

## Research on the Tourism Destination Accessibility: Evidence from China

Baiping Zhang

School of Economics

Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China

Anshun University, Guizhou, China

### Abstract

The research shows, in a broader perspective, that the tourism destination accessibility mainly involves three aspects: transport accessibility, ecological accessibility, and cultural accessibility. But the current literatures are scarce of ecological and cultural accessibility of tourism destination. Technologically, people could go to anywhere on earth, but economically, transport investment is restricted by investment efficiency, and mass tourism means lower transport costs. Ecological accessibility means some destinations could be admitted to while some destinations not under the condition of ecological regulation or natural environment. Cultural accessibility refers to the attitudes to exotic visitors for local residents and local governments.

**Keywords** — The transport accessibility; The ecological accessibility; The cultural accessibility

### Introduction

Tourism had a sequence of uninterrupted growth since 1960s, and its growth rate has been at around 4% per year for eight straight years (UNWTO, 2017). Both international and domestic tourism could favor poverty alleviation and equal development between regions. The tourism destination is a well-defined geographical area or space which is understood by its visitors as a unique entity (Buhalis, 2000). The most basic classification of tourism destinations is threefold: coastal destination, urban destination, and rural destination (Cooper et al, 2010). China, as one of the very important countries in the world, has affluent tourism resources with more than 50 world heritages and hundreds of tourist attractions at AAAAA and AAAA levels<sup>1</sup>, and the local governments at all levels dedicate themselves to the local development of tourism. With the overwhelming development of tourism, the quality of the tourism destination accessibility plays a more vital role in tourists' choices on destinations and their experiences (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; ).

The tourism destination accessibility is one of the important factors for tourists. So, many countries or regional governments strive hard to enhance the competitive advantages in the local tourism destinations, such as by improving the transport accessibility, promoting the governance capacity.

Tourists' activities mainly occur in the tourism destinations, so, they might face ecological and cultural barriers, namely, problems of ecological and cultural accessibility. Ecological protection and the conditions of subsistence restrict the tourists' access to a few destinations. On the other hand, because of the cultural difference between tourists and local residents as well as the difference of attitudes to tourism, face-to-face communication gives easily rise to conflicts between tourists and managers or local residents, affecting tourists to choose tourism destination. This paper studies the tourism destination accessibility in terms of transport accessibility, ecological and cultural accessibility based on Chinese tourism development.

### 1. The transport accessibility of the tourism destination

#### 1.1 The introduction to transport accessibility

The infrastructure of transport is always the dominant to local development. The Chinese slogan says: Transport first, then there will be richer.

The transport accessibility of tourism, as one of the basic supplies in tourism, refers to the conditions of transport from the usual place of residence to the tourism destinations. High efficiency of tourism transport means lower expenditure and shorter time on the way, which could provoke the tourism demands. Transport is not just about moving from A to B. It is about connecting people to opportunity and building a sustainable future.

Theoretically, the transport accessibility is just a technological facet, and the investment of transport infrastructure could facilitate the regional development (Zhang & Zhao, 2015). Although when a number of tourism destinations have

---

<sup>1</sup> In china, the tourist attractions are classified into 5 levels from “AAAAA “to “A” according to Standard of Rating for Quality of Tourist Attractions (GB/T17775-2003). AAAAA refers to the highest quality of the tourist attractions.

similar attributes then the closest to the tourist's origin is likely to be most popular (Hooper, 2015), a rational tourist usually expects that the higher the transport cost in tourism is, the better he obtains the satisfaction, which means he reaches more remote destination. Namely, to those whose tourism budget is higher, the assumption of distance decay does not be widely applied to the field of tourism (Mckercher & Lew, 2003; Mckercher et al., 2008). The categories of tourism characteristic transport include railway passenger transport services, road passenger transport services, water passenger transport services, and air passenger transport services, involving transport tools such as cars, trains, ships, and planes, supporting facilities such as bus stations, and airport, and, transport operators.

## 1.2 The effects of transport on domestic tourism in China

In China, economically, the significant development of tourism transport began from the ninth "Five-year Plan" (1996-2000) suggesting "accelerating the development of domestic tourism and allocation of tourism infrastructures". It was 1994 when the indicators of domestic tourism were first measured. That was an era of highway transport. Table 1 shows the transport situation and domestic tourists in China from 2000 to 2019.

