

China's Pollution Debacle and Destabilization of Inbound International Tourism: A Critique

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Abstract: China holds an impressive position as the world's third biggest country in terms of international tourist arrivals. In fact, the Chinese government is proactively promoting the tourism industry as an important source of national economic development. However, massive air pollution in tourist hotspots such as Beijing was an important factor impeding tourists' inflow in the year 2013. In fact, the beginning of the year 2014 was no better for Northern China when the WHO described China's smog as a "health crisis." Though the Chinese government has undertaken numerous pollution-curbing measures, myriad challenges hinder this exercise. Against this backdrop, this article provides a critique of the impact of pollution on China's inbound international tourism scenario. It concludes that tapping tourism potential requires a healthy environment and an effective communication of environmental improvement as essential elements of a robust, farsighted tourism plan.

Keywords: Inbound tourism, China, pollution, environment, health

1. Introduction

The Chinese central leadership attaches significant importance to attracting transnational tourism in advancing the country's economic development. In fact, as China seeks to rebalance the economy by giving up reliance on export-and-investment-based growth, tourism emerges as all the more important avenue of growth, favorable to the national services industry as well as being a source of revenue.

Though popular for its captivating tourist destinations, China finds itself in an increasingly competitive global scenario as it seeks to grab a larger share in tourist arrivals. For example, according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the average growth rate in overnight visitors worldwide was 2.8 percent from 2008 to 2012, and 2.1 percent in China (Watt, October 2013). In fact, countries at large are bolstering their tourism industries to tap their potential for revenue generation and unleashing economic growth. As forecasted by UNWTO, international tourist arrivals worldwide will increase by 3.3 percent a year from 2010 to 2030 to reach 1.8 billion by 2030, while the market share of emerging economies is expected to reach 57 percent (equivalent to over one billion) of international tourist arrivals from 47 percent in 2012 (UNWTO, 2013).

On its part, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has undertaken numerous measures and formulated a series of policies to deepen reform and promotion of the tourism industry, such as enactment of the tourism law and launch of the "Beautiful China" campaign. However, the message of the beautiful China is countered by the

country's pollution debacle. Pollution has lately emerged as a specter haunting its tourism industry, especially when owing to social media, stories and news spread quickly, globally and beyond control.

The existing literature can be divided into two major categories. First, the comprehensive works such as by Chon, 2002, focus on forms of and challenges to tourism in China including management of natural reserves (Chon, et. al., 2002); others focus on the development of tourism policy and destination planning in China (Airey, and Chong, 2011; and Ryan, and Huang, 2013). Second, there exists literature assessing the impact of pollution on sustainable development, human health and economy (Economy, 2010; Ho, and Nielsen, 2007; and Shapiro, 2010), some of which sporadically allude to tourism. However, literature devoted to the impact, proved or predicted, of pollution in China on inbound international tourism is almost negligible.

Though establishing a clear-cut connection between pollution and tourism as a proven or hypothetical scenario will require quantitative research, this article fills the void in some measure by analyzing the challenge posed by air pollution to China's attraction as a tourist destination. Hence, this study is analytical-cum exploratory, supported by the case study of the widely popularized smog-enveloped cities, such as Beijing, which are major tourist attractions. In so far as it brings out the Chinese government's tourism promotion and anti-pollution measures, it is descriptive, while a streak of predictive inference in the context of the challenge to tourism industry issues reflects at the end of the study. Further, it has incorporated a component of tourism marketing aspect in connection with addressing the perceptions formed about pollution-afflicted cities.

The first part of this article provides a brief overview of China's inbound international tourism as well as Chinese leadership's tourism promotion efforts. The second part highlights China's air pollution scenario and its impact on tourism. Also, it sheds light on the CCP's anti-pollution measures. The third part illuminates the challenges to the anti-pollution drive, especially in light of attracting tourists. The fourth part concludes.

2. Inbound tourism and tourism promotions

China is a magnificent country with splendorous natural and architectural beauty. As of 2013, it boasted of 45 world heritage sites including the Great Wall of China and the Summer Palace in Beijing, the Classical Gardens in Suzhou, and the Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi. It ranks third (58 million in 2012) in the number of arrivals of international tourists, after France and the United States. Per the January-March 2011 figures provided by China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), the major places visited by foreigners included Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Shandong, and Yunnan (CNTA, 2011). Further, the total tourism receipts in China in 2013 were about 2.9 trillion Chinese yuan renminbi (CNY) or US\$483 billion (China National Tourist Office, 2014).

