

Competing Internationally for the Chinese Tourist Market with Consideration for Local Thai Residents

Korawan Sangkakorn, Ph.D

Social Research Institute (SRI), Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Korawan.phd@gmail.com

Pachernwaat Srichai, Ph.D

Social Research Institute (SRI), Chiang Mai University, Thailand

dr.pachernwaat@gmail.com

Ravee Art Phoewhawm, Ph.D

International Business School (IBS), Chongqing Technology and Business University, China

rtc999@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study focuses on the economic, societal, social, and environmental impact of the behavior of Chinese tourists vacationing in four provinces in Northern Thailand on the local community as perceived by local residents. It aims to develop a solid understanding of the viewpoint of Thai locals, most notably their concerns about their own wellbeing and the preservation of their environment, and seeks to determine how the number of inbound tourists from China can be estimated effectively; a key issue to ensure proper planning amenable to all stakeholders. It also offers suggestions and a practical guideline for tour operators and agents to remain competitive in the Chinese tourist market. Data was collected from a survey questionnaire sent to local residents, open-ending interviews conducted with two representatives of the governmental tourism agencies and manager of local tour companies, and personal observations. The results of this qualitative research indicate that many aspects of tourism in Northern Thailand need to be further refined before the region is able to effectively and sustainably cope with a large number of Chinese tourists, maintain its beauty, and preserve the locals' way of life. Any plan to further develop the Thai tourist industry in Northern Thailand must aim for a more balanced approach that benefits all stakeholders involved. Only a joint effort from all those involved will assist in propelling the ideas within the guideline for tour operators and agents to remain truly competitive in the Chinese tourist market.

Keywords: Chinese Tourists, Cultural, Economic, Environmental, and Societal Impact, Practical Guideline

1. Introduction

Given the People's Republic of China's (China) fast-growing economy and huge population, an increasing number of Chinese citizens find themselves fortunate enough to have disposable income for traveling abroad. According to Kiatkawsin and Han (2017), many of these newly-prosperous Chinese want to travel to places with a rich history and culture, a lush natural environment, entertainment, and most of all, abundant shopping venues. With the influx of tourists from mainland and the depth of the Chinese market as a reservoir for potential outbound tourists, tour operators and agents the world over are eager to attract Chinese to popular destinations and ensure that they want to come back in the future (Ma et al., 2018).

One destination of choice for many Chinese is Thailand, which has one of the most developed tourism markets in Asia. Referred to as the ‘Land of Smiles’ for its fame hospitality, the country boasts beautiful beaches, historical places and eco-attractions (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2016). It also has affordable accommodation. For all these reasons, it is expected to remain one of the top tourist locations in the years to come and a prime destination for Chinese tourists. Thailand, though, is facing increasing competition from neighboring countries, Vietnam and Myanmar in particular. Among other measures, this is forcing the Thai government to improve land connection with China (Bangkok has been in dialogue with Beijing for the construction of a high-speed 873 km line through Laos). The high-speed line, which would transport Chinese tourists (and manufactured goods) to Thailand, is one of the many plans aimed at promoting Thailand as a ‘Preferred Destination’.

However, there have been growing concerns about the behavior of Chinese tourists whose routine habits can offend local residents. This has been the case in Thailand. In spite of the economic windfall which Chinese tourists provide in the form of investments and business and job opportunities, an increasing number of Thai locals feel that they are losing some of their traditional ways of life and are seeing a degradation of their environment. (Gong, Detchkhajornjaroensri, & Knight, 2018). Some view the lack of cultural awareness on the part of Chinese tourists as a source of tension and misunderstanding between them (Jing, Lei, & Thanalerdsopit, 2017). Such negative impacts have led to a backlash and the posting of online messages highlighting some unfavorable traits of Chinese tourists that give the impression that they are no longer welcome to Thailand (Malikhao, 2017). Given the proliferation of video clips on social media promoting negative stereotypes of Chinese tourists, tour operators and travel agents find themselves in a bind and struggling at times to persuade potential Chinese tourists that it is safe to have a vacation in Thailand.

This study focuses on Chinese tourists in Thailand and on the battle which Thai tour operators and agents are facing in the global competition for tourists from mainland. It aims to assist them in their effort to keep bringing Chinese tourists to Thailand and compete in the Chinese tourist market by developing a solid understanding of the viewpoint of local Thai residents, most notably their concerns about their own wellbeing. Specifically, focusing on four provinces in Northern Thailand highly sought by Chinese tourists who flocked there in high numbers year after year, it seeks to determine how Thai people living in those four provinces view the economic, social, cultural, and environmental impact of Chinese tourism on their wellbeing. Collecting and monitoring such feedback from locals will alert the industry to the adjustments needed and aid to implement them (Lee, Jeon, & Kim, 2011). It will also assist them in finding ways to lessen the negative impact felt by local residents and at the same time keep tourists satisfied enough while preventing any misbehavior that would offend locals (Li et al., 2010). Addressing these issues, however, requires reliable estimation on the volume of incoming visitors. To attain these objectives, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the local Thai residents’ viewpoint on the economic, societal, cultural, and environmental impact of Chinese tourists’ behavior?

RQ2: How can the number of inbound tourists from China be estimated effectively?