**Table 1** The transport situation in China (2000-2019)

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
Length of Highway Transport Routes (10000 km)	167.98	334.52	400.82	457.73	501.25
Length of Railway Transport Routes (10000 km)	6.87	7.54	9.12	12.1	13.99
Length of Regular Domestic Civil Aviation Routes (10000 km)	99.45	114.25	169.50	292.28	546.75
Number of Regular Domestic Civil Aviation Routes (line)	1032	1024	1578	2666	4568
Number of Regular Civil Airport Opened (unit)	139	135	175	206	237
Domestic Tourists (million person-times)	744	1212	2103	3990	6006

(Data comes from China Statistical Yearbook (2001-2020))

The construction of expressway began in 1988, and from then on, China went into an era of expressway whose average growth rate of expressway transport routes was 20.1% from 1998 to 2009, and 24.8% from 1998 to 2005, and, 12.3% from 2005 to 2009. The length of expressway transport routes grew from 8700 km in 1998 to 149600 km in 2019. At the same time, the constructions of high-speed railway and regular domestic civil aviation transport were also accelerated. Up to 2019, the length of high-speed railway transport routes was about 35000 km, and the highest velocity is over 350 kmph, and, the number of regular civil airport opened was 237 all over the country, namely, there is almost one regular civil airport opened in each prefecture-level region in China.

The development of tourism transport leads to the increasing development of domestic tourism in China. Tourists could travel to more remote tourism destinations, such as from east China to west or southwest China, which leads to economic and social development in destinations. In 2019, Chinese domestic tourists are over 6 billion person-times, equal to 5 times per capita.

The improvement of transport infrastructure from the usual place of residences to the tourism destinations just means effectively technological access, and the transport costs persistently decrease with the development of society, evenly, "suggesting that our economies are entering an age that will culminate in the 'death of distance'" (Fujita & Thisse, 2013). Nowadays, tourists could go to everywhere technologically, that is to say, the restriction of transport accessibility to tourism destinations plays a weak role, and the decreasing transport costs give the remote destination from cities a new chance to develop.

## 2. The ecological accessibility of the tourism destination

### 2.1 The connotations of ecological accessibility

Theoretically speaking, every geographical space could be a tourism destination to the visitors. But, realistically, tourists might be restricted by the ecological condition, namely, the ecological accessibility. The ecological accessibility refers to the restriction to the tourists based on the ecological protection and the conditions of subsistence in the tourism destinations. The ecological restrictions include ecological protection and natural restriction.

### 2.2 The measures of ecological protection in tourism in China

The basic classification of ecological protection is twofold: the nature reserves and the maximum carrying capacity in scenic area. Regulations on the People's Republic of China on Nature Reserves took effect from October 9, 1994 to protect the natural regions with unique biological characters. China has established 446 national natural reserves up to 2016, including 34 International Biosphere Reserves established by UNESCO. In the nature reserves, Regulations

strictly forbid any human activities at the core zone, allow scientific observation at the buffer zone and appropriate human activities such as scientific tests, educational practices, visiting, and tourism at the experimental zone. Fig. 1 shows the structure of the nature reserves. So, tourists are forbidden to tour at the core and buffer zones in the nature reserves. Secondly, Guideline on the Maximum Carrying Capacity of Scenic Area, issued by China National Tourism Administration on May 1, 2015, requires limiting the number of tourists on the scenic area at the specific time when it is beyond the maximum carrying capacity to assure tourists' experiences and the sustainable development of tourism destinations. By the end of 2015 in China, all of the 184 AAAAA scenic areas announced the maximum carrying capacity of arrivals a day, respectively. For example, the maximum carrying capacity of the Palace Museum is eighty thousand person-times a day in Beijing, China. The management of maximum carrying capacity in scenic area will lead to inaccessible for some tourists at a special time.

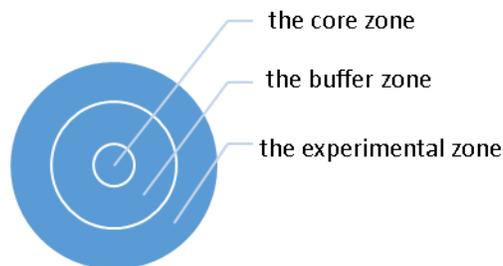


Fig. 1 The structure of the nature reserves

On the other hand, a few tourism destinations, because of such special natural conditions as high altitude, big desert, and extremely frigid climate, which most people could not accommodate, could not become the destinations for mass tourism, such as Kekexili in Qinghai province, Dao city in Sichuan province, and Heihe in Heilongjiang province. For example, most people might suffer from high altitude stress which threatens tourists' lives when they tour in the high altitude areas. On the other hand, for lack of usual settlements in these areas, the basic infrastructure is obviously too scarce to carry out mass tourism.