Per the facts provided by the World Travel and Tourism Council for the year 2012, the direct contribution of travel and tourism (T&T) to China's GDP was CNY1,361.9bn or 2.6 percent of the total GDP, whereas the total contribution was 9.3 percent of GDP. As for employment, T&T directly supported 22,756,500 jobs or 3 percent of total employment (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2013) in such industries as hotel, travel, airlines, and leisure. As regards the exclusive benefits from inbound foreign tourist arrivals, the visitor exports generated CNY332.9bn or 2.4 percent of total exports in 2012.

The table below reveals the sources of tourists to China, indicating a preponderance of East Asia and Southeast Asia, though non-Asian countries also figure in the top ten slots.

Table 1. Statistics on major tourist sources in August 2013

By aggregate tourists to China	Country	October		Total: from January	
		Tourists to China (10,000 persons)	Year-on-year increase (%)	Tourists to China (10,000 persons)	Year-on-year increase (%)
1	Korea	39.18	5.25	337.95	-2.75
2	Japan	26.97	8.61	240.90	-21.20
3	Russia	23.18	-6.28	184.58	-9.36
4	USA	21.10	2.66	176.42	-1.93
5	Vietnam	12.61	34.05	111.17	19.63
6	Malaysia	12.34	7.74	93.69	-3.78
7	Mongolia	9.64	5.74	85.99	2.02
8	Philippines	8.59	7.18	82.83	4.01
9	Singapore	9.43	-0.62	75.58	-7.45
10	Australia	6.78	-7.08	60.57	-6.13

Source: China national tourism administration, 2013.

Table 1 exhibits a decline in a year-on-year increase in most cases. An important causal factor was the spread of China's smog news, as explained in the subsequent section. Let us first understand the country's major tourism promotion efforts.

Under the direct leadership of the State Council, China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) is entrusted with promotion and regulation of the tourism industry. It has six affiliated organizations: CNTA Logistics Center, CNTA Information Center, China Tourism Association, China Tourism News, China Travel and Tourism Press, China Tourism Management Institute. Moreover, CNTA has set up 18 overseas representative offices in 15 important tourist generating countries and regions such as Tokyo, Singapore, London, Los Angeles, Kathmandu, Frankfurt, Seoul, Sydney, and New Delhi (Mekong Tourism, n.d.)

Relaxation of the visa policy is one of China's tourism-boosting measures. In January 2013, for instance, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu and Chongqing introduced a program to enable transit passengers from 51 countries to stay in China visa-free for up to 72 hours (specifically in the city they landed in) (Moriyasu, 2014). Also, China has strengthened tourism exchange and cooperation globally. For instance, at the 7th Annual China-U.S. Tourism Leadership Summit in Chicago in October 2013, both sides agreed to expand two-way tourism to reach the mark of 5,000,000 passengers (CNTA, 2013). Similarly, during his first foreign visit to Russia after assuming office, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed fostering "tourism cooperation into a new highlight in China-Russia strategic cooperation."

On 25th April 2013, the National People's Congress adopted the Tourism Law of China. Its Article 1 states: "This law is made to protect the legitimate rights and interests of the tourists and tourism operators, regulate the order of the tourism market, protect and reasonably utilize tourism resources, and promote the sustained and healthy development of tourism." Accordingly, the legislation aims to protect the following key rights of tourists:

- Tourists shall be entitled to select tourism products and services independently and refuse coercive trade behaviors of tourism operators.
- Tourists have the right to get the true information on the tourism products and services they buy and to require tourism operators to provide products and services set forth in the contract.
- The human dignity, national customs and religious beliefs of tourists shall be respected.
- The disabled, the elderly and the minors shall enjoy due convenience and benefits in tourism activities in accordance with laws, regulations and relevant rules (CNTA, June 2013).

Also, the law spells out tourists' duties such as observance of public order and respect for social morality.

