

Challenges Facing the Tourism Sector in Palestine: A Chinese Perspective

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Abstract

Palestine has a glorious history, which makes it one of the most culturally-rich tourist destinations. China is now the second largest economy in the world and probably the largest potential market for tourism. This paper analyzes the challenges that Palestinian tourism face in consideration of Chinese market. More cooperation in tourism sector, as well as more advertisements of Media and more Palestinian cultural events in China are suggested.

Keywords: Tourism Industry, Palestinian Tourism, Chinese Outbound Tourism, China-Palestine Relation.

Introduction

Palestine is a region with prodigious historical and culture heritage that makes it one of the most remarkable destinations for tourism. However, due to the extremely complex political situation, tourism in Palestine had been negatively affected and cannot grow as well as it should be. This phenomenon attracts attention, and solving this issue comes to be important for Palestine's future development.

This paper aims to describe the tourism sector in Palestine, analyse the challenge of tourism with the concern of Chinese market, and then discuss some potential methods to solve the existing issue. In addition, this paper focuses on providing an objective and academic view. All racial, political and religious controversy will be avoided or described in a neutral manner, and the description of the region will be based on the de facto control area of each regime.

In section 2, the main research methodology of this paper will be introduced in detail, and section 3 will describe the current situation of Palestine's tourism in the Occupied Palestine (Israel), West Bank of Jordan River and Gaza Strip in order. Section 4 will describe tourism sector in Palestine under Israeli occupation, and section 5 and section 6 will introduce the situation of Chinese tourism industry, and analyse the challenges of tourism sector in Palestine from a Chinese perspective, then the following section will discuss several possible ways for improvement. Lastly, a conclusion will be placed to sum up the paper.

Literature Review

Current Situation of Tourism in the Occupied Palestine 1948 (Israel)

The occupied Palestine, or State of Israel, is resulted from the collaboration of Zionist movement with Britain in 1948, (Figure1). According to Central Intelligence Agency (2016a), Israel has de facto control of 20330 square kilometer area, and the newest estimation of population is around 8.5 million of which about 20% are Palestinians (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). It is also necessary to note that, Israel is not a country that had been recognized globally, and the Arab League Boycott of Israel is still effective: Israeli passport holders, and nationals with Israeli visa or border control stamp are denied for entry to most Arabic countries (Weiss, 2007). Israel has extraordinary tourist attraction, and there are nine world cultural heritages located (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016).

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The main destination cities of Israel controlled area include Tel Aviv (Yafo), Haifa, and the west side of Jerusalem (actual control, not widely accepted) and so on (Jewish Virtual Library, 2016). It is worth noted that tourists can enter the famous Dead Sea by Israeli side, and besides, the Golan Heights were generally recognized as Syrian territory but occupied by Israeli military, tourists willing to enter must travel from Israeli side. The main airport for entering Israel is Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv (Poria et al., 2004).

Figure1. Occupied Palestine 1948 (Israel), West Bank, and Gaza Strip



West Bank of Jordan River

The West Bank of Jordan River is a part of Palestine occupied by Israeli forces in 1967 (Hajjar, 2005). The Central Intelligence Agency (2016b) recorded that the land area is about 5844 square kilometers including the Palestinian part of the Dead Sea. The estimated Population of the West Bank in July 2016 is 2.93 million (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2016). Nowadays, according to the Oslo Accords (Watson, 2000), the West Bank was divided into three geopolitical areas: Area A, Area B and Area C. while Area A is administrated by the Palestinian Authority (Schanzer, 2008), Area B is under the civil control of the Palestinian Authority, but security issues remained in the hands of Israeli occupation, and Area C which represents about 62% of West Bank area remained under full Israeli control.

There are two world cultural heritages located in West Bank region (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016), and a third one is located in Eastern Jerusalem, while the territorial status is not yet determined (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2012). The main destination cities of the West Bank include Eastern Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, and Nablus (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007). There was one airport in the West Bank, but had been abandoned because of Israeli occupation in 1967 (Derfner, 2001), and therefore, visiting the West Bank has to be through either Israel or Jordan by land arrival.