### 3. Cultural accessibility of the tourism destination

#### 3.1 The connotations of cultural accessibility

The core meaning of tourism is on-the-spot experience, including face-to-face communication with local residents or managers, observing local life style, visiting local families, or participating in the production of souvenir, et al. Summarily, tourism leads to cultural interaction between tourist and local resident by displaying their own culture. "Culture, or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Taylor, 1929); or "Culture is the shared concepts and norms of people living in a specific space" (Benedict, 1935). Culture is diverse all over the world, which gives birth to cultural appeal among different ethnical groups. Cultural accessibility means the mutual acceptability of two different cultures—indigenous and exotic cultures. Different culture shows different inclusiveness and openness, which is embodied by individual behavior in tourism activities. When tourists encounter local culture with low inclusiveness and openness, they might face stronger barriers and obstacles, such as compulsive bargain, hostile attitude. On the other hand, the tourists with lowly inclusive and open culture might splurge on their superior lives to local residents. In addition, religious taboo might hinder tourists from visiting religious shrines or joining religious events. As a result, a conflict arises between two cultures in tourism, leading to weak accessibility of the tourism destinations.

On the contrary, the result is active. Subsequently, tourists always choose the mature and famous tourism destinations, and mutually self-enforcing processes take effect between growth and tourism activities in the destination.

On the other hand, local policies and governance abilities in the tourism destinations affect the tourists' satisfaction, which affects the accessibility. When local government and tourism operators implement friendly attitudes and conduct to visitors, there is a good accessibility, otherwise a bad accessibility. Local governments should maintain tourism order, solve conflicts between tourists and local operators or local residents, and protect both tourists' benefits and tourism managers' benefits. We consider local tourism regulation favoring sustainable development as friendly institutions. Unfriendly institutions in tourism destination hinder tourists from entering.

#### 3.2 The effect of cultural differences on tourism in China

According to Graburn (1989), tourism is divided into two types as follows: natural tourism including ecotourism and environment tourism, and cultural tourism including history tourism and ethnic tourism. In China, there are 55 ethnic minorities accounting for 8.49% of total population in 2010 and 77 ethnic minority autonomous areas at prefecture level mainly locating southwest and northwest regions. That is, the main tourist market is in the east and middle regions in China, and the main tourists are the Han peoples. Figure 2<sup>2</sup> illustrates this. The core attraction is the special ethnic culture and tourism has become the leading industry in the ethnic minority autonomous areas. The ethnic minority households are not only the element of local culture but also the participants of tourism hospitality in the lodging and restaurant industries. So then, the intercultural identity and respect are more significant in China.

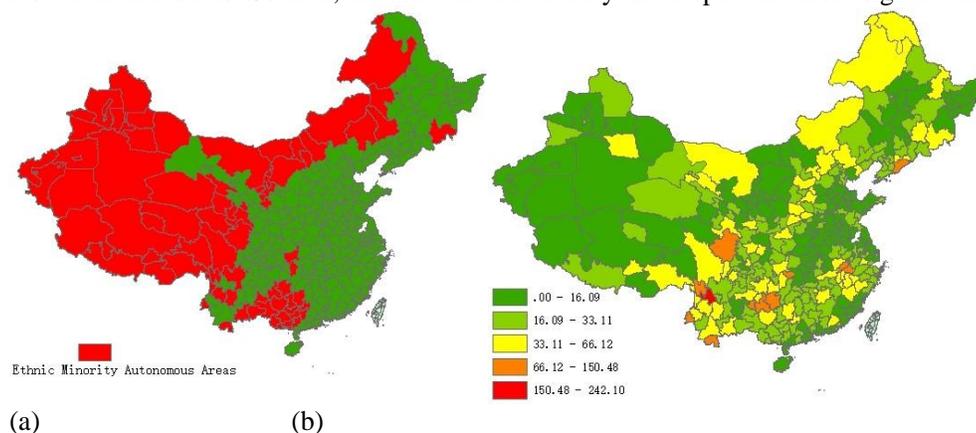


Fig. 2 (a) The location of ethnic minority autonomous areas in China; (b) The Percentage of Total Tourism Receipts in GDP at Prefecture Level and above (%) (2017). Data source: China statistical yearbook (2017) and statistical bulletin on national economy and social development (2017).

Another aspect of cultural differentiation is social conventions in different areas, as Chinese proverb runs ‘Ten miles apart, but the customs are quite different’.

Cultural differentiation is not only a tourism attraction but also maybe a potential source of conflict in tourism, which perhaps either improves or deteriorates accessibility to the tourism destinations.

#### 4 The interregional comparison of tourism in China

Benefitting from the improvement of accessibility to tourism destinations under the policies of interregional balanced development and national equality, from Fig. 2(b), we could see that tourism facilitates economic growth and development significantly in the ethnic minority autonomous areas and middle regions where the percentage of total tourism receipts in GDP is above 16 percent, even over 100 percent.

