Travel Along the New Silk Road: Understanding New Trends in Chinese Outbound Tourism

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As part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the New Silk Road spans four major civilisations of the Eastern and Western worlds, a region with four of the world's major religions, and three types of economies in developed, developing, and less developed countries. It also connects some of the world's major tourist resources, attractions, and destinations, including nearly 500 natural and cultural heritage sites, which represent 70% of such sites around the world. As China increasingly becomes an important tourist market for many countries along the New Silk Road, all of whose economic cooperation has intensified, the scale of tourism in those nations is expected to expand further. In particular, as China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced in 2017, during the period of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan the country anticipates exporting 150 million tourists and more than US $200 billion in tourism consumption to countries along the New Silk Road (People.com.cn 2017).

For those reasons, it is necessary to clarify aspects of the Chinese outbound tourism market as a new market trend, especially such tourism along the New Silk Road. To that purpose, this chapter presents a study that involved examining both historical statistical data and tourist-generated content regarding this trend. The historical data is mainly from the government or well-known authorities, such as the World Bank, State Statistical Bureau, etc. A comparison analysis method for historical statistical data was used for this research. As for the tourist-generated data, the 50 most-read travel comments were collected from one of the most popular travel websites in China (*Ctrip.com*). Both word frequency analysis and topic clustering methods were used in the analysis in order to understand Chinese tourists' perceptions of different destinations. This chapter thus presents an overview of Chinese outbound tourism in recent years, followed by a shift in focus to the top 10 destinations on the New Silk Road and the emerging behavioural patterns and preferences of the Chinese tourists who travel there.

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Overview of Recent Chinese Outbound Tourism

China's outbound tourism has experienced an upgraded transformation in recent years. Based on official statistics (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2018; World Bank 2018), three major characteristics of Chinese outbound tourism are clear. First, the number of Chinese outbound tourists has steadily increased in recent years, as previous research has attested (Dai et al. 2017). In 2017, Chinese citizens travelled outside China on more than roughly 130 million trips and spent approximately US $115.29 billion, thereby making them part of the largest outbound tourism market in the world. There are several reasons behind the continually growing trend of Chinese outbound tourists. In addition to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the enhancement of Mainland China's International status and swift economic development, the improving quality of life (Kim et al. 2005), flexible visa polices for Chinese tourists, and the problems (e.g. overcrowding, pollution) in domestic destinations (Chen et al. 2019) are the main reasons that lead Chinese people to travel aboard. Second, the total consumption by outbound Chinese tourists has also risen. In 2012, the overseas consumption of Chinese citizens totalled US $102 billion, which surpassed that of US citizens. The continuous increase of China's gross domestic product stands as the most likely reason behind such growth, which has prompted a steady increase in the disposable income of Chinese citizens. According to the World Bank (2018), the total overseas consumption of Chinese citizens has ranked first in the world since 2014, which demonstrates their robust power as consumers abroad. Third, the structure of Chinese consumption in recent years has been transformed, especially in shopping trends that have increasingly diversified and become more personalised. The top five sources of consumption among Chinese tourists are shopping, group tour fees, food & beverages, entrance tickets, and transportation. In particular, shopping remains the top consumption behaviour among Chinese tourists, as supported by previous findings (Meng et al. 2019). At the same time, a shift in the rationale of consumption among Chinese tourists has also occurred, which highlights their increased demand for profoundly local experiences regarding food choices, the exploration of natural sites, outdoor sports, and urban recreation (China Tourism Academy 2018a).

Who Are the Chinese Outbound Tourists?

