# Economic and socio-cultural impacts of Mainland Chinese tourists on Hong Kong residents

Manisa Piuchan [a, *], Chi Wa Chan [b], Jack Kaale [b]

[a] *Department of Tourism, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand*
[b] *School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the economic and socio-cultural impacts from the burgeoning mainland Chinese tourists on Hong Kong residents. Ten individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect Hong Kong residents' views. Content analysis was employed to analyze the data. The results showed that the socio-cultural aspects were reported negatively with regard to culture, shopping and dining, and transportation but conversely, it had a positive impact on education and infrastructure. The economic aspect showed that residents accepted and appreciated the economic benefits brought by the inflow of mainland Chinese tourists. The Hong Kong government should consider these impacts, and then provide better solutions for residents' lives and plans to cope with the upcoming scenario which might arise regarding Hong Kong's economic boom and more tourists traveling to Hong Kong. Recommendations are also suggested in this study for further development.

## Introduction

The tourism industry has become an economic pillar of Hong Kong with the majority of tourists coming from mainland China. Numbers of mainland visitors have boomed (reported at 16.7%), with 40 million in 2013 of the total 54 million tourists in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2014) due to the introduction of the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) in 2003. This exceeds the expected 42 million in 2015 from the forecast in 2011 (Siu, Lee, & Leung, 2013). Since this implementation was announced by China, residents from 49 cities across China (numbering approximately 250 million) are now officially permitted to travel independently to Hong Kong (Want China Times, 2012). Many case studies have reported the general perceptions of residents regarding the impact of tourism (Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013; Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009; Zhuoyang, 2005) which Hong Kong residents have seen to be similar to other areas of the tourism boom as well. Interesting evidence from China Real Time (2014) mentioned a survey in 2012 by the University of Hong Kong, which reported that only 28 percent of Hong Kong residents viewed mainland Chinese visitors in a positive way. Ko (2012) reported that wealthy mainlanders have been welcomed recently because of Hong Kong's struggling economy and are filling hotel rooms and shopping in designer stores. However, there are perceptions by Hong Kong's locals that the mainlanders have driven up overall property prices, leaving even middle-class Hongkongers struggling to afford rents or mortgage down payments, putting pressure on housing, school places, health care, including from locally born babies with mainland parents who have automatic residency (37% of babies born were to mainland families) in an already overcrowded city.

It should be noted that Hong Kong society was built along British lines and adopted to English values even though the locals were ethnic Chinese. Uniquely, Hong Kong values slowly emerged alongside the city's economic and society development. For instance, Hong Kong residents were well-educated, worked efficiently, and understood the standard manners which were seen as the mark of an educated person (Ko, 2012; Siu et al., 2013). For these reasons, they seemed different from the mainland Chinese and the potential for conflicts and tension was always there. However, there are various benefits that Hong Kong receives from mainland Chinese tourists as well. A study on the impacts of tourism has recognized that the population of the destination has perceived economic and social benefits and costs from tourists on their community and lives (Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009). Tourism impacts may be analyzed from four perspectives: economic, society, culture, and environment, with both positive and negative impacts (Kim et al., 2013). Tourism generates economic growth, improves the standard of living, and develops infrastructure, as well as raising investment and business activities (Kim et al., 2013; Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009). On the other hand, prices of land, goods, and services are also dramatically raised by tourism which clearly have an effect on local residents (Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Kim et al., 2013; Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009). However, it seems that the effect of tourism on the cost of land and housing is a neutral perception of local residents (Belisle & Hoy, 1980), which implies that different groups in the community might have different perceptions of the impact on their community and lives (Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009). Much attention to this positive attitude has demonstrated that if residents receive more benefits or are economically dependent on tourism, they tend to be more supportive than those who are not (Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Zhuoyang, 2005). Siu et al. (2013) agree with this in that if local residents express positive opinions on the impact of tourism, they are likely to support tourism development and welcome more tourists.