Gaza Strip

The Gaza Strip is another part of Palestine. According to Aljuaidi et al. (2009). Gaza strip surface area is 365 square kilometers, and its population is 1.88 million. It is considered to be one of the most dense areas in the world (5150.6 person per km²). In 2007 the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) took control of Gaza Strip from the

Palestinian Authority by force and still in control until now (Robinson, 2007). Nowadays, Gaza is under blockage of Israeli occupation, and so, it is not a safe place for tourism; therefore, this paper will not discuss tourism in Gaza strip in detail.

Tourism in Palestine

Palestine is a rich region with both natural and cultural resources. It includes a variety of climate regions despite its small surface area. In summer, the high lands and have moderate temperatures, and in winter, the low lands, mainly Jericho, have high temperatures. This climate diversity created environmental and agricultural diversity with beautiful landscape, and this encourages rural tourism.

Historically, different civilizations controlled Palestine, and this made it one of the richest areas in the world with cultural heritage. But nowadays, the unstable political conditions in Palestine have negative impacts and consequences on tourism sector (Abahre & Radadd, 2016; Isaac et al., 2016; Suleiman & Mohamed, 2012; Suleiman & Mohamed, 2011; Isaac, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

In Palestine, the level of tourism activities is directly affected by the political situation, and restrictions imposed by Israeli occupation authorities. The data shows that demand for hotel services rises or declines sharply in periods with low or high level of political turmoil. As indicated by the PCBS's hotel surveys, the number of hotel guests at the end of 2013 amounted to more than half a million relative to 51 thousands in 2002 (during the second Intifada called Al-Aqsa Intifada).

Many important archaeological, historical, and religious sites are located in Area C under the full control of Israel. Both sides; the Palestinian Liberation organization (PLO) and Israel agreed that a Palestinian Authority would be established and assume governing responsibilities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Later, permanent status talks on the issues of borders, refugees, water resources, and Jerusalem would be held. Then, tourism and hospitality was grown and tourist trips expanded to include Palestinian places and Arab-owned tourism related industries, especially hospitality services (Al-Rimmawi & Butcher, 2015). Also many touristic sites are located in Jerusalem, most famously the Old City, and its religious landmarks (the Dome of the Rock and Church of the Holy Sepulcher), but Palestinian Authority has no control over these sites.

However, in September 2000 tourism industry was declined due to the collapse of the peace process because Israeli forces stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque, headed by Ariel Sharon (head of Likud party). Later, from the Second Intifada in 2000 until 2009, several hospitality and tourism markets took a downturn in Palestine. As a result, since 2009, tourism sector has revealed upward trends. Al-Rimmawi and Butcher (2015) stated that overall tourism sector has slowly recovered due to almost stability returned to the region.

The main factor that precludes the expansion of Palestinian tourism is the Israeli occupation. About 23% of the inbound tourists indicated that they were warned by Israeli tour agencies or tour guides about their safety concerns if visiting the Palestinian territories, also 16% were advised not to visit the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Falah, 2014). Development of tourism sector in Palestine will empower the Palestinian economy and reduce and weaken the consequences of Israeli occupation. This requires close cooperation between the private and the public sectors (ICCPalestine 2013).

Research Methodology

For the description of Palestine and its tourism sector, reliable data will be collected from academic monographs, academic journals and government websites. About the situation and perspective of China, the posts, threads, and advertisements from some main Chinese websites of tourism industry will be collected. Those data will be treated as first hand material and the result will be used for supporting the discussion and analysis.

Current Situation of Chinese Outbound Tourism

China is a large country; it has more than 1.3 billion inhabitants, which is the highest among all countries (Cai, 2014). Also, after Chinese Economic Reform in 1978, the economy of China has a very high and steady growth in the past 38 years. Nowadays China is the second largest economy by nominal GDP (United Nations, 2016). This provides solid evidence that China is one of the largest markets and should be treated significantly.