To better understand Chinese outbound tourists, it is necessary to identify some of their major characteristics. First, they are mostly women. During the past three years, women represented 60% of all Chinese tourists overseas, whereas men accounted for only 40% (China Tourism Academy 2017). Second, by age, those in their thirties continue to form the backbone of China's outbound tourists, given their wealth and abundant time for leisure activities (China Tourism Academy 2017). Moreover, the proportion of senior tourists is expected to rise, which will require additional attention from researchers and industry professionals in the future. Third, most Chinese

outbound tourists are from first-tier cities in China, including Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. At the same time, the tourism market appears to show a rapid increase in tourists from second- and third-tier cities, including Tianjin, Qingdao, Zhuhai, and Xi'an, whose populations of tourists thus exhibit clear potential for expansion (China Tourism Academy 2014, 2017). Fourth, according to China Tourism Academy (2018c), group travel and independent travel each represented over 40% of all tourism among Chinese tourists in 2017. Beyond that, however, tailored travel experiences have emerged as a new trend in outbound tourism among Chinese tourists, which reflects their desire for high-quality, personalised tourism experiences. Fifth and last, regarding the spread of destinations, places in Asia, especially East Asia (e.g. Thailand, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam), have been hotspots for Chinese tourists (Lin et al. 2015). Driven by the Belt and Road Initiative, outbound travel from China is becoming more convenient for Chinese citizens, and countries in Europe and North Africa along the New Silk Road, including Morocco, Turkey, and Tunisia, have become so-called "dark horse" destinations in recent years (China Tourism Academy 2018b, c).

The Top 10 Destinations Along the New Silk Road: Chinese Tourists' Behavioural Patterns and Preferences

To elucidate how the Belt and Road Initiative has influenced Chinese outbound tourism, the list of the top 10 destinations along the New Silk Road for Chinese tourists abroad serves as an important indicator of their tourism behaviours. Data from the travel agency Ctrip.com and China Tourism Academy were accessed to determine that list and changes to the ranking of countries therein. For historical statistics, since the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed by the Chinese government in 2015, data from 2013 and 2017 were accessed to allow a comparison of trends in recent years (see Table 18.1).

As Table 18.1 shows, changes in the top destinations for Chinese outbound tourists have occurred due to the expansion of the New Silk Road. On the one hand, the near-monopoly of South East Asian destinations became ever stronger from 2013 to 2017. Thailand and Vietnam remained the most popular destinations for Chinese tourists, for they received 980 and 400 million tourist arrivals, respectively, in 2017, while Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia all moved up one or two places in the ranking. In particular, increased rates of Chinese tourist arrivals in Indonesia (174.53%) and Cambodia (296.07%) were among the highest. As a result, South East Asian destinations boosted their share in the Chinese outbound tourism market and improved their reputations as hotspots for Chinese tourists.

On the other hand, European destinations have become less desirable amid fierce tourism competition, even though Russia experienced the greatest growth rate of Chinese tourist arrivals from 2013 to 2017 (306.50%). In fact, most traditional European destinations, including Italy, France, and Germany, dropped by one or two

Table 18.1 Changes in the top 10 destinations along the New Silk Road

Ranking	Country	Chinese tourist arrivals (2013)	Chinese tourist arrivals (2017)	Changes in arrivals rates (2013 to 2017) (%)	Change in ranking (2013 to 2017)
1	Thailand	463.73	980	111.33	0
2	Vietnam	190	400	110.53	0
3	Singapore	173.4	322.7	86.10	+ 1
4	Italy	185.02	307.73	66.32	− 1
5	Malaysia	150	265	76.67	+ 1
6	Indonesia	75	205.9	174.53	+ 2
7	France	170	200	17.65	− 2
8	Germany	87.09	155.57	78.63	− 1
9	Russia	36.9	150	306.50	+ 1
10	Cambodia	30.55	121	296.07	+ 2

Sources China Tourism Academy 2014, 2018b; Ctrip.com 2015.

places in their ranking. In addition, the growth rate of Chinese tourist arrivals in most European destinations was lower than that of their counterparts in South East Asia. For instance, the rate of Chinese arrivals to France increased by only 17.65% during the five-year period and amounted to roughly 200 million in 2017, which was far less than such rates in Thailand and Vietnam. Consequently, the market share of traditional European destinations in the Chinese outbound tourism market decreased from 30.67 to 26.17% from 2013 to 2017.