Socio-cultural perspectives show that tourism contributes to social problems such as beggars, gambling, drugs, prostitution, increased crime levels, congestion, and crowding (Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Kim et al., 2013; Kreag, 2001), while positive views focus on developing and upgrading infrastructure and facilities (Kim et al., 2013). The cultural impact might vary based on residents' social relationships in regions, level of education, the communication between locals and tourists, and image of international tourists (Kim et al., 2013). Interchanges between hosts and guests create a better cultural understanding and can also help raise awareness of the preservation of traditional customs and festivals, while it can also lead to the erosion of traditional cultures. Haralambopoulos and Pizam (1996) reported that tourism also influenced the host population's spoken language which can become displaced by the tourists' native languages. Furthermore, some research has indicated that the social and cultural impact has affected community residents regarding their overall sense of well-being which consists of material life, community life, and health and safety (Kim et al., 2013).

This paper studied the socio-cultural and economic impacts on Hong Kong residents from the flourishing number of mainland Chinese tourists visiting Hong Kong. Due to the great number of tourists from mainland China, existing impacts might occur to the local residents' livelihood, as suggested by many studies which have reported the perceptions of residents regarding the impacts of tourism in specific countries and towns (Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009). The main research question of this study was "What are the economic and socio-cultural impacts of mainland Chinese tourists on Hong Kong residents?".

## Methodology

The main purpose of this study was to study the socio-cultural and economic impacts of mainland Chinese tourists' influence on Hong Kong residents using qualitative research methods. A qualitative study was designed to be consistent with the assumption of a qualitative paradigm in a process of understanding a social or human problem, building a holistic picture, formed with words, reporting the detailed views of informants and conducted in a natural setting (Hill, 2012; Maxwell, 2013). Interviews enabled the researcher to explore the richness, depth and understanding of the phenomena in their natural setting (Maxwell, 2013; Veal, 2011). Semi-structured and open-ended questions were used in order to encourage the respondents to give details based on their experience and the researchers gained the opportunity to obtain thoughtful answers. Thus, a semi-structured interview was the main data collection method applied to access local residents' opinions. Table 1 illustrates the interview questions which were guided from a literature review. The questions comprised two main areas of this study: social-cultural and economic impacts. Moreover, the interview protocol included questions prompted by the interviewees. For instance, if the interviewees mentioned a quota was placed on the number of residents entering the school, in subsequent interviews, the researchers incorporated a question about these issues.

The target sample was Hong Kong residents with a total of 10 respondents. A snowball sample was employed to collect data on a few members of the target population by asking those individuals to provide information needed to locate other members whom they knew (Babbie, 2001). The weakness of snowball sampling was that it did not lead to a representative sample but it has been reported as the best method when there is a the time limitation (Babbie, 2001; Maxwell, 2013).

**Table 1**
Samples of interview questions

| |
|---|
| Q1 What aspects do you think have the most influential impact on your daily life effected by mainland Chinese tourists? |
|     - Socio-cultural impacts |
|     - Economic impacts |
| Q2 How do those aspects affect you in your daily life? |
| Q3 What is your recommendation to minimize those impacts or develop the cases? |

The selection criteria included people who were permanent residents of Hong Kong and who had been born there without leaving for other countries, excluding for travel purposes. This criterion was used because it was believed that local residents responded more to their communities and impacts on their lives than migrants (Poppleton, Hitchcock, Lymperopoulou, Simmons, & Gillespie, 2013). The selection criteria did not specify length of stay as this was in line with their age range. The number of interview samples ended at 10 because of reaching data saturation (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Warfield, Baker, & Foxx, 2014). Fusch and Ness (2015, p. 1409) noted that data saturation may be attained by as little as six interviews and qualitative research had to consider data in terms of richness and depth rather than sample size. The current study reached saturation by the seventh interviewees and so all three researchers agreed to end the number of interviews at 10. Furthermore, the researchers had agreed on general principles to stop interviewing if there were no new data, no new themes, no new coding, and the ability to replicate the study had been reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Maxwell, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during March 2014 one by one through telephone conversations with the interview time ranging from 20 to 30 min. The mother-tongue language, Cantonese, was the main language for interviewing to ensure that the respondents fully understood the questions and allowed questions to be asked in order to have a better understanding of the answers. The response rate was high (100%). All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees using a digital voice recorder, electronically transferred to a personal computer, and transcribed verbatim. Notes were taken during the interviews. Then, translation of Chinese to English was performed afterward. The transcript was analyzed in accordance with content analysis to uncover similar sentences related to each category. Content analysis may be suitable for the simple reporting of common issues mentioned in data (Creswell, 1994).