With the economic growth, the outbound Chinese travel was developing rapidly (Wang & Sheldon, 1996), in the first half of 2016, the Chinese outbound tourist reached nearly 60 million (China National Tourism Administration, 2016). This figure strongly proved that, China has tremendous potential for outbound traveling and should be treated as one of the main targets for Palestinian tourism.

Challenges of Palestine's Tourism with a Chinese View

Analysis of Visa Policy and Border Control

There are several challenges of tourism sector in Palestine with a Chinese view. For the occupied part, since the Arab boycott is still effective, sometimes travelers had to avoid having any Israeli visa or entry stamps on passport, which interrupts their willingness of visiting Israel.

For visiting West Bank, although Chinese citizens do not require visa for entering Palestine, they still need an Israeli visa if arrived Israel and traveled from it. There are also Israeli checkpoints that may ask for permission or restrict tourist's entry to the occupied West Bank. Chinese tourist was required for visa when visiting Jordan, but a visa on arrival is available in recent years (International Air Transport Association, 2016), which reduces difficulty of visiting West Bank. So, it is easier for a Chinese tourist to visit the West bank through Jordan.

Another thing which needs to be mentioned is that Jordan is one of the few Arabic countries that allows entry to the West Bank and Israel, which means that the border control of another Arabic boycott country, when seeing the entry and exit stamp on the passport, may determine that a tourist was visiting Israel, and this also produces risks of entering other Arabic countries. This situation may discourage tourists to visit the West Bank.

Gaza Strip is in a much worse situation. There is no way to enter Gaza by sea because of the Israeli blockage. Also, there are several Israeli checkpoints between Israel and Gaza Strip and can deny entry. Moreover, there was also one airport in Gaza Strip; but abandoned now because it was destructed by Israeli forces, which means that arriving Gaza by air is impossible.

Analysis of Chinese Tourism Website

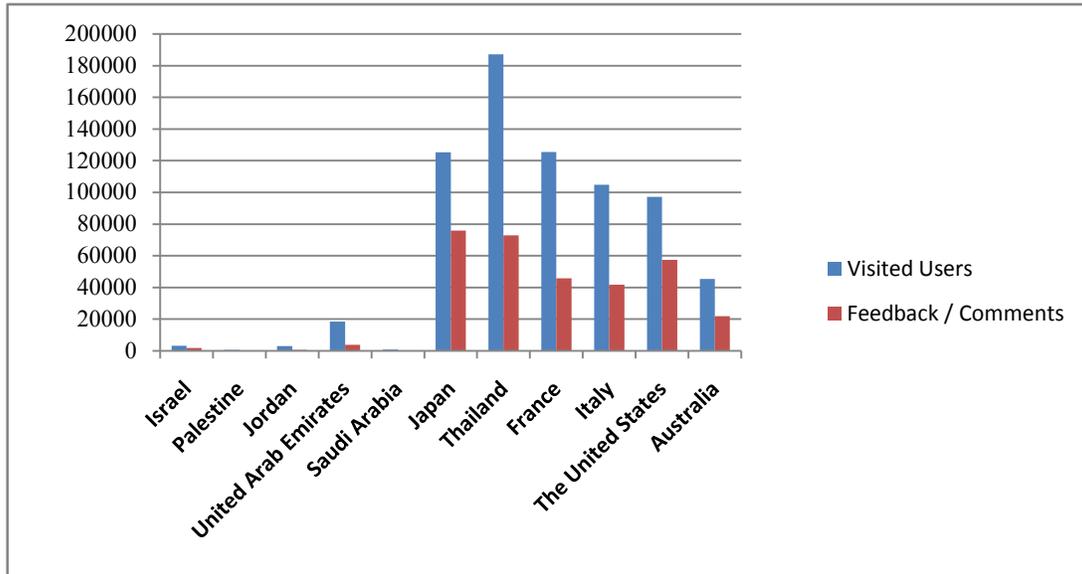
Concerning the Chinese view of Palestinian tourism, the direct material is all taken from main Chinese websites and forums for tourism. The main websites used for the necessary data acquisition are: Qyer (<http://www.qyer.com/>), Mafengwo (<http://www.mafengwo.cn/>), and Baidu (<https://lvyou.baidu.com>).