RQ3: What should a practical guideline for tour operators and agents to remain competitive in the Chinese tourist market look like?

2. Literature Review

- *Economic Impact of Tourism*

Chinese tourists vacationing in Thailand generate substantial revenue for the local economy (Tourism Statistics, 2019). For the period 2017-2019, the Thai tourism industry contributed around 12.91 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Thailand, with a significant portion of it coming from international tourists (Statista Research Department, 2020). From this figure, it can reasonably be inferred that tourism equally contributes the local economy and that, as the largest group of foreign visitors to Thailand, Chinese tourists have been having a huge economic impact on these communities, providing, among other benefits, meaningful employment to locals (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2019). But the benefits of tourism do not evenly trickle down to all locals (Lyu et al., 2017). While it is imperative to hold onto a partnership with a nation, China, that brings large numbers of tourists, there also needs to be a strong awareness of the necessity for cultural and natural environmental sustainability (van Niekerk, 2014). This may require more investment in a variety of tourist attractions at different sites in order to spread visitors between them and avoid having them concentrated in overwhelming numbers at only a few attractions. Cities, towns, and rural areas that are able to attract the quality of tourists they want should be empowered by authorities to decide the best approach in providing hospitality to visitors and be involved in designing and planning the phases of such proposals (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017).

- *Societal Impact of Tourism*

Thai locals who are part of the everyday tourism scene make up an intricate dynamic condition that can be seen as either welcoming to or hostile towards visitors from another country (Piuchan, Chan, & Kaale, 2018). Generally, they believe that they should be treated with courtesy and that any sign of deviancy from expected behaviors and the law and any lack of discipline will make things uncomfortable. They find it difficult to get acclimated to such situations. Some of them even resent any effort from government officials to promote tourism in their hometown (Gao, Zhang, & Huang, 2018). They also expect any government policies designed to help restoring amicable relationships between tourists and local residents to show positive results, otherwise the problems will be aggravated (Chen, Hsu, & Li, 2018). The well-being and welfare of the local community's natural habitat is thus vital for holding tourism infrastructures together. Conversely, people will be able to enjoy their travel experience as long as there is safety and security at all times and the social environment provides a warm welcome for all (Hatipoglu, Alvarez, & Ertuna, 2016). An agreement by all sides to respect the privacy and comfort of others is likely to uplift the spirits of all (Khodadadi, 2016). In short, a balance between the satisfaction of Chinese tourists and the need to maintain the lifestyles and safety of the local community members and provide meaningful employment has to be achieved (Lyu et al., 2017).

- *Cultural Impact of Tourism*

Culture holds people together, shapes their identity, and determines their behavior. It varies from one country to another and even within each country as several sub-cultures may often be found (e.g. the local culture in Northeast Thailand). So, when foreign tourists interfere with Thai locals, some of their behaviors may not align with their respective values or embrace their beliefs (Santa & Tiatco, 2019). When two or more different cultural groups meet without much information about each other, miscommunication may occur and mistakes can be made. When people cannot discern the minds of others who are culturally different from them, they may

judge them by their actions, often based on their customs and traditions in handling mundane affairs (Wen, Huang, & Ying, 2019). However, this does not give a license to anyone to try to change or correct things they see as not being their own culture. Instead, locals may want to build a bridge of understanding by making some changes in their traditional practices to put foreign visitors at ease (Tuzov, Ansah, & Boonanant, 2020). The tradeoff is that tourists will be expected to reciprocate by displaying an interest in the local culture and being aware of at least some basic behaviors that are culturally proper (Lin et al., 2020).

- Environmental Impact of Tourism

One issue of growing concerns to Thai locals is the natural landscapes surrounding them which they feel entitled to enjoy and the sense that foreign tourists are not doing enough to preserve them as massive crowding spoils their beauty (Zou & Meng, 2020). Another challenging issue in tourism is having to deal with waste and pollution from sites catering to travelers that do not have a proper system to curb the rise of garbage from product consumption (Saqib et al., 2019). Moreover, locals not involved in the tourism industry often find themselves competing for space and safety on the road with convoys of vehicles overcrowding the lanes and rushing to get tourists to their scheduled visit sites, which leads to traffic congestion and frequent road accidents (Han, Lee, & Hwang, 2016). Making matters worse, when accidents occur, locals must often go through painful negotiations with foreign visitors on taking responsibility and paying for the damage caused (Lai et al., 2018).

- Remaining Competitive in the Chinese Tourist Market

In this era of social media, personal reviews by individuals who have actually been to tourist attractions and provide information on what to see, do, and especially buy, have risen to great and increasing levels of significance (Blichfeldt, Hird, & Kvistgaard, 2014). In order to generate a continuous positive buzz, feedback is required from all stakeholders to decide how the available resources should be utilized for promoting tourism events, activities, and interesting sites for the future. By posting accurate and relevant information on areas of interest, local authorities would be providing the means for potential visitors to visualize vacation plans in particular areas, thus reinforcing tour sites' visibility in tourists' eyes and extending the areas' sustainability as tourist attractions in the long term (Lia et al., 2017). To ensure that information is gathered with the intent of acting on it and that attention is paid to the intricate details and implicit messages from travelers' responses, an outside party should be involved in making the critical assessments on how each of the stakeholders is interacting with the infrastructures in place (Manthiou, Kang, & Schrier, 2014). Unbiased information can lead to greater understanding and a better vision that support quality and standard in traveling (Bogicevic et al., 2013). Feedback from tourists can be applied to challenge tour operators' established practices and improve approaches for providing services in their business (Farmaki, 2013).