Recognizing the indispensable role of media in tourism promotion, the government has undertaken a prudent exercise to bolster media campaigns as part of tourism marketing. In February 2010, CNTA and five network media signed the Tourism Publicity Cooperation Agreement. The media included the People's Daily (www.people.com.cn), Xinhua (www.xinhuanet.com), CCTV (www.cctv.com), China Economic Net (www.ce.cn), and Sina (www.sina.com.cn). Realistically enough, the government seeks to channel its result-oriented marketing messages via trusted and controlled media sources, especially in the face of coverage of negative news and stories by social sites and foreign media. Accordingly, the agreement states:

..all media will bring into full play their specialty and influence, and report in broader and deeper way. They will comprehensively use live broadcast, interactive report, online interview, official website and other publicity forms to report on the activities, conferences and forums organized by CNTA. Both parties will cooperate with each other to organize online solicitation, travel survey, graphic display, special topic report and other activities. In addition, they will meet with each other periodically to enhance communication and consultation. And the comprehensive Coordination Department of CNTA will provide support to the five media on their publicity and report on tourism industry (CNTA, 2010).

Search engine marketing is another marketing avenue. For instance, the tourism authority in Shandong province, which is known for Confucius' birthplace and Tsingtao beer, is working with Google Inc. to improve Shandong's advertising reach (CNTA, 2013).

Importantly, CNTA launched the "Beautiful China" campaign in February 2013 and has since organized nearly 100 promotional events at home and abroad. The campaign aims at etching "Beautiful China" in "a core brand of Chinese tourism". As such, the year 2014 has a catchy theme - "Beautiful China—2014 Year of Smart Travel" (CNTA, 2014).

Thus, an amalgam of measures has issued from the Chinese quiver to target foreign tourists.

Interestingly, however, a country like China that is known for a high trade surplus, which amounted to US\$ 318.69 billion in January 2014, exhibits a deficit in travel services.

As shown above (Moriyasu, 2014), China's travel services deficit reached \$ 70 billion in 2013 from a rather minuscule surplus in 2008. Thus, the inbound tourism picture has some holes for the Chinese government to fill. In this regard, the increasingly global image of China as a home to severely polluted cities could emerge as a hard roadblock, if it is ignored as a trivial or episodic issue, though non-environmental issues also affect inbound tourism. The section below highlights China's pollution scenario with its impact on tourism.

3. Pollution picture and threat to tourism

China's economic growth trajectory has been impressive as the country sustained an annual average GDP growth rate of 10.5 percent between 2001 and 2010 and 9.7 percent between 1979 and 2009. In 2013, China's GDP growth rate was 7.7 percent.¹ Further, China has emerged as the second largest economy and the largest manufacturing and biggest trading nation. At the same time, the stupendous growth brought in its trail environmental degradation with deleterious consequences for human health and future growth (World Bank, 2012, p.249). According to the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2009: "The costs of environmental degradation and resource depletion in China reached 10 percent of GDP over the past decade—air pollution accounted for 6.5 percent, water pollution 2.1 percent, and soil degradation 1.1 percent" while the country has emerged as the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter and biggest energy consumer. As reported in *The Economist*, since 1990, China's release of carbon dioxide has risen from 2 billion tons a year to 9 billion, accounting for 30% of the global emissions (The Economist, 2013, p.8).

As regards the impact of air pollution, the Global Burden of Disease Study reports that outdoor pollution accounted for 1.2 million premature deaths in China in 2010 (Dominguez, 2013). A significant study, 2013, on "the impact of sustained exposure to air pollution on life expectancy from China's Huai River policy" reveals that "life expectancies are about 5.5 y (95% CI: 0.8, 10.2) lower in the north owing to an increased incidence of cardiorespiratory mortality" (Chen, et. al., 2013).²

Widely popularized as "airpocalypse," Beijing, a popular tourist city, was enveloped with heavy smog in January 2013, with the concentration of particles exceeding 40 times the level permitted by the World Health Organization (WHO). In Shanghai, another major tourist destination, the "concentration of tiny, harmful PM

China's rapidly expanding travel services deficit; in billions of dollars



*China Tourism Academy for 2013 data only
Source: State Administration of Foreign Exchange

¹ Of late the Chinese leadership is laying more emphasis on sustainable development rather than double-digit growth.

² It was conducted by scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Tsinghua University, Peking University, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem by using data for the period 1981-2000. Also, see Yu, J. and Zhang, Q. (2009). The Chinese Cancer Village Phenomenon and Its Reflection of Health-Related Environmental Pollution Problems. *Proceedings of China Environmental Science Society Annual Conference* 3, 880-889; Li, H. (2008, July 7). Defeated by Cancer: Cancer Country. *Caijing* 215, 80-88; and S. Wang, S., Lin, J., Shi, S. and Zhang, J. (2001, May). Geological Disease Caused by Ecological Environment: An Example of Cancer Village in Shaanxi Province. *Environmental Protection*, 42-43.