Aside from those hotspots, countries in South East Europe and North Africa along the New Silk Road, such as Morocco, Turkey, and Tunisia, have become dark horse destinations in recent years due to the development of the Belt and Road Initiative. To better understand Chinese tourist's changing behaviour, we classified popular destinations along the New Silk Road into hotspots and dark horse destinations with reference to the numbers of Chinese tourist arrivals and changes in the rate of their arrivals from 2013 to 2017. Whereas the hotspots include places in South East Asia and traditional European destinations, the dark horse destinations include those areas in North East Africa and South East Europe. In detail, distance from China, flight time and cost, cultural similarity or difference, and overall price level were selected as indicators to illustrate characteristics of the four types of destinations (see Table 18.2). Subsequently, a total of the 50 most read travel notes including travel-related comments and reviews posted by Chinese tourists on one of the most popular travel websites (*Ctrip.com*) were collected. Topic clustering and word frequency analysis were analysed using ROST CM6 software to elucidate their behaviours and preferences regarding different types of destinations (see Fig. 18.1).

Table 18.2 Classification of destinations along the New Silk Road

	Hotspots		Dark horse destinations	
	South-east Asia	Traditional European destinations	North-east Africa	South-east Europe
Distance	Close	Far	Far	Far
Flight time	2–7 h	20–25 h	20–40 h	20–25 h
Flight cost	Low	High	High	Middling
Cultural similarity	Similar	Different	Different	Different
Price level	Low	High	High	Middling

Fig. 18.1 Word clouds of Chinese tourists' perceptions of four types of destinations along the New Silk Road

South East Asia

In the results, the top four sorts of attractions in South East Asia for Chinese tourists were beaches, architectural sites, tourism infrastructure, and restaurants. Most mentioned by the tourists was tourism infrastructure in the region, especially when it afforded convenience. As one tourist described, her decision-making process about selecting accommodations indeed prioritised convenience: "The Eastin Grand Hotel was a great place to stay, with a perfect location. The hotel entrance was directly connected to the BTS [Bangkok Mass Transit System] station. The service was great, and the room was comfortable. The breakfast buffet was very good" (Blogger: Shishixiaofei 2018.02.05). Convenience was also prized for shopping. "When I came to Thailand this time, all of the 7-11s supported WeChat and Alipay, and many shopping malls were supported as well, which was super-convenient" (Blogger: Shishixiaofei 2018.02.05).

The second-most important aspect for Chinese tourists in South East Asia was food (22.67%). Great variety and low cost make South East Asia a culinary paradise for Chinese tourists. As one traveller mentioned, "You can walk all around while eating, which is a great experience" (Blogger: Kongqibeier 2017.11.01). Third was distinctiveness. As a blogger recalled about his travel experience, "The roof of KL [Kuala Lumpur] Sentral is also very distinctive. I don't remember when I developed a habit of looking up after entering some buildings, but I think it's a very good habit" (Blogger: Zhangdaqiang 2014.07.09).

Traditional European Destinations

Content analysis revealed that the general perceptions of Chinese tourists about traditional European destinations were positive and that "famous" was the most common term used by them to describe such destinations. One Ctrip.com user wrote that the Louvre is "one of the three major museums in the world. You can't miss it when you visit Paris" (Blogger: queenquan 2014.07.03).

Based on comments collected from Ctrip.com, European culture and shopping were the two primary focuses of Chinese tourists in traditional European destinations, more than 90% of whom shared their experiences of European culture and their pursuit of seeing famous tourism attractions. In terms of shopping, tourists who wrote on Ctrip.com shared shopping tips, especially about luxury goods and services. As many of them commented, "The main purpose of coming to the opera house with the old Buddha behind it is to go shopping. It's very convenient indeed. The shopping guides are all Chinese. It's very convenient to buy things" (Blogger: Aiwenwen 2014.07.09). To meet Chinese tourists' demand for shopping, merchants in Germany have made arrangements specifically for Chinese tourists by providing Alipay and WeChat Pay in their mobile tour guide services.