- Forecasting the Right Number of Inbound Tourists from China

Forecasting the right number of Chinese tourists arriving every season requires the examination of the multiple factors that shape the decisions of Chinese travelers (Tsuar & Chen, 2017). A basic approach is to research the demographics of the targeted population. This includes the population size and the average discretionary income allotted for travel plans. Keeping abreast of the changing market environment, rechecking official public statistics on the expected number of potential visitors, and attending forums to learn about the latest

methodologies available to obtain accurate tourism data are also very helpful (Tsuar & Chen, 2017). China possesses a vast population with diverse social backgrounds, so acquiring data on this target market should start with a basic understanding of the economic climate and the market structure. Seasoned travelers, i.e., those who travel frequently, are an excellent source of information for promoting tours specifically tailored to accommodate a particular purpose, be culture or ecotourism. Useful information can only be collected when those involved are primarily concerned with what really matters to travelers and with helping them to have the best experiences as opposed to merely focusing on following procedures (Almeida, Costab, & da Silva, 2017). Information disseminated to other stakeholders in the network should be open for dialogue, allowing others to share their concerns and ideas on how to redesign tour programs. Workable ideas with clear benefits could be highlighted in marketing materials provided to future travelers in China who have not yet decided on their next vacation destination (Clayton & Boxil, 2012).

Knowing the number of Chinese tourists likely to visit the country would be helpful to making critical preparations to accommodate them in large numbers (Wu, Zeng, & Xie, 2017). In particular, the figures obtained would be most useful to recruit staff equipped with the skills that would positively impact the appeal of local attractions. The specific details that go into large-scale operations involving time, resources, and energy need to be carefully coordinated among tour operators (Lyu et al., 2017). Business owners, tour operators and community leaders will need to decide what inflow level of Chinese tourists is beneficial for the well-being and health of all stakeholders, and whether there should be a limit on the number of Chinese visitors despite the high demand for Thailand's attraction (Ryu, Lee, & Kim, 2012).

3. Methodology

To meet the objectives of this study and answer the three research questions, this study relied on a survey (RQ1), open-ended interviews (RQ2 and RQ3), and observations.

- Population Sample

This study focuses on the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, and Lampang, located in the northern region of Thailand. The targeted sample groups were tourism stakeholders and local Thai residents who have had ample interactions with tourists from China and have enjoyed access to the hospitality and transportation services provided by local entrepreneurs and business organizations on a daily basis. According to Yamanae (1973), with a sample size at 95% confidence level, the study sample should include 400 people. Accordingly, a total of 2,116 local Thai residents and tourism stakeholders took part in the survey. In order to obtain an accurate picture of the local perception of the issues raised, the population surveyed was split among the four provinces targeted. In addition, 20 people selected among tourism business operators, travel organization association personnel, and government personnel, were interviewed. Table 1 shows the breakdown by provinces of the stakeholders surveyed.

Table 1: Breakdown of Thai Stakeholders Surveyed

Province /Groups	Population	Yamaanae's Suggestion	Studied Samples
Chiang Mai	1,779,254	400	896
Chiang Rai	1,282,544	400	400
Lampang	738,316	400	400
Lamphun	405,075	400	400
Tourism stakeholders	-	-	20
Total	4,205,189	-	2,116

Source: Compiled by the authors for this study

The sample population included a predominantly male population (70%). The age of those who took part in the study ranged from 22-30 years old (32%), 31-40 (34%), 41-50 (25%), 51-60 (7%), and 61 and over (2%). Most of them held an undergraduate (65%) or a postgraduate degree (25%). Only 10 percent ended their schooling with a high school diploma. As to their monthly revenue, 55 percent had an income of 20,000 Baht (USD670) or below, 25 percent an income ranging between 21,000-40,000 Baht (USD675-1,330), 15 percent an income ranging between 41,000-50,000 Baht (USD680-1,665), and only 5 percent an income between 51,000-60,000 Baht (USD685-2,000).

- **Data Collection**

- *Questionnaire*

The overall purpose of the questionnaire was to ask local Thai residents to provide their opinion on the impact of Chinese tourists on the local economy, society, culture, and the environment. Each section of the survey focused on one of these four specific impacts. The survey was conducted over three months. Participants were encouraged to provide detailed responses. The section on the economic impact investigated the desired attributes of the revenues generated by Chinese tourists, new business opportunities, employment, key tourism investments made by Chinese investors, and concerns about rising prices. The next section on the impact on society focused on Chinese visitors' behavior with respect to privacy, peace, manners, use of public facilities, personal safety, and property security. Local residents living in areas with high levels of tourist density were also asked if they were willing to adapt to tourists' behaviors and attitudes for the sake of income and to work with the public sector to promote tourism to generate greater numbers of Chinese tourists in the future. They were also asked about their confidence in the government's intention to implement a policy to alleviate some of the problems caused by Chinese tourists.

