

One China, Two Taiwans: The Geopolitics of Cross-Strait Tourism

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Abstract

China and Taiwan together compose one of the world's most dangerous geopolitical hotspots. Yet while China points over a thousand missiles across the Taiwan Strait, it has sent millions of tourists in the same direction with the encouragement of Taiwan's politicians and businesspeople. When tourism began officially in 2008, it was promoted by politicians, industry, and scholars in both China and Taiwan as a mode of reconciliation and peace-making after decades of tension and travel bans. This trade began while China claimed Taiwan as its own territory under the so-called "One China Principle", with Taiwan maintaining a more ambiguous stance towards its own sovereignty. Tourism quickly became a major mode of contact between Taiwanese and Chinese people—after the opening of direct cross-Strait flights, Chinese tourists rapidly became the largest segment of Taiwan's market, and by 2016, accounted for about half of the 10 million annual arrivals on an island of 23 million people. Despite this growing interaction, Taiwan and China have drifted farther apart politically, and Taiwan itself has been split socially by the tourist trade. Tourism's revenues have not been shared evenly, and many in the industry complain of cartelization by Chinese capital. Other impacts, including congested roads and trashed tourist sites, bewilder many Taiwanese residents. Finally, following the 2016 election of a more independence-leaning president and legislature, China froze official communication with Taiwan and reduced outbound tourism, throwing the future of cross-Strait relations into question.



Based on participant-observation, interviews, and media analysis conducted between 2012 and 2016, I demonstrate that despite the wishful thinking of pundits and politicians, tourism has accelerated alienation between the two polities and deepened divisions within Taiwan. I treat tourism as not only a commercial traffic of bodies, but as a potent political practice with the capacity to reconfigure borders and territories. In other words, I show that tourism is no mere leisure activity, but rather another mode of an ongoing geopolitical struggle.

About the Speaker

Dr. Ian Rowen is Assistant Professor of Geography at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and Associate Researcher at the French Center for Research on Contemporary China. A Fulbright Scholar (2013-14), he has written about regional politics, social movements, and tourism for publications including *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, *Asian Anthropology*, *Journal of Archaeology and Anthropology*, the BBC, and *The Guardian*. Prior to earning a PhD in Geography from the University of Colorado Boulder, he worked as a tour guide, translator, and journalist in China, Taiwan, and elsewhere.

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