Another interesting behavioural pattern among Chinese tourists is the preference for multi-country travel rather than touring only one country. For example, they often combine a trip to Germany with a visit to other countries such as France, Switzerland, Italy and Austria. One of the possible explanations for this is that time and price are the main considerations for many Chinese tourists, therefore they like to visit as many places as possible within a limited time (Raspor et al. 2012; Skivalou and Filippidi 2017).

North East Africa

According to the results of our analysis, local culture attracted the most attention (67.60%) from Chinese tourists in North East Africa, who repeatedly mentioned major tourist attractions such as temples, pyramids, and museums while sharing their travel experience online. In their comments, "mysterious" ranked among the top keywords for North East Africa, and most Chinese tourists were clearly astonished by the exoticism and spectacle of North East African culture. As some bloggers wrote, "Visiting the Valley of the Kings and temples in Luxor: what a mysterious appearance of Egypt that finally came to my eyes" (Blogger: Yelaoshi 2016.06.09), and "People, pay great attention! On the wall of the temple is a mysterious picture! A great God!" (Blogger: Duguhu 2018.10.12).

Wildlife was the second-most popular attraction (32.40%) for Chinese tourists in North East Africa, particularly that provided by national parks and nature reserves. Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese tourists generally have a strong desire to take photographs, and as one traveller commented, "I have high expectations, but it wasn't easy to find the animals. Sometimes you can't find an animal after an hour or even longer. But I didn't want to miss any opportunity for photographs" (Blogger: Caiweihuang 2015.05.08). Although taking photos of wild animals is difficult, Chinese tourists nevertheless attempt to pursue that enjoyable experience.

South East Europe

Increasingly attracting the attention of Chinese tourists, places in South East Europe have become dark horse destinations. Previous studies have shown that as Chinese tourists have become more experienced, the second-tier destinations began to become popular for them in their search for new and different experiences (Jørgensen et al. 2018). From 2016 to 2017, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary all witnessed more than 50% growth in their rates of Chinese visitors. More than any other country in the region, however, Serbia's growth rate increased by 8.66 from 2016 to 2017, largely due to its visa exemption for Chinese citizens (PinChainTourism 2017).

History and culture were the most attractive features for Chinese tourists travelling in South East Europe (96.33%). In fact, 29.76% of keywords in online comments by Chinese tourists related to history and culture. Sarajevo, for example, is famous for its involvement in World War I, while Serbia is renowned for the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in 1999.

The general perceptions of Chinese tourists about South East Europe are that the region is beautiful and enjoyable. As one traveller mentioned, "Surrounded by mountains and rivers, Montenegro is a country with very beautiful natural scenery. We spent two hours traveling around the city" (Blogger: pd****7, 2014.07.20). Another stated, "When you overlook the panoramic view of the chain bridge, it offers another source of magnificent enjoyment" (Blogger: haruxu 2017.10.26).

Overview of Chinese Outbound Tourism Along the New Silk Road

Overall, it can be assumed that in the future, Chinese outbound tourism will continue to grow, especially among citizens from second- and third-tier cities in China. A shift in the rationale for travelling among Chinese tourists can also be expected to occur from the current orientation towards shopping to more diverse, personal reasons. Amid the development of the New Silk Road, China has continuously strengthened its tourism cooperation with countries along the route by implementing visa-free policies and promoting the so-called "Year of China–Kazakhstan Tourism", among other things. The countries along the New Silk Road have become a new force in the Chinese outbound tourism market and offer increasingly diverse destinations for China's tourists. As a result, increasingly more Chinese tourists can be expected to travel along the New Silk Road in the future.

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