The following section on the cultural impact sought the views of Thai locals on how Chinese tourists behave towards local customs and traditions and on whether they were willing to adjust their traditional practices to meet the demands and expectations of Chinese tourists. Participant were also asked whether Chinese tourists were willing to understand the Lanna culture and if they thought Chinese tourists were willing to alter some of their behaviors to display more respect towards the Lanna culture.¹ Finally, in the section on the effects on the local environment, local residents were urged to express any concerns they may have about the waste and pollution generated by Chinese around tourist sites and the impact of Chinese visitors on traffic and the frequency of road accidents. One question specifically asked them

¹ The Lanna Kingdom began in the year of 1296 and ended in 1939. The name Lanna meant a million rice fields. The culture was built on craftsmanship trade in creating household items, agricultural tools, and weapons from silver, gold, and metal which featured artistic designs of life events, customs, religious ceremony, and community appreciation, thus identifying the Lanna cultural way of living (Lekuthai, 2008).

whether they felt stressed when trying to negotiate with Chinese on the liability they incurred. The issue of not taking enough action in protecting the natural landscape was also brought up.

- Open-Ended Interviews

For RQ2, two open-ended interviews were conducted with representatives of the TAT and the Sports and Tourism Ministry, respectively, to learn about their methods for estimating the incoming number of Chinese tourists. Due to their busy schedule and the limited staff, interviews were granted with only one person from each organization.

For RQ3, ten open-ended interviews were conducted with managers of local tour companies (five in Chiang Mai, two in Chiang Rai, two in Lampang, and one in Lamphun). The main purpose was to discuss the practical guidelines that should be implemented to ensure that tour operators and agents remain competitive in the Chinese tourist market. Each local tour companies had a representative discuss the issue raised on behalf of his/her working colleagues who were busy with their work.

- Observations

Social media outlets such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and online traveling websites, were examined to further learn about the local residents' positive/negative viewpoints on Chinese tourists' traveling behavior in the four provinces targeted in this study. Because of the sense of freedom of speech generally associated with social media and the anonymity which they procure, these sources were quite helpful in developing a deeper understanding of local residents' views on the economic, social, cultural, and environmental impact of Chinese tourists on their provinces.

4. Results and Discussion

This section begins with RQ1 and a discussion of local Thai residents' viewpoint on the economic, societal, cultural, and environmental impact of Chinese tourists' behavior when vacationing in their community. It presents the results of the survey conducted in the four Northern provinces (as noted earlier, 2116 viable responses were collected). The responses showed that 635 local residents (30%) believed that the arrival of Chinese tourists has had an economic impact on the community. The other 70 percent (1481 people) did not think this was the case at all. Whilst 423 Thai locals (20%) felt that Chinese tourists' behavior has had a societal impact, 1693 of them (80%) thought the opposite. 593 of them (28%) believed that it has had an impact on Thai culture whereas 1524 (72%) didn't see any impact on the culture. Finally, on the issue of the environmental impact, 466 local residents (22%) thought there was an impact. The other 1651 respondents (78%) disagreed. The subsequent sub-sections provide a detailed report of each of the four impacting factors.

- Thai Residents' Viewpoint on the Economic Impact of Chinese Tourists' Behavior

Local Thai residents in the northern region hypothesize that if a large volume of tourists from mainland China consistently travel to their area, it will increase their chances of attracting tourists from other nations (Europe, North America, South Korea, and Japan in particular) who are categorized as quality travelers. This is a strategy believed to also be applicable when Thais draw more of their fellow citizens to a dining spot or an event; large crowds are expected to draw even more people to the attractions. Unsurprisingly, as Chart 1 shows, locals see the income generated by Chinese tourists' spending as the most impactful feature of tourism (35.1%). 36.2 percent of them noticed that their revenue has increased with the massive arrival of Chinese tourists in the region and 34.6 percent indicated that this has created new business opportunities for them. Some of the Thai residents surveyed also believed that this has had a moderate impact on employment (35.6%) and on some key investments made by Chinese

investors in the tourism sector (33.7%). However, 40.1 percent of them expressed concern over the slight increase in the price of food, beverages, and tourist goods and services. Meanwhile, there were also some apprehension about the fact that revenue from quality tourists seems to be decreasing (40%).

It is clear from these findings that tour operators and agents must recognize that whilst the rise of foreign visitors, Chinese tourists in particular, increases revenues, creates new business opportunities, enhances employment, and boosts investment, there is also an uneasiness about the resultant price increase, especially felt by those struggling to make both ends meet on a daily basis. If the wellbeing of the local residents who are not part of the tourism industry is to be genuinely taken into consideration, tour operators and agents should have a dialogue with these stakeholders to devise a way for them to purchase goods at an affordable price. Another way of looking after the wellbeing of all groups could be to determine how these locals could be provided with a commercial opportunity to offer unique services to Chinese tourists without being exposed to high financial risks. If such services met the needs of Chinese tourists, tour operators and agents could, for instance, assist those interested locals in obtaining a valid license to operate their businesses legally.