Data analysis of the qualitative research of this study was carried out concurrently with the data collection process (Maxwell, 2013). Moreover, following the four steps of qualitative research suggested by Hill (2012, pp. 25—26) to conduct the research and analysis consisted of (a) collecting data in an open way; (b) sorting data into broad categories, called *domains*; (c) creating summaries, called *core ideas*, of what each participant has said in each domain; and (d) looking for themes or patterns across participants' responses within each domain, called *cross analysis*. Consequently, this inductive process allowed the results to emerge from the data using words and stories. In addition, attention was paid to the context within which the words were spoken in assigning domains and creating core ideas and the researcher constantly returned to the raw data to check for trustworthiness of the analysis.

Table 2 presents the profile of the respondents. The majority of the selected sample occupied job positions at the entry level in different organizations because this study aimed to investigate the general views of residents to gain richness and depth of information.

**Table 2**
Profile of respondents

| Code number | Age range | Gender | Occupation category |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| R1 | 21—30 | Female | Human resources officer |
| R2 | 21—30 | Male | Secondary school teacher |
| R3 | 21—30 | Female | Secondary school teacher |
| R4 | 21—30 | Male | Hotel front office supervisor |
| R5 | 21—30 | Male | Hotel housekeeping supervisor |
| R6 | 31—40 | Female | Club house supervisor |
| R7 | 41—50 | Male | Businessman |
| R8 | 21—30 | Female | VM designer (Virtual machine and display show) |
| R9 | 31—40 | Female | Event sales representative |
| R10 | 31—40 | Male | Food and beverage team leader |

## Results and Discussion

The analysis found that four interviewees considered the economic aspect to be the most significant impact on the daily life of Hong Kong residents brought about by mainland Chinese tourists. Their comments on the economic impact were of the most concern. The remaining proportion was scattered among discrete social and cultural aspects like culture, shopping behavior and dining manners, transportation, education, and infrastructure. For instance, the socio-cultural impacts were reported physically and behaviorally such as overcrowding of shopping malls and rude awakening, maintaining the mainland Chinese tourists' reputation for inappropriate behavior while traveling abroad. In addition, the interviewees who were working in the hotel and tourism industry were more likely to give positive comments and these comments were related to economic issues. Table 3 summarizes the responses on the economic and socio-cultural impact of mainland Chinese tourists on Hong Kong residents from this study.

The economic impacts were seen as more positive because the mainlanders created more business opportunities and generated revenue in Hong Kong. Some example of shopping boosting the economy were explained by some interviewees (R6, R7, R9, R10) as Chinese tourists had great confidence in Hong Kong products (such as milk powder, food items, luxury leather brands) as they are regarded them as genuine and safe. Also, fake, slipshod construction, and toxic products emerging in mainland China have induced more Chinese tourists through the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) to come to Hong Kong regularly to purchase large amounts of products like milk powder or daily necessities. Their spending on tourism services, retail brands, or daily necessities were all viewed as bringing more business opportunities, and therefore, bolstering the economy. This supports other research that claimed the higher incomes and eagerness to shop by Chinese tourists generated revenue for the local economy (Siu et al., 2013). The notion of Hong Kong as a "Shopping Paradise" is believed to be one of the reasons attracting Chinese tourists to Hong Kong (Siu et al., 2013). The city image might be instilled in the minds of tourists, including mainland Chinese tourists, encouraging them to spend more money on shopping activities.