2.5 particles was 602.5 micrograms per cubic meter” in December 2013. According to Greenpeace, the adjacent provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang witness the worst factory emissions. *The Guardian* cites the statement of Huang Wei, a Greenpeace project manager: “Both Jiangsu and Zhejiang should act as soon as possible to set goals to reduce their coal consumption so that the Yantze River Delta will again be green with fresh air” (*The Guardian*, 2013). Eastern China is suffering owing to coal burning, car exhaust, factories and weather patterns (*The Guardian*, 2013).³ In fact, as the Asian Development Bank report of 2012 states, less than 1 percent of China's 500 largest cities meet the WHO's air quality standards (Asian Development Bank, 2012). Beina Xu pinpoints the nefarious role of coal in worsening the air quality:

Coal has been the main culprit in the degradation of air quality. China is the world's largest coal producer and accounts for almost half of global consumption. Coal is also the source of as much as 90 percent of the country's sulfur dioxide emissions and half of its particulate emissions. Mostly burned in the north, it provides around 70 percent of China's energy needs (Xu, 2014).

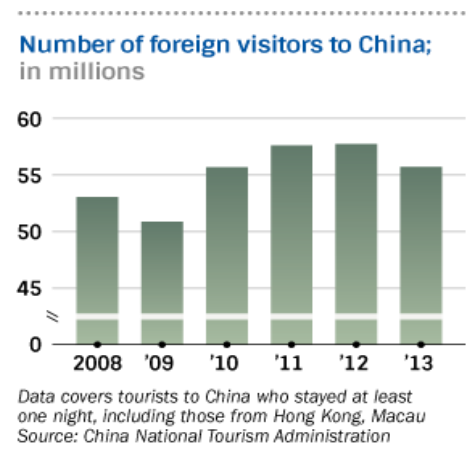
Quite recently, Jonathan Kaiman reported that Chinese scientists have warned that the country's toxic air pollution resembles “a nuclear winter, slowing photosynthesis in plants – and potentially wreaking havoc on the country's food supply” (Kaiman, 2014). Further, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences has described Beijing as almost uninhabitable for human beings.”

3.1. Impact on tourism

The Chinese State Council-controlled CNTA cites *Xinhuanet* in underscoring the role of pollution in affecting tourism: “Many Chinese cities are seeing rising pollution levels due to a combination of weather conditions and an increase in the burning of coal for municipal heating systems. That’s been bad news for the country’s tourism industry, which is trying to woo foreign visitors back to what’s being called ‘Beautiful China’. The Forbidden City, once the Chinese Imperial Palace, is barely visible, shrouded in pollution.” CNTA has acknowledged that “China's tourism image has been hurt by the emergence of H7N9 bird flu, air pollution and dead pigs found floating in Shanghai's main river” (Watt, August 2013). It states that the number of overseas visitors who visited and stayed at least one night in mainland China, including tourists from Hong Kong and Macau, totaled 55.69 million in 2013, down 3.5% from the previous year (Moriyasu, 2014).

As reported in the *China Daily*, rising pollution in Beijing was responsible for a decline in the number of foreign tourists in Beijing from 5.01 million in 2012 to 4.20 million January to November 2013 (see table 1). Also, as reported in *The Telegraph*: “In Beijing, where major attractions include the Great Wall and the Imperial Palace, the drop is even more striking. The number of foreign tourists visiting the Chinese capital fell by 15 per cent in the first six months of the year [2013] to 1.9 million” (*The telegraph*, 2013).

The chart above indicates that the number of tourists to China who



Source: Nikkei Asian Review

stayed at least one night rose sharply from 2009 to 2012 and declined in 2013. Pollution as a deterring factor appears to be the most recent phenomenon. However, it would be imprudent to ignore the environmental factor in tourism promotion since it could rear its head again as a tourism restraining force. *The Durango Herald*, for example, cites the case of Frano Ilic of travel agency Studiosus in Munich who reported that tourists had been put off by news about smog and other problems in China; the number of people booking trips to China through his company fell by 16 percent in 2013 (Watt, August 2013). Also, one is reminded of Jazz star Patti Austin's cancellation of a show in Beijing after suffering an asthma attack. Yang Jian, the concert host, expressed regret saying: "I think we in Beijing should apologise to her. Our air is so bad that she was poisoned" (Jing, 2013).