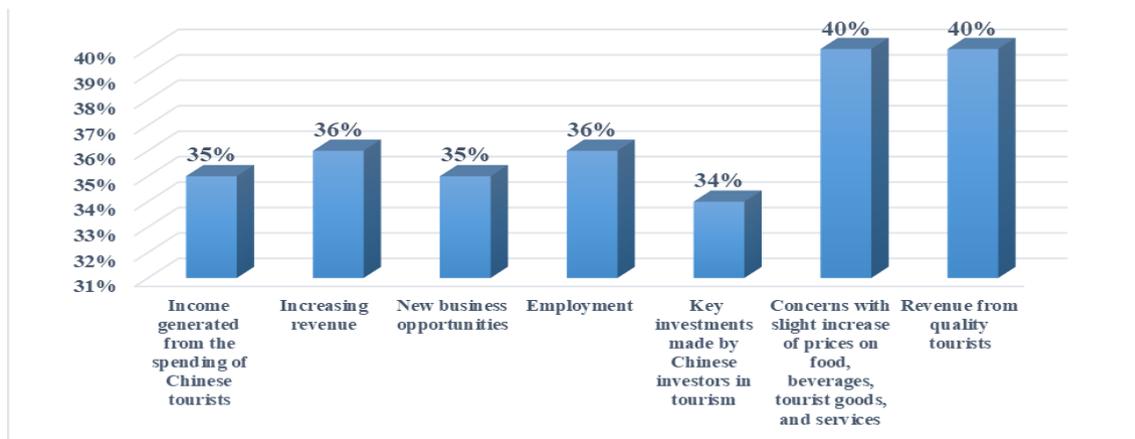


Chart 1: Local Residents' Viewpoint on Economic Impact of Chinese Tourists' Behavior
Source: Compiled by the authors for this study

- Thai Residents' Viewpoint on the Societal Impact of Chinese Tourists' Behavior

Overall, the percentages shown in Chart 2 point to a moderate societal impact of Chinese tourists' presence on the local community. One thing that is clear from the survey, interviews, and observations, though, is that when Chinese tourists visit these northern provinces, a majority of the locals (51.7%) feel that there is a lack of privacy and peace around their homes as they are constantly exposed (and subjected) to the activities and events designed to attract tourists. They perceive it as a nuisance to the community. The noise, traffic and resulting pollution make tourist areas less comfortable for those who need to conduct their personal business in those places. 64.7 percent of the locals reported being shocked at the poor manners of Chinese tourists who, for instance, have no qualms, smoking in non-smoking areas, leaving a mess after completing their activities, spitting on sidewalks and roads, not putting waste in trash receptacles, and not complying with rules and procedures when visiting various sites, most notably temples. The biggest complaints (64.3%) relate to their lack of respect using university campuses and public areas to wash themselves or their clothes and their reckless handling of various modes of transportation (rented cars or motorcycles). In-keeping with these issues is the locals' feedback and concerns about their safety and the security of property (34.5%). Yet, in spite of all these daily inconveniences, some local people, mindful that

Chinese do bring much needed revenue to the four provinces, have adapted to the behavior and attitudes of Chinese tourists (37.5%) and are willing to work with the public sector to promote tourism to generate greater inflows of Chinese tourists in the future (36.1%). Some also think it is important to have a good impression of Chinese tourists (30%). A sizeable number of locals, however, have very little confidence in the government’s intention, let alone its long-term commitment, to implement policies for alleviating some of the problems caused by Chinese tourists (27.1%).

Issues of manners, public facilities use, and verbal and visual communication need to be addressed in a timely manner by tour operators and agents in order to develop a sense of moral awareness that will help make Chinese tourists welcomed by the local community. Specifically, it should be made clear to them that certain comportments that are considered perfectly normal in China are simply not acceptable in Thailand as they clash with fundamental values which Thai people hold in high respect and in fact project a very negative image of China. Of course, this should be done in a sensitive way that shows a willingness on both sides to adapt and work with the public sector. Therefore, people in direct contact with Chinese tourists would be well advised to find a way of communicating that is both friendly and effective enough to convince them to behave in ways that will avoid irritating local people.

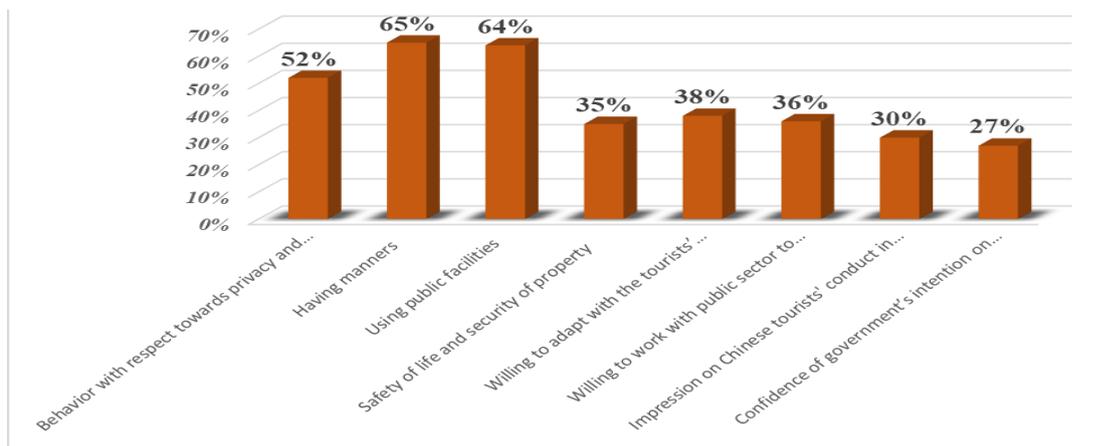


Chart 2: Local Residents’ Viewpoint on the Societal Impact of Chinese Tourists’ Behavior
Source: Compiled by the authors for this study

