however, there are also perspectives that see tourism as a potential catalyst for peace and mutual understanding. Many Chinese tourists express admiration for their hosts' way of life and culture during their stay in Taiwan, which can certainly help to build bridges of understanding. However, the effect of tourism is ambivalent. Chinese tourism in Taiwan often helps to blur the boundaries between the two entities. In the regions heavily frequented by Chinese tourists, there is often a feeling of "being in China". This leads to a "mainlandization" in which local structures, itineraries and narrative strategies are oriented towards the preferences of Chinese visitors. Such developments show how profoundly tourism can shape perceptions and relations between Taiwan and China - both in terms of rapprochement and a subtle form of cultural appropriation.

## **Tourism as a political instrument: The case of Sun Moon Lake and Zhaishan Tunnel**

Tourism between Taiwan and China is not only an economic factor, but also an important political tool that emphasizes identity, territorial affiliation and national sovereignty. A particularly vivid example of this is Sun Moon Lake, one of the most famous tourist attractions in Taiwan. For Chinese tourists, Sun Moon Lake is often a destination that gives them the feeling of being in a familiar environment - almost like "home". However, the high number of Chinese visitors has caused some Taiwanese to feel that the area feels like mainland China due to the presence of many Chinese tourists. This leads to a sense of alienation, with some Taiwanese feeling distanced from what was once a purely Taiwanese destination.

The structure of the tourism industry at Sun Moon Lake has strong similarities with the practices of Chinese domestic tourism. This is evident from the research findings of Ian Rowen in his study *One China, Many Taiwans* (2014). This, combined with China's territorial claims to Taiwan, contributes to some Chinese tourists' perception of the island as part of the People's Republic of China. This perception is reinforced by the presence of Sun Moon Lake images on People's Republic of China passports. In addition, the Taiwanese tourism industry, in collaboration with Chinese tour operators, has adopted a model similar to domestic tourism in China, such as group tours and pre-organized itineraries. According to Rowen, institutionalized cooperation between Taiwanese providers and Chinese tour operators only began in 2010; there had been no comparable cooperation in this form before. Even if the tour guides often try to avoid political topics, their stories can lead to the emergence of different ideas of statehood.

Chih Yuan Woon and JJ Zhang provide another example of the complex link between tourism and political issues in their study, in which they examine the use of former military infrastructure in Taiwan, such as the Zhaishan Tunnel on the island of Kinmen. In an attempt to promote peaceful encounters between Chinese and Taiwanese tourists, these military relics have been purposefully repurposed as tourist attractions. The Zhaishan Tunnel has been turned into a symbolic place by various Taiwanese tourism authorities and stakeholders, creating an "affective atmosphere" - an "atmospheric force field" that provides a platform for visitors to exchange views on historical and cultural differences. This transformation shows how tourism is being used as a strategic means of identity building to shape and potentially de-escalate cross-Strait relations, while at the same time addressing the political dimensions of historical tensions.

Tourism at Sun Moon Lake and in the Zhaishan Tunnel illustrates how strongly tourism is linked to identity issues, territorial claims and national politics. Both examples show that tourism not only has an economic significance, but also plays a profound role in the perception of belonging and sovereignty. While Chinese tourism has brought economic benefits to Taiwan, it has also led to complex political and cultural discussions about belonging and the understanding of "statehood" between the two sides.

## **Conclusion: Current developments and outlook**

Tourism between Taiwan and China is therefore caught in a complex field of tension between political influence, economic interests and cultural identity. Many Taiwanese feel increasingly alienated due to the influx of Chinese tourists and the associated changes in their everyday lives. Despite the visible presence of Chinese symbols and currencies in popular tourist destinations, it is important not to misinterpret these elements as signs of potential assimilation. Rather, they reflect the growing complexity that tourism brings with it in a highly politicized context.

Opinion polls show a divided attitude towards Chinese tourism, with fears of potential negative impacts often outweighing the perceived economic benefits. There are also concerns within the Taiwanese travel industry about the structure of the tourism sector, such as unfair competition, delayed payments and cost pressures that threaten the sustainability of the industry.

China's use of tourism as a political tool could prove counterproductive. Instead of promoting greater economic integration, the political dimension of tourism may strengthen resistance in Taiwan to reunification. This development calls into question the potential of tourism to act as a bridge between the two sides. On the contrary, China's political and military build-up towards Taiwan makes the idea that tourism alone could lead to peaceful relations questionable.

Political tensions have a significant impact on the tourism sector, which is reflected in fluctuating travel regulations and sudden travel restrictions that are often introduced in response to geopolitical developments. This uncertainty leads to a vicious circle in which tourism is an economic factor, but also contributes to further polarization and the urge for national self-determination.

Tourism between Taiwan and China is proving to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it offers potential for cultural exchange and economic cooperation; on the other, it often exacerbates existing tensions and conflicts. The unequal economic benefits and exploitation within the industry raise questions about long-term sustainability. While large travel companies and certain regions benefit disproportionately, smaller companies and remote areas often miss out. In addition, tour guides are increasingly having to subordinate their labor to political and economic interests, which often has exploitative traits. The focus on low-cost mass travel increases the pressure on local resources, promotes social tensions and thus undermines the basis for a fair and sustainable tourism economy.

The future of tourism between Taiwan and China remains uncertain given the ongoing political tensions and geopolitical uncertainties. Even though efforts are being made to revitalize the sector, the political situation will largely determine whether tourism will actually function as an instrument of dialogue and understanding in the future or whether it will continue to be a means of political and economic power games.

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