Table 2. Statistics on tourists to China and foreign exchange revenue in October 2013

	Unit	October	Year-on-year increase (100%)	Total: from January	Year-on-year increase (%)
Tourists to China	10,000 persons	1135.59	1.33	10 742.55	-2.68
# From foreign countries	10,000 persons	259.43	4.36	2 195.74	-3.98
From Hong Kong	10,000 persons	651.19	-0.11	6 393.95	-2.20
From Macao	10,000 persons	174.29	2.82	1 719.42	-2.43
From Taiwan	10,000 persons	50.68	0.09	433.44	-4.09
Foreign exchange revenue	USD 100 million	45.82	2.06	400.55	-4.68
# From foreign countries	USD 100 million	28.66	3.17	239.59	-5.79
From Hong Kong	USD 100 million	9.03	-0.15	88.61	-2.22
From Macao	USD 100 million	2.29	2.79	22.64	-2.43
From Taiwan	USD 100 million	5.84	-0.06	49.71	-4.49

Source: China National Tourism Authority (CNTA), 2013.

The table above clearly shows a decline in foreign exchange revenue from foreign tourists in the year 2013.

According to an estimate, a one percent rise in air pollution will lower the number of foreign tourist arrivals by about 1.2 percent in China (Watt, August 2013). Dr Li Chuangxin from the International Tourism Development Institute at China Tourism Academy (CTA) also states that the 2013 decline was partly due to the strengthening yuan, which increased traveling expenses in China, and partly due to air pollution. In his words: "People want a leisure holiday and not to inhale PM2.5 airborne particles that penetrate deep into the lungs when traveling" (Yi, 2014). Below are listed statements linking pollution and tourism in China:

It is very significant what we are seeing in Beijing at the moment. Because it's live and it's out there and it's on the front page of the news, if that stays there and they don't manage the situation, then in a period of three to four weeks they will see a lot of cancellations, particularly people from Asia (Live Mint, 2014).

-David Scowsill, President of World Travel and Tourism Council, February 2014

Beauty can be looked at in many different ways, but when you have all the stories about the pollution, and the air pollution in particular, people are not going to buy the fact that China is 100 percent beautiful (Watt, August 2013).

-Alastair Morrison, a Beijing-based expert in tourism destination marketing and development in response to the Beautiful China tourism campaign.

[Air and water pollution are] difficult to control because it is difficult or politically infeasible to identify responsible parties. Thus the air pollution trends in China will be difficult to reverse and their impacts will be significantly negative on the tourism industry (Watt, August 2013).

-Tim Tyrrell, former director of the Center for Sustainable Tourism, Arizona State University

According to Sun Shue, director of the international tourism marketing department at Shandong Tourism Administration, almost half of inbound tourists to Shandong come from Japan and South Korea, with Southeast Asia also contributing to inbound tourism (Watt, August 2013). In terms of a futuristic scenario, the unabated pollution could deter tourists of this region which is proximate to China. Also, China might lose tourists to neighboring countries that are also proactively promoting their tourism industries (Iwata, 2013). Even though the Chinese government may consider publicizing the environmentally healthier regions to draw overseas tourists, the latter, on the contrary, may be swayed by negative perceptions. Indeed, rational decision-making could be fragile in the face of strong perceptions that turn into prejudices.

3.2. Major anti-pollution measures

The Chinese leadership has expressed grave concern about the state of pollution in the country. President Xi Jinping acknowledged pollution as the biggest challenge facing Beijing specifically, in view of the thick smog at hazardous levels that blanketed northern China for straight seven days in February 2014 (Bloomberg News, 2014). Moreover, he has stated the government's intent to declare a "war on pollution" just as it fought poverty.

In 2013, the city government of Beijing ordered 103 heavily polluting factories to suspend production and directed the government departments and state-owned enterprises to reduce their use of cars by one-third (Watt, January 29, 2013). In fact, as back as 2007, the Chinese government had announced the Action Plan on Environment and Health (2007-2015) to achieve sustainable development, which had the following components:

- Setting up a standard system for environment and health related laws and regulations
- Building a supervision network on environment and health
- Strengthening the risk warning systems concerning environment and health and the emergency disposal work systems
- Setting up state environment and health information share and service system.
- Improving technological support construction for environment and health
- Strengthening publicity and the exchange of environment and health knowledge (China.org, 2008).