- Thai Residents’ Viewpoint on the Cultural Impact of Chinese Tourists’ Behavior

Chart 3 makes it quite clear that the majority of respondents believe that if more Chinese tourists were to come to the upper northern region, they would most likely be disrespectful to the local customs and traditions such as funeral events. It is common for bereaved families and their relatives to host funerals that can take up time and space in public areas close to some of the favorite spots of Chinese tourists, whom some locals (31.1%) believe are not fond of ceremonies honoring the deceased. 36.1 percent of community residents, however, feel that their traditional practices should be adjusted to meet the needs of Chinese tourists. Provincial natives (46.0%) are also under the impression that Chinese tourists lack a great deal of understanding about the Lanna culture and are not willing to display an ounce of respect towards their culture (48.3%). Most locals are proud of their culture. Any sign of disrespect by foreigners is bound to make it difficult to gain a warm welcome or trust. In the eyes of locals, Chinese tourists do not really seem willing to show more respect of and interest in the Lanna culture, let alone learning much about it. They also feel that many of them are inconsiderate towards their customs and traditions, which makes most of them feel that it is therefore not necessary for them to try to adjust to their way of living to accommodate visitors. Tour

operators and agents will have to work closely with local residents servicing Chinese tourists and caution mainland visitors about displaying behaviors that may disrupt highly symbolic ceremonies should they decide to see them up close and personal.

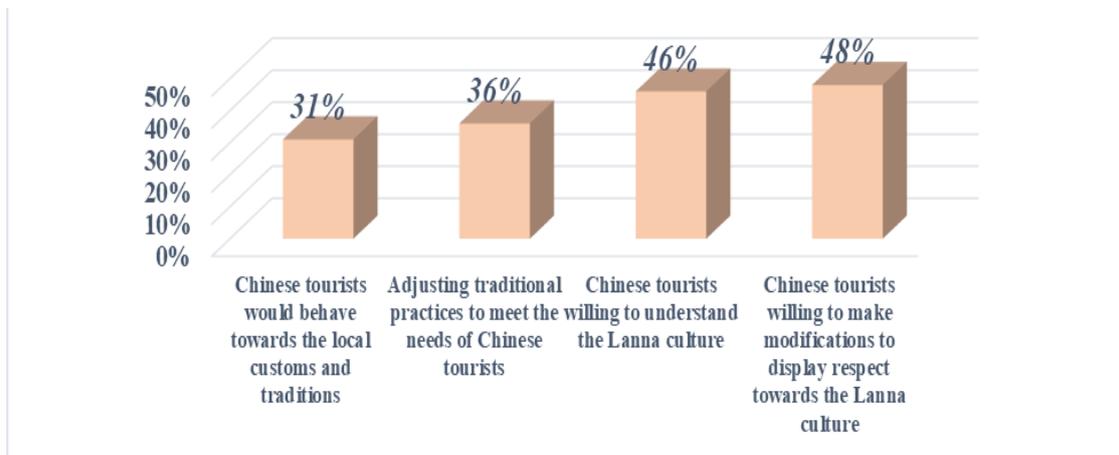


Chart 3: Local Residents' Viewpoint on the Cultural Impact of Chinese Tourists' Behavior
Source: Compiled by the authors for this study

- Thai Residents' Viewpoint on the Environmental Impact of Chinese Tourists' Behavior

Chart 4 highlights a great deal of concern over the increase of waste and pollution around certain tourist sites that need to be closely monitored and taken care of in order to sustain the natural environment (45.1%). With 54.6 percent of the people feeling that traffic is highly congested when there is a large Chinese tourist presence in the area, the need for adequate measures is felt even more acutely (much of the impact on traffic is due to tourists either carelessly crossing the road or using transportation in large groups). Another pressing issue is road accidents involving Chinese tourists, who are generally unfamiliar with traffic lanes and direction (48.0%). As reported by locals, accidents cause them trauma and stress not only from being involved, but also from trying to negotiate with Chinese into having them take some responsibility for wreckages (55.1%). Locals (49.4%) are also disturbed by the apparent display of ignorance of Chinese tourists and their lack of concern about the protection of natural landscapes that attract large numbers of tourists from around the world as they also seem to be unconcerned about the damage they cause at the sites. Tourism authorities and operators should be mindful of the conditions of tourist attractions and ensure that they remain safe and clean as their safety and cleanliness are critical to the overall development of the Thai tourist industry (Bickle & Harrill, 2010). Investments may be required to restore and protect these areas that produce a holistic experience to foreign visitors. It should also be communicated to all the stakeholders that they are protected for long term enjoyment by all (Chang, Backman, & Huang, 2014).

