

Sri Lanka - China Tourism Relations: An Analysis of Recent Trends in Chinese Tourist Arrivals to Sri Lanka

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Tourism is widely recognized as one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries accounting for approximately 10% of global GDP, and employing a growing workforce of 283.5 million. In the context of Sri Lanka, the tourism sector is the 3rd largest foreign income earner and total contribution to the economy is around 12% of GDP. This paper examines recent trends in Chinese tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka along with comparative position of Sri Lanka as an outbound tourism destination of China. It is observed that during the period of period 1984 – 1994, Germany held the number one spot in Sri Lanka's tourist arrivals. Until 2004, Germany, India and the UK were the 'top 3' countries among Sri Lanka's tourist arrivals, and China's contribution to local tourism was insignificant. In 2014, however, China rose to the rank of Sri Lanka's 3rd major tourist partner accounting for 8.4% of total tourist arrivals. Moreover, Chinese tourist arrivals grew by a remarkable 72.5% in 2010-2016 while Indian and UK tourist arrivals increased by only 19.3% and 10.3%, respectively. Furthermore, tourist arrivals from China increased by 68% in 2015 compared to 2014 while Indian tourist arrivals grew by only 30%.

Despite the impressive growth rate in Chinese tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka, these numbers are negligible in comparison to Chinese outbound tourism to other countries. Even though Sri Lanka was among the top 25 tourist destinations of Chinese travelers in 2007, it no longer holds this valuable position. Thus, this study recommends increasing the number of Chinese-speaking guides and hotel staff introducing Chinese-language apps for tourists and promoting Sri Lanka's tourism destinations e-tourism sites, improving air-connectivity between the two countries and cultivating tourism-friendly 'soft power' by celebrating festivals such as Chinese New Year in order to multiply its incoming tourists from China.

Key words: *China, Sri Lanka, Soft power, Tourism destinations, Tourist arrivals*