**Table 3**
Summary of responses on economic and socio-cultural impacts of mainland Chinese tourists toward Hong Kong residents

| Economic impact | |
|---|---|
| Pros | - Bring more business opportunities and lead to an encouraging economy |
| | - Increase demand for hotel rooms |
| | - Increase hotel room rate, price of hotel services, hotel revenue, bonus, annual salary |
| | - More hotels will be built, more hotel choices for hotel staff to choose from |
| | - Bring more job opportunities |
| | - Positively influence the economy of Hong Kong as Hong Kong relies heavily on the tourism industry |
| | - Improve the banking and finance industries |
| | - More mainland Chinese come to invest and bring more cash inflow |
| | - High spending on shopping |
| Cons | - Perturbations caused in purchase price for public housing flats |
| | - Fierce speculation in property market emerging |
| | - Increased property prices |
| | - Hong Kong residents cannot afford to buy flats |
| **Socio-cultural impact** | |
| *1) Culture* | |
| Cons | - Cultural differences occur between Hong Kong people and Chinese |
| | - Inappropriate behavior like speaking loudly, squatting negatively affect the appearance of the city |
| | - Disturb the social order |
| *2) Shopping behavior& Dining manners* | |
| Cons | - Overcrowding in shopping malls |
| | - Long queues and long waiting time always outside restaurants and international brand shops in the shopping districts |
| | - Facilities get damaged, are dirty and create a bad atmosphere regarding shopping and dining experiences for local residents |
| | - Inappropriate behavior such as jumping the queue stimulates conflicts with other people |
| *3) Transportation* | |
| Cons | - Induce traffic congestion |
| | - Overcrowded everywhere in all kinds of transports, always no seating |
| *4) Education* | |
| Pros | - Improve Putonghua or Chinese (Mandarin) language |
| | - Diversify the language base of Hong Kong people |
| *5) Infrastructure* | |
| Pros | - More infrastructure being built to meet demands of Chinese tourists, and Hong Kong people can benefit from this also |

The hotel employees (R4, R5) stated that if more Chinese tourists come, then the demand for hotel rooms will increase, and inevitably the room rates, hotel services such as food and beverage services and spa services will increase. In addition, improved turnover leads to larger bonuses and greater increments in annual salary because of the profitable revenue generated by the huge Chinese market as one sample statement indicated below.

*"This Chinese market is our real boss, and they pay us our salary."*

(R4: Hotel Staff)

In view of this, hotel employees actually welcome Chinese tourists. In addition, hotels have been built and are more planned to be built to accommodate the rising demand. This also creates more job opportunities. However, even though most local residents benefit from job opportunities, there is some argument that these jobs are unsustainable and of a lower career level (Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009), which might be advantageous only in the short term. What is more beneficial is that hotel workers will have more employer choice and can work for the hotels they prefer. They added that there must be positive economic effects as Hong Kong's economy relies heavily on the tourism industry. The banking and finance industries will be improved as well when more mainland Chinese come to invest and create more cash inflow. To stimulate a more favorable economy, the interviewees suggested promoting more internationally branded commodities which are always attractive to wealthy Chinese people.

*"We hope to have the wealthier niche of the Chinese market rather than pulling all kinds of Chinese tourists in."*

(R7: Businessman)

This finding was similar to previous studies claiming that residents expressed a more positive attitude if their job were dependent on tourism (Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Siu et al., 2013; Zhuoyang, 2005). The respondents made an interesting point for improvement as they proposed that the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) should devise a series of advertisements to promote Hong Kong as a brilliant shopping paradise, especially for famous brand products. Moreover, to attract more Chinese tourists, numerous destinations should be constructed to cater for their needs. The Hong Kong government should take the lead to educate Hong Kong people to be more considerate and try to accept different cultures.

