



Tourism and changing perceptions across the Taiwan Strait by Claire Bai

On Oct. 28, a 66-member delegation led by Shao Qiwei, chairman of China's National Tourism Administration, arrived in Taipei for a private visit to inspect Taiwan and determine whether it was a suitable "official" destination for mainland tourists. When he departed 10 days later, Shao said his group had a positive impression of Taiwan and announced that the mainland would officially "open" Taiwan to mainland tourists. Earlier this year, Taiwanese opposition leaders visited the mainland and agreed with their Chinese interlocutors – President Hu Jintao among them – to promote mainland tourism to Taiwan. Sadly, hostility between the Beijing government and the administration of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian kept the two sides from implementing that agreement. Perhaps Shao's visit will break the logjam.

Given the political situation across the Taiwan Strait, frequent and extensive human-to-human contact has special importance for improving relations. Regardless of which party is in power in Taiwan, the key to reducing strategic distrust lies in confidence-building and reciprocal policies at the grassroots level. Since the 1980s, mainland-Taiwan relations have been characterized by growing economic interdependence. However, people-to-people contact has been mostly one way. In 2004, more than 3.68 million Taiwanese traveled to the mainland, while a mere 30,000 mainland Chinese visited Taiwan. From 2001 to 2004, 2,875 Taiwanese undergraduate students and 2,766 graduate students enrolled at 70 mainland universities. Taiwan's Ministry of Economy estimates that over 750,000 Taiwanese business people reside on the mainland, and over 50,000 companies have operations there. The number of Taiwanese Trade Associations on the mainland has expanded from 6 in 1992 to 84 in 2005.

Tourism is the easiest and most effective way to increase people-to-people exchange. It would give people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait a chance to gain a more accurate understanding of each other's society, history, and lifestyle, and thus help to forge a more friendly perception of "the other." Unfortunately, there are three obstacles to mainland tourism to Taiwan: 1) The absence of direct flights between mainland cities and Taiwan means tourists have to travel through a third country or region, which significantly increases transportation costs; 2) acquiring a visa for Taiwan is a complicated and costly process, especially for PRC nationals residing on the mainland; and 3) Taiwan limits the number of mainland tourists to 1,000 a day.

Politicians in Taiwan have feared that economic interdependence would increase the island's vulnerability to the mainland. The Chen administration worries that there may be government spies or saboteurs among mainland tourists or that some tourists might overstay their visas and become illegal workers. As a result, the Taiwan government has carefully regulated the admission of mainland tourists;

recently, it reduced the permitted duration of stay from 10 days to 7.

There might be a grain of truth to some Taiwanese concerns. However, Hong Kong's experience suggests that there are other factors to weigh as well. Among the 28.9 million mainlanders who traveled abroad in 2004, 12.24 million visited Hong Kong, 56 percent of Hong Kong's total number of tourists. Mainland tourists bought 12 percent of the sales of Hong Kong's retail industry and created 16,500 employment opportunities. The benefits Hong Kong has reaped from mainland tourism should entice Taiwan to open its own doors to cross-Strait exchanges. According to a recent survey conducted in several Chinese coastal provinces, close to 500 million people listed Taiwan as their number one overseas tourist destination. The Taiwan government should be capable of screening out "suspicious" individuals, while granting the wishes of many interested mainland friends.

Tourism made up only 2.78 percent of Taiwan's GDP in 2004; Taiwanese should be eager to exploit the growth potential. Opposition leaders believe there is a huge market in tourism and related industries across the Strait, and that Taiwan holds unbeatable comparative advantages and unique attractions for mainland Chinese: people on both sides of the Strait share the same language, culture, and customs.

At the farewell banquet for Shao Qiwei's delegation, Shao proposed four steps to facilitate mainland tourism to Taiwan: 1) promote "sister" relationships between mainland and Taiwan tourism agencies and platforms such as the Shanghai/Kunming International Tourism Expo to further exchange; 2) establish a "credit system" in cross-Strait tourism industry; 3) promote cross-Strait cooperation in tourism planning, development, marketing, and human resource training to form a "cross-Strait tourism circle"; and 4) the mainland should encourage the provincial tourism industry to expand cooperation with Taiwan counterparts to exploit their advantages. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council released a written statement that put a positive spin on Shao's visit and applauded his confidence in Taiwan's tourism attractions and facilities.

With any luck, Shao's experience will be a template for that of millions of other Chinese visitors to Taiwan over the next few years. By seeing how their neighbors across the Strait live and absorbing the nuances of Taiwanese culture, mainland Chinese may be renewed in their desire to seek a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan question. Likewise, by benefiting firsthand from the flourishing tourism and getting to know friendly mainland visitors, the Taiwanese may reshape their perception of the mainland and its people, and reconsider the future of the island.

Claire Bai is Vasey Fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS. She recently visited Taipei for the first time as part of a Pacific Forum Young Leaders Program. She can be reached at iclaireb@yahoo.com