

# The emerging market of Chinese tourists: Exploring potentials in rural Denmark

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**Keywords** | Emerging markets, chinese tourists, qualitative research

**Objectives** | Chinese tourists have been ascribed the role of a large, fast-growing, high-spending market of international travelers to which destinations around the world would wisely pay attention in order to get their market share. Much emphasis has been put on the sheer size of this potential market, while less attention has been paid to the actual potential and what it might entail when it comes to the specifics of Chinese tourists as a group. Very little has been said about the diversity that would logically characterize a market of this size, and about the potential diversity in tourism developments that this market may underpin. Likewise, the fact that different destinations may benefit very differently from a large emerging market like the Chinese tourists, a group that logically contains many subgroups with various characteristics, needs and demands when travelling, has largely been ignored. So far, the significance of the Chinese market has been directed at the large urban centers at a European scale, and numbers also suggests that this is where the Chinese tourists are currently having the greatest impact. The question is whether smaller rural destinations would also be able to benefit from this emergent market, and this study therefore aims to contribute to a more nuanced and critical view of what may constitute the potential of this emerging market, and it aims to explore different ways in which rural destinations may also benefit.

**Methodology** | Denmark will be used as a case example, because of a development that resembles general developments at a broader European level. The numbers that confirm the much emphasized potential in Chinese tourists have yet to materialize, and, in many destinations, Chinese tourists are more visible as strategic targets than they are in actual numbers. The total number of Chinese overnight stays in Denmark in 2015 amounts to 198.000, which is less than a half per cent of the total number of tourists in Denmark per year (Visitdenmark, 2016). Nonetheless, the Chinese market continues to be a strategic focal point, which was further underlined by the Danish Government's most recent initiative consisting in a Danish/Chinese Year of Tourism in 2017 as part of a newly proposed national tourism strategy (Ministry of Business Denmark, Sep. 2016). Paradoxically, there are only very few signs of local strategies or even initiatives pointing towards the Chinese market throughout Denmark, and the vast majority of Chinese tourists are to be found in the major cities. A scan of rural destinations around Denmark showed no signs of such initiatives, and in some cases even direct opposition towards it.

A methodological focus will be on generating qualitative knowledge, due to the overrepresentation of

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'numbers'. Existing statistical data will be used as a vantage point, but the aim is to reach more holistic understandings. Various methods and choices of data are thus included, i.e. exploratory focus groups and observations have been conducted with Chinese tourists in focus, and various documents and conversations with DMO employees in Denmark have been included in order to explore the case at hand and obtain a nuanced view of the case of Chinese tourists in Denmark.

**Main Results and Contributions** | This exploratory study points out a number of qualitative issues for tourism development in rural areas of Denmark, in relation to the Chinese tourists. Standing out is the idea that many Chinese tourists identified in rural Denmark had other primary reasons to be in the area than tourism, e.g. working or studying. This inspired an idea of 'accidental tourists' as a resource that could be explored further in order to discover and provide particular tourism offers to this specific group. This suggests that maybe there is reason to reconsider the relatively apprehensive approach by the rural DMOs, because these accidental tourists are not included in statistics that tend to show that no significant amount of Chinese tourists are present in the area. The rural DMOs do not necessarily have the capacity for large numbers of tourists, which is generally the trademark that this group of tourists has been given, and therefore there is an apparent need for diversifying this image. It seems that an extension of the idea of the accidental tourist gives room for rethinking one-day visitors from within a region in which these tourists are already situated by working or studying. One of the major challenges to the rural areas is that the Chinese tourists have limited knowledge of tourism in the area, and therefore cannot necessarily navigate the tourism landscape themselves. This means that innovative market communication, product development, etc., may provide new opportunities to attract Chinese tourists. A focus on long-term benefits could also reveal positive effects in the sense that having emotional connections to an area otherwise not on the mental map of tourism destinations could present new opportunities for revisits or extended opportunities for friends and family.

**Limitations** | This study takes on a very current issue in the tourism industry in Europe. This entails less of a theoretical focus than an empirical one, and this causes some limitations in terms of theoretical contributions at this stage. However, this is hopefully outweighed by the ideas presented and directly applicable to tourism businesses. As the aim is to diversify and not to generalize, it is essential to pay attention to differences and, for that purpose, a comparative study could have informed the Danish case. However, it was decided not to for the scope of this work.

**Conclusions** | All in all, this study has confirmed a great need to diversify the Chinese tourism market in order for smaller, rural destinations to also get their share of this market. The study has also shown great potential for innovating current ideas to adjust to this particular market. In addition, it seems potential exists in rethinking tourism products available within a regional context, which would also support destination awareness long term. Lastly, it is important to stress that the need for qualitative knowledge is much more urgent than what this study can satisfy on its own, so this study serves as a starter, and hopefully more studies of its kind will follow.

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