There is one special characteristic of Qyer compared to other websites, it allows registered users to post their footsteps of countries traveled. Table 1 shows the data of Israel, Palestine, and some popular traveling countries as an example (data collected at September 28, 2016).

Table 1. Footstep of Chinese Qyer User by Country / Region

Country / Region	Visited Users	Feedback / Comments
Israel	3171	1859
Palestine	669	17
Jordan	3095	628
United Arab Emirates	18572	3794
Saudi Arabia	863	78
Japan	125399	75875
Thailand	187201	72929
France	125565	45821
Italy	104918	41733
The United States	97208	57487
Australia	45349	21873

Figure 2. Footstep of Chinese Qyer User by Country/Region

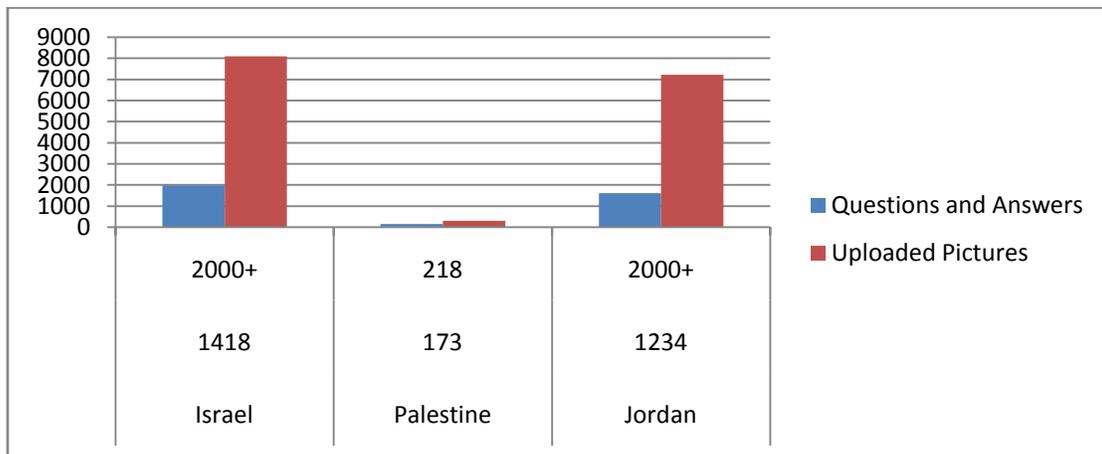


It is easy to understand that, both Israel and Palestine are not popular traveling places for Chinese tourists. Also, the feedback/ comment section with leaving footprint could be an effective way to see the tourists' impression. The feedback/footstep ratio of Palestine is 0.0254, which is the lowest among all listed countries, but feedback/footstep ratio of Israel is 0.586, it is quite high and only slightly lower than Japan and the United States. Since Palestine, Israel and Jordan are three of the most important countries/ regions discussed in this paper, table 2 aims to provide a further comparison of more details (Figure 3).

Table 2. Other Comparisons of Palestine, Israel and Jordan in Qyer

Country / Region	Travel Notes	Plans	Questions and Answers	Uploaded Pictures
Israel	1418	2000+	1981	8095
Palestine	173	218	157	302
Jordan	1234	2000+	1608	7223

Figure 3. Other Comparisons of Palestine, Israel, and Jordan in Qyer



The result shows that Israel attracts slightly more tourist attention than Jordan, and both Israel and Jordan are much more popular than Palestine in regard of posts and threads, plans, questions and answers, as well as uploaded pictures. Another thing worth mentioning is, almost all travel notes about