The CPC Beijing Municipal Committee, MEP Minister Zhou Shengxian listed the following major achievements of the country on the environment front:

- During the "11th Five-Year Plan" period, SO₂ and COD emissions dropped by 14.29 percent and 12.45 percent respectively. In 2012, national emission figures of COD, SO₂, ammonia nitrogen and NO_x dropped 3.05%, 4.52%, 2.62% and 2.77% respectively compared with 2011.
- The Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) of important industries in five regions, including Bohai Sea rim, have been completed, and the SEA on China's Western Development Drive has been initiated.
- The Work Plan on Underground Water Pollution Prevention and Control in North China Plain has been compiled, the National Plan for Underground Water Pollution Prevention and Control has been actively carried out,
- The Plan on Water Pollution Prevention and Control in Key River Basins (2011-2015) and the 12th Five-Year Prevention and Control Plan on Air Pollution in Key Regions have been released (China Council, 2013).

Nevertheless, pollution remains a gigantic challenge. Therefore, at the Ecological Civilization Forum in Guiyang, China's environment minister Zhou Shengxian announced the Airborne Pollution Prevention and Control Action Plan (2013–2017) that involves investment worth 1.7 trillion yuan (£179 billion), setting limits on the levels of PM 2.5 particles (Dominguez, 2013). The Plan proposes to reduce consumption of coal to below 65 percent in terms of total energy consumption by 2017 and improve air quality across the nation with a special focus on improvement of air quality in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei province, the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta (Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2013). Other measures include:

- Enhancing overall treatment and reducing discharges of multiple pollutants
- Adjusting and optimizing industrial structure and promoting upgrade of economic transition
- Speeding up technological reform of enterprises and improving the capability of scientific innovation.
- Quickening the step to adjust energy structure and increasing the supply of clean energy (Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2013).

According to China's National Energy Administration, renewable energy sources accounted for 57 percent of newly installed electricity-generating capacity in the first ten months of 2013 (Aredy, and Spegele, 2013).

4. Major challenges

The anti-pollution drive is beset with challenges, including the challenge of addressing the pollution image, as described below.

4.1. Magnitude of the problem

February 2014 did not fare well since hazardous smog affected much of the Northern China including Beijing, prompting the WHO to describe China's smog as a "health crisis." This might reinforce the unpleasant image

of the country on which global media had turned the spotlight in the preceding year because of the same problem.

Jimmy Fung and William Funt wrote in *The Guardian* in December 2013 that air pollution levels in Shenzhen and Guangzhou were decreasing after peaking in 2007, while air quality in Shanghai was better than that in Beijing, partly because of its strict regulations such as use of cleaner fuels for ships entering its harbours. They, however, added a caveat: "But even in these cities the haze is so thick that often in winter it blocks out the sun, reducing natural light and warmth significantly. As a result temperature drops, households use more energy for heating; pollution gets worse, causing respiratory diseases and eventually more people are hospitalized" (Fung and Hunt, 2013).

Fung and Hunt argue that things could improve with the accessibility of more data that could be "fed into simulation models to provide accurate assessments of how changes to transportation, industry and power plants and even agricultural practice could help to reduce pollution" (Fung and Hunt, 2013). As such, curbing of carbon growth needs to reflect in a major overhaul of the economy and city planning, which is indispensable for the country's sustainable urbanization drive as well.

4.2. Powerful social media and negative images

The stories of China's pollution debacle and pictures of smog-engulfed cities with people in masks wading through dust and haze are frequently shared on various social media sites. A consistent exposure to such news imperceptibly builds up and reinforces negative images of and perceptions about China's environment, deterring potential tourists from setting foot in China.

As a commentator writes in the *Forbes* magazine: "Try eye-stinging air pollution in January that sent particle monitors at the U.S. embassy in Beijing into 'crazy-bad' territory for weeks on end, a spectacle captured and relayed by Chinese and Western media to a world that recognizes a gross-out when it sees it" (Montlake, 2013).

Or if a prospective traveler happens to consult a travel website like "China Travel Go" that markets itself as The Ultimate China Travel Guide, its information and facts might compel the traveler to give a second thought to visiting China. The website states: "Linfen (large city in Shanxi Province), Lanzhou (capital of Gansu province) and Urumqi (capital of Xinjiang) are China's worst cities for air pollution and among the top 10 of the world's worst cities for air pollution" (Brendon, 2013).