Table 2 Interregional Comparison at Provincial Level in China

Provinces	Ethnic Minority Population as Percentage to its Provincial Population (%) (2010)	Villages with Chinese Ethnic Minority Characteristics(unit)	Tourism Receipts as Percentage to Provincial GDP (%)
Zhejiang	0	40	17.4
Jiangsu	0	8	13.5
Guizhou	36.11	212	52.7
Yunnan	33.37	247	42.3

(Data source: Chinese Statistic Report and National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People’s Republic of China)

Table 2 shows the absolute advantage of villages with Chinese ethnic minority characteristics in southwest China’s Guizhou Province and Yunnan Province than in east China’s Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province, the aggregate of the former two provinces over 400 units, and the latter just up to 50 units, so do the contribution of tourism to their provincial economies, the former two provinces’ tourism receipts as percentage to provincial GDP above 40, while the

<sup>2</sup> In China, the administrative divisions include province level, vice-provincial level, prefecture level, and county level in sequence. In detail, the administrative regions at province level include 23 provinces, 5 ethnic minority autonomous regions, 4 municipalities directly under the central government, and 2 special administrative regions. The administrative cities at prefecture level and above include 4 municipalities directly under the central government at province level, cities at vice-provincial level and at prefecture level, ethnic minority autonomous areas at prefecture level.

latter two provinces below 20 in 2017. Intuitively, we could make a conclusion that ethnic culture in southwest China plays a significant role in tourism attractions. Of course, benefitting from the increasing improvement on transports in southwest China and national harmony, the advantage of ethnic cultural resource realizes the effect of local economic driver and obtains its economic rents.

### 5 Accessible tourism

The accessibility problems for peoples with disabilities or for elders had been highlighted since the 1991 General Assembly when the first recommendations devoted to promoting Accessible Tourism were passed (UNWTO, 2013). Accessible tourism emphasizes making tourism accessible to all citizens, and is considered as duties for operators, governments, nongovernment organizations, and local residents by providing safe, convenient and economic facilities for all tourists to ensure good experiences in tourism. Accessible tourism is an idea to develop tourism industry.

### Conclusion

Accessibility is the premise to realize tourism activities, but we should realize and respect the inaccessibility of destination for tourism. Tourism can make a meaningful contribution to people's lives and our planet, but yet, respecting and protecting the living environment is common responsibility for mankind. Generally speaking, the accessibility of tourism destination involves three aspects: transport, ecology and culture. The transport accessibility is restricted by geographic locality, technology and investment efficiency which take effect at different periods respectively. The ecological accessibility is of natural and legislative aspects. And the cultural accessibility also embraces two aspects: local culture and formal institutions. To the accessible destination, operators and governments should ensure accessible tourism for all, while the inaccessible destination should be protected effectively.

### References

- Benedict, R. (1935). *Patterns of Culture*. London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD.
- Buhalis, D. (2000). Marketing: the competitive destination of the future. *Tourism Management*, 21(1), pp. 97-116.
- Cooper, C., Fletcher, J., Fyall, A. et al. (2010). *Tourism: principles and practice* (fourth edition). Dalian: Dongbei University of Finance & Economics Press, pp. 476.
- Graburn, N. (1989). Tourism: The Sacred Journey. In SMITH V. (Ed.), *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (pp. 21-36). University of Pennsylvania Press. Retrieved January 15, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhc8w.5>.
- Hooper, J. (2015). A destination too far? Modelling destination accessibility and distance decay in tourism. *GeoJournal*, 80: 33-46.
- Masahisa, M., & Thisse, J. F. (2013). *Economics of agglomeration: cities, industrial location, and globalization* (second edition) (pp. 13). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McKercher, B., & Lew, A. (2003). Distance decay and the impact of effective tourism exclusion zones on international travel flows. *Journal of Travel Research*, 42 (2), 159-165.
- McKercher, B., Chan, A., & Lam, C. (2008). The impact of distance on international tourist movements. *Journal of Travel Research*, 47(2), 208-224.
- Taylor, E. B. (1929). *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (PP. 1). London: John Murray Press.
- World Tourism Organization (2013). *Recommendations on Accessible Tourism*. UNWTO, Madrid.
- World Tourism Organization (2017). *2017 Annual Report*. Available from: <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/9789284419807>.
- Zhang, Guanghai, Zhao, J. J. (2015). Spatial econometric analysis of transport infrastructure to the development of regional tourism economy. *Economic Management*, Vol. 37, No. 7, pp. 116-126.