Clearly, the booming Chinese tourist market is raising the cost of living in Hong Kong and similar impacts have been reported on locals in other cities (Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Kim et al., 2013; Siu et al., 2013; Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009). A negative comment about the Chinese tourists made by the respondents was the housing problem. Numerous Chinese visitors bring a considerable amount of cash to buy a lot of flats—not only luxurious flats, but also public housing flats which are meant to be for purchase by Hong Kong residents only. Chinese visitors, with the help of Hong Kong property intermediaries, buy public housing flats illegally and then increase the price and resell the flats to Hong Kong residents. Speculation in the property market has become fierce. Property price increases as a loss of resources for residents is one of the perceived economic impacts of mainlanders. Hong Kong residents have articulated this in the sample statement below.

*"Hong Kong property is not for Hong Kong people; it is for mainland Chinese. We can no longer afford it."*

(R2: School Teacher)

Therefore, the interviewees declared that the illegal public housing transfer or selling must be banned. The government may follow the lead taken with regard to the public housing scheme in Singapore which strictly controls the price of public housing to ensure reasonable prices for its citizens. In addition, higher stamp duty is imposed on those

who are not Hong Kong permanent residents in order to diminish the speculations in property by mainland Chinese.

The negative comments regarding socio-cultural impacts represented a bigger section of the overall opinions of the interviewees. All the interviewees pointed out that mainland Chinese are rude, and lack social etiquette and education. They like to speak loudly, as if they are shouting at someone. Whether in an indoor shopping mall or outdoor public area, they are always squatting, which Hong Kong people view as negatively affecting the appearance of the city. The most unacceptable case they claimed was that they had seen Chinese parents allow their children to excrete publicly in Mongkok. Some interviewees thought that Chinese tourists upset the social order as they usually fight over seats on public transport and like to occupy seats with their belongings. One of the interviewees sincerely affirmed that tour guides can act as kindly reminders who can help to educate the mainland Chinese during tours, telling them what the Hong Kong culture is and direct them to adapt to the culture of the city they are visiting. Furthermore, cultural differences also cause other problems in shopping and dining experiences, and transportation aspects. Regarding the former, the interviewees asserted that shopping malls have become overcrowded as shown by the sample statement below.

> "It is very annoying! Chinese tourists fill up the streets and tourist attractions such as Ocean Park, and there seems to be no more space for us."

> (R1: Human Resource Staff)

Especially in shopping districts like TsimShaTsui, long queues and long waiting times always occur outside restaurants and the international brand shops. Sometimes, Chinese tourists also jump the queue which easily leads to conflicts with other people. To ease this situation, the interviewees advised the government to set a capacity limit for tourists on a monthly or annual basis, in order to restrict excessive tourist arrivals. In the meantime, the crowds of tourists are becoming more serious on transportation because of the rising number of individual visitors through the IVS. The interviewees indicated that there is often traffic congestion on the roads and all kinds of transportation are overcrowded.

> "When getting into the MTR [Mass Transit Railway] during the weekend, we cannot even breathe due to many mainland Chinese tourists using the same transportation, it is difficult to find any seats, … do not follow the public rules, or do not understand social etiquette. They still do everything same as they do in China and you can see through the news and media everyday about these kinds of problems."

> (R9: Event Sales Representative)

The interviewees expected the MTR to increase the frequency of trains, especially during peak hours. Some even suggested lengthening the compartment of all the trains. This all leads to deteriorating living standards for Hong Kong residents as mentioned in the social-cultural cost of Siu et al.'s (2013) study. Their study also

mentioned that these ill-mannered Chinese tourists made residents feel frustrated due to cultural conflicts and a similar result was supported by Tsundoda and Mendlinger (2009) that if more tourists come, a negative attitude toward tourists' rudeness could arise.

Nevertheless, there were some positive comments about education and infrastructure with interviewees reflecting that regarding education, Hong Kong people had improved their Putonghua which could diversify their language base. In addition, through continuous cooperation with China, lots of infrastructure has been built to cater for the huge numbers of tourists from whom Hong Kong people can also benefit. More infrastructure is proposed to be constructed to manage the increasing numbers.

