

Chinese tourism could boost global economy, but at what cost?

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South Korean vendors eager to see return of Chinese tourists. Credit: Reuters Photo
On January 8, China announced the easing of Covid-19-related travel restrictions. This meant that the Chinese people were free to travel domestically as well internationally after three years.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic Beijing had imposed strict restrictions on its citizens, and easing of these restrictions came close to the upcoming Lunar New Year, which has historically witnessed major movement of people across and outside China.

Not only the Chinese people, but the international tourism industry has also been very welcoming of this decision. Reports suggest that in less than an hour of these announcements, websites such as [trip.com](https://www.trip.com) witnessed the maximum searches in the last three years. There are no surprises here, as in 2019, the number of trips made by Chinese tourists stood at 170 million. Chinese tourists not only travel extensively, they also spend lavishly during these sojourns.

As per China's tourism ministry the expected number of trips during this holiday could be around 2 billion. This time the top destinations for Chinese tourists is anticipated to be Australia, Thailand, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Hong Kong. The more China became economically prosperous and wealthy the more its people become attractive as tourists. Their capacity to spend on these trips is very attractive to several countries.

Covid-19 pushed the governments to impose lockdowns and strict protocols on travel which has affected the tourism industry negatively. Prior to the pandemic, Chinese tourists accounted for a total of 20 per cent of total spending in international tourism. They spent around \$277 billion in 2018 and \$255 billion in 2019. With the revival of Chinese tourism there is hope that this will result in infusing around \$200 billion into the tourism sector.

There are a lot of hope that this easing of travel restrictions will help in boosting the struggling tourism economy, domestically as well as internationally. There are also predictions that it will also help in the growth of the domestic Chinese economy as it will encourage consumer sector. This is also an optimistic news for international students who have been unable to travel to China for the last three years.

The global economies primarily depended on tourism as a major source of earning and foreign exchange have struggled to survive during the pandemic. In a bid to make the most of the opportunity, Thailand has announced major relaxations in documents and tests required for Chinese tourists.

On the contrary, countries such as India, Spain, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea, the United States, and Italy have decided to put stricter screening measures on Chinese travellers. Voicing distrust in Beijing's mechanisms to control the pandemic and in the data it shares, many nations are concerned about the impact Chinese tourists could have on the health of domestic populations.

Beijing is aware of the economic boost Chinese tourists bring with them, and has used it as leverage to get its foreign policy agenda in the past. By fanning nationalistic sentiments, Beijing discourages its tourists from travelling to countries critical of China, and its policies. In fear of losing Chinese tourists, many small nations that are dependent on tourism remain silent to Beijing's excesses.

While there is a potential economic boom if Chinese tourists travel extensively, one cannot ignore the challenges new strains of the Covid-19 virus pose. With the easing of restrictions there has been a surge in the number of daily infections and deaths in China. With more people travelling, the chances of rising infections globally is a chilling possibility.

The tourism industry is very positive about the wave of Chinese tourists visiting and its benefits, but one cannot ignore the nagging fear that this may be just the beginning of another global Covid wave and healthcare challenges

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The views expressed are the author's own. They do not necessarily reflect the views of DH.