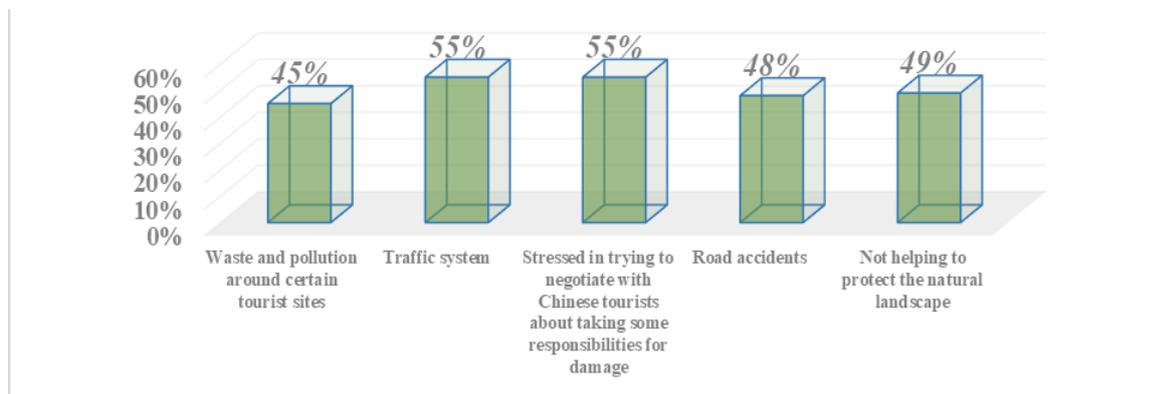


Chart 4: Local Residents' Viewpoint on the Environmental Impact of Chinese Tourists' Behavior

Source: Compiled by the authors for this study

- RQ2: Efficient and Effective Tools for Estimating the Number of Inbound Tourists

This sub-section discusses the response to RQ2 (How can the number of inbound tourists from China be estimated effectively?). While the saying “two heads are better than one” is generally cause for expanding collaboration, this is not the case with the governance of Thai tourism, which is managed by two agencies. One, the TAT, is in charge of administering campaigns to attract travelers and visitors from other nations. The other, the Sports and Tourism Ministry, acts as the policy and law enforcer to the networks involved in the tourism industry and manages the internal functional affairs of the acting agents. While both organizations are heavily involved in the tourism industry, their roles differ. Whereas the TAT heavily concentrates on developing the marketing promotion that is supposed to grab the interest and attention of travel prospects, the Sports and Tourism Ministry acts as the proctor of operations and sees to it that organizations are complying with standards and regulations. There is currently no search for an efficient and effective common tool to forecast the number of inbound tourists from China. The two institutions therefore continue not to be aligned. This lack of coordination between them makes it quite difficult to plan the use of the resources available toward specific goals (Padin, 2012).

More staff and greater expertise are needed to perform an adequate job given the many issues involved in developing quality service and products in the tourist industry and the constant possibility that plans may need to be modified after being implemented (Font & McCabe, 2017). Estimating the number of inbound tourists is a task that involves many rounds of surveys questions. The collection of feedback that helps to determine whether a concept applied needs to be refined or entirely reformulated is also time consuming (Hörisch, 2015). However, no common effort is likely to happen as the Sports and Tourism Authority is overwhelmed with issuing licenses for tour guides and operators, inspecting tourism sites, and assisting more than seven foreign film productions annually. Additionally, the staff have never received formal training and development in the development of tourism. Improving this situation therefore will require some sacrifice and unlearning some of the ways work is performed. Management will have to likely improve the organizational culture as well as the basic concept of their organizational purpose (Neugebauer, Figge, & Hahn, 2016).

- RQ3: Practical Guideline for Tour Operators and Agents Marketing Thai Tourism to Chinese

RQ3 asked what a practical guideline for tour operators and agents to remain competitive in the Chinese tourist market should look like. It called for the development of a practical guideline as it is the view of the authors that there is no clear direction for industry development. Some tourist sites have grown too quickly and are in danger of becoming

unsustainable and the rapid increase of Chinese tourists is primarily being funneled only to the four Northern provinces. As we just saw, the high volume and density of tourist activity in these limited areas have taken a heavy toll on the wellbeing and welfare of the local community. There seems to be a growing consensus that to preserve the natural beauty of the area and the lifestyles of people foundations need to be laid with an emphasis on the preservation of the natural resources while generating stable and growing levels of income for the tourism industry and community members. As a contribution to attaining this end, the following practical guideline for tour operators and agents to remain competitive in the Chinese tourist market has been developed:

1. Promote an image of Thailand as a place to improve one's quality of life, where tourists can engage in leisure activities that nourish their spiritual and mental health.
2. Be open and receptive to remarks that call for improvement in tourism service and quality. Use the information to redefine or redesign the practical intentions of the vacation programs.
3. Make communication constantly clear and to the point on what is acceptable or not for Chinese tourists as they need to be made aware of these limitations so that tour operators and agents can take proactive measures to configure resources that prevent local residents from being put into a discomfortable situation.
4. Promote and support the establishment of a protocol for finding quality tourism operators in the tourism value chain who can serve as models for other operators. Incentives could be offered to tour operators and agents who come up with innovative methods and suggestions.
5. Strengthen the marketing skills and abilities of local communities by providing the know-how to practitioners to acquire marketing competencies by themselves and enhance the capabilities and capacity of local communities in protecting the environment while stressing accountability on both sides to conserve the natural landscape that is free from pollution or waste.
6. Promote the development of local products and services to meet the needs of the Chinese market. Tour operators and agents need to work more closely with the TAT to get the best of their expertise in developing marketing campaigns for the promotion of local specialties (products and services) for certain targeted demographic group in the Chinese tourist market.
7. Restructure some of the markets to take advantage of trends in health and wellness, business meetings and exhibitions, ecotourism, sports, and recreation, and provide marriage and honeymoon services for high end Chinese customers. Working with the Tourism Authority of Thailand, tour operators and agents could provide information that serve the interest and wellbeing of local residents in catering to the needs of Chinese tourists who want to be immersed in the local Thai culture and have a memorable learning experience.
8. Redesign facilities to serve individuals who travel to explore the history, culture, and modern life of local Thai communities. Tour operators and agents can liaise with the Ministry of Sports and Tourism to ensure that the standards and regulations are truly enforced and genuinely serve the needs of both local residents and Chinese tourists, as well as capitalizing on the feedback from them to revise the operations in order to ensure that quality is being upheld.
9. Develop new promising venues to showcase authentic local customs and traditions of the Thai culture. In promoting the culture, the tour operators and agents will have the support of the local residents.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

While the large number of Chinese tourists visiting Northern Thailand on a yearly basis is good for the local economy, the local community has to endure some social discomfort and disruption in its everyday life. Moreover, while locals feel that they should make some adjustments to their cultural functions, they also would like to see Chinese tourists take more initiatives to develop their understanding of the Thai culture as well. This dual approach of getting these two traditional and highly celebrated Asian cultures to better understand and value each other will be a challenge that goes far beyond the language communication barrier. Getting the right balance for all sides to be highly satisfied interacting with each other will among others require some societal measures that encourage both of them to promote more of the positives that keeps things sustainable for all to enjoy. At the same time, they will need to make a concerted effort to learn about the errors which have caused dissatisfaction in their respective expectations of good behavior. There are also concerns about the increasing amount of waste and pollution in the surrounding urban landscape.

A strategic framework needs to be established for all stakeholders to get involved so they have a role in moderating the impact of Chinese tourists; a balance of joy and pleasure with a degree of sincerity towards society, culture, and the environment would be ideal for tourist areas to grow for the benefit of all (Malik, Madappa, & Chitranshi, 2017). The lack of ability to coordinate efforts between the TAT and the Sports and Tourism Industry poses a major challenge for marketing improvement. It calls for a more effective and efficient way to forecast the number of Chinese tourists that will be visiting Thailand. The current lack of coordination has resulted in a lack of focus of resources and energy when laying the foundation for a program highlighting the health and wellbeing of the community and ensuring the sustainability of the natural environment. Without any form of authority or accountability any new methods for proper coordination in marketing improvement will not be sustainable as staff members tend to interpret any message of changes in the working structure as ambiguous in their normal operation and are unwilling to create a state of confusion that could lead to a disharmony in the workplace.

Indeed, in a working environment, where bureaucracy is highlighted as the working culture, it is difficult for certain members to share their ideas and knowledge for proposing and implementing ideas on marketing improvement. For one, those in power generally do not like to keep on having to make adjustments. For another, the results might lead to a damage in reputation if the outcome becomes lower than expected. If the level of uncertainty is quite high, the tendency is therefore to avoid events that would make one lose one's image. Consequently, coordination between the TAT and the Sports and Tourism Ministry has to be proactively undertaken by tourism operators and agents in a united effort to get these two institutions to work together. The idea would be to invite key representatives to a conference on laying out plans for tourism activities that promote a cordial and peaceful space for Chinese tourists and local residents to learn and understand each other while the former enjoys the events. The TAT and the Sports and Tourism Ministry would be asked to combine their resources in developing sustainable conditions with standard quality that maintains satisfaction for both Chinese tourists and Thai local residents to co-exist. As this study has made it abundantly clear, any plan to further develop the Thai tourist industry in Northern Thailand must aim for a more balanced approach which benefits all stakeholders involved. Development efforts should have an agreed upon shared set of values so that all sides are willing to cooperate in working towards the highest level of mutual benefit possible. As also emphasized throughout this discussion, marketing tourism towards Chinese tourists is an ongoing process and problems discovered by industry participants should be equally resolved in the best interest for all stakeholders without any biasness involved.

In summary, many aspects of tourism in Northern Thailand need to be further refined before the region is able to effectively and sustainably cope with a large number of Chinese tourists while maintaining its beauty and preserving the locals' way of life. Tourism marketing needs to develop a vision that looks after the wellbeing and welfare of all the stakeholders involved. This should be done not only by those who have the power and influence to make it happen, but also with the feedback of the Chinese tourists and the average Thai citizen (Baum, 2012). To be successful, all forms of tourism excursions will require strong collaboration and coordination to maintain values that keep everyone satisfied. A joint effort from all those involved would undoubtedly assist in the implementation of the guidelines and ensure that tour operators and agents remain truly competitive in the Chinese tourist market.

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