## Recommendations

With regard to the perceived presence of the negative impact of mainland Chinese tourists on Hong Kong residents' livelihood—socially, culturally, and economically—the following recommendations should be considered, in an effort to balance the benefits and bring about a win—win situation.

### Revision of Housing Policy to Benefit Residents

As noted by one of the interviewees, most Chinese tourists come to Hong Kong with a lot of money which allows them to buy houses and later on resell them to Hong Kong people for exorbitant sums of money. This will eventually leave local people unable to buy a home, resulting in increased tension. In order to bring sanity to this problem, the government could create a public scheme which controls prices and give first priority to locals. This system is working well in Singapore. Additionally, the government may increase prices or impose taxes on mainland Chinese who acquire housing units so that locals benefit more. This policy of ownership can ease the tensions between the mainland Chinese and local people. Support for such a recommendation is provided by the following comment.

> "…locals can't afford to buy the apartments in good locations as they are taken by wealthy Chinese who then resell at a higher price. The Hong Kong government should investigate carefully or set the regulations to control housing prices in each district …. "

> (R3: School Teacher)

### Infrastructure and Super-structure Development

The introduction and implementation of the IVS in 2003 has seen an influx of mainland Chinese tourists to Hong Kong for many reasons, among others to buy goods, since mainland Chinese tourists consider Hong Kong products to be genuine. However, this scheme has brought about congestion and traffic jams in the transport sector within the city—as one interviewee stated, it is sometimes difficult to breathe, referring to the situation in the popular Mass Transit Railway (MTR). In view of this trend, it is

recommended that the government increases the frequency of the MTR services and also their capacity by adding additional compartments or carriages. The government and the private sector should further develop super-structure such as recreation facilities, shopping malls, eating places, and lodging facilities as this may not only avoid conflicts between the locals and mainland Chinese, but also boost the economy.

### Economic Realization and Benefits

The fact is that the inflow of mainland Chinese tourists to Hong Kong has had a negative impact on the prices of goods and services, but this effect increases the balance of payment through revenue collection in hotels and from other locally produced goods. In return, the government can produce more branded domestic and international goods for export. Therefore, the government can pay back some of the gain to the community in terms of developing more infrastructure like education and housing which can be made affordable to all Hong Kong children and residents.

> *"The Hong Kong government should establish more schools for residents as today there is strong competition to enter schools and limited numbers of students in each school. Also, improvement of the education system and of standards should be a concern .... "*

> (R9: Event Sale Representative)

### Sensitization of Acceptable Cultural Behavior

One of the main issues mentioned previously about Hong Kong residents is the perception that mainland Chinese tourists are rude both inside shops and in public, squatting anywhere, hence making the city look dirty, and making a lot of noise. However, the Chinese tourists may not be aware of this improper behavior due to differences in cultures. Therefore, it is recommended that strategies are crafted and executed in terms of sensitization on certain matters pertaining to cultural adherence.

### Conclusion

The impact of mainland Chinese tourists on Hong Kong residents' livelihood, both socially and economically has its upside of tangible economic benefits such as wealth creation and employment, as is the case with the mainland Chinese tourists and local Hong Kong people. It also has its downside inasmuch as it can bring about changes in the prices of commodities, so local people can be exploited and cultural aspects sacrificed. In response to all the negatives, it is important and incumbent upon the Hong Kong government to design policies of conserving and respecting the culture of local people. Additionally, local people should be educated on the importance of tourism and they must see and appreciate the benefits. These benefits must be felt by local people if they are to appreciate the existence of tourism by mainland Chinese tourists because tension will be reduced and harmony created. This study is an eye opener to the authorities to begin to develop remedial and sustainable measures for the future administration. The Hong Kong government's future is anchored on tourism; hence, developing tourism policies is important. Finally, this research may not fully represent the overall perceptions of all Hong Kong residents due to its limited sample size. Therefore, future research can expand the sample size so that a very comprehensive outcome can be achieved.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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