On the contrary, the Chinese tourism authorities mostly use traditional media for tourism promotion, while the pollution-covering stories on non-governmental and foreign websites gain the upper hand. For instance, Wang Sheng, assistant general manager at D & J Global Communications, points out: "Most government tourism administrations in China prefer the traditional way of promotion to attract foreigners, such as holding promotions in targeted places overseas. But this practice has one major shortcoming in that they are still not close enough to the potential individual customer" (Watt, January 29 2013).

Furthermore, even if China is able to curb pollution significantly in times to come, the ossified negative images would still be a stumbling block in attracting tourists if pollution is what is putting them off. Hence, effective communication of messages of cleansing of environment is equally important.

4.3. Ambiguous directions to local officials

On the one hand, monitoring of local officials' compliance with environment-related guidelines has been reported to be difficult, on the other hand, as *China Daily* reported, the "ruling Chinese Communist Party is sending mixed signals to local officials as Beijing seeks a balance between environmental protection and economic growth" (Lelyweld, 2013). Seeking to rebalance the economy by curbing carbon growth, the Chinese central leadership is placing more emphasis on green growth rather than a high GDP growth rate. However, as Michael Lelyweld writes:

results suggest that the forces of old-fashioned development and new-style sustainable development are pulling in opposite directions, not only at provincial and local levels but also within the party and the central government itself. The party circular also conveys conflict because it groups environmental assessment together with employment, which is usually associated with economic growth. Although the government has pledged to rebalance the economy, it is unclear whether it will crack down on the provinces that are still outpacing the national average [of GDP growth rate] by wide margins (Lelyweld, 2013).

Thus, the central government will need to provide unambiguous directions to local governments rather than lukewarm instructions. Also, it will need to be tough on the compliance issue. For example, the provincial department of environment protection imposed fines on local governments in eight cities in northeast China's Liaoning Province for air pollution, which totaled US\$ 8.9 million (Xinhuanet, 2013).

4.4. Challenges to curbing coal consumption

While the government's action plan (2013-17), as explained earlier, elicited applause, skepticism equally attended this announcement. Greenpeace has "calculated that to achieve the 2017 target of a 25% cut in PM2.5 levels, coal use will have to fall by between 80 million and 90 million tons in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region over the next five years, while annual increases in coal use in Shanxi and Inner Mongolia will have to be restricted to 2% or less. The figures released by Beijing and its neighbors do not go this far" (Nan, 2013). Similarly, Li Junfeng, director of the National Centre for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation, points out: "On one hand it restricts coal consumption; on the other it encourages coal-to-gas production, further strengthening coal's position" (Nan, 2013). Wen, Luo and Shiao express reservations from a different perspective: "Converting coal to natural gas, however, is an extremely water-intensive process. One cubic meter of SNG requires 6 to 10 liters (1.58-2.6 gallons) of freshwater to produce. China's attempt to control urban air pollution in the east might jeopardize its water supplies elsewhere" (Wen, Luo, and Shiao, 2013).

Taking cognizance of wider opinions and analyses, the government will need to ensure that its coal use reduction plan delivers.

5. Conclusion

The article underscored that as the Chinese government gears up to tapping the potential of its tourist attractions by launching marketing campaigns and through legislative and administrative measures, it will need to pay urgent attention to improving air quality, especially in highly polluted cities such as Beijing. With China

facing competition from other countries in attracting tourism, indifference to or inadequate attention to pollution could be ruinous to the prospects of its tourism industry. An ideal tourism strategy should be comprehensive that addresses the present and potential concerns of tourists. Further, communication of improvement in pollution levels through social media and other channels will be crucial in addressing foreigners' negative perceptions about China's polluted cities.

In light of the foregoing analysis, the article empirically investigated the impact of air pollution on China's inbound international tourism while highlighting the challenges to the government's anti-pollution drive. Given the paucity of focused studies in this specific area, this study fills a critical lacuna. It is understandable that it was in 2013 that inbound tourism witnessed a stark decline and the role of pollution as a causal factor came to prominence in mass media. This possibly accounts for a lack of empirical studies in this domain as well as illuminating the limitation of this study that is confined to the most recent smog debacle. Nevertheless, it merits a mention that by incorporating the recent incidents which are reflective of a serious health concern in the country, the study focused on a burning issue of air pollution as a mark of current and possibly long-term challenge to the Chinese tourism industry, if corrective measures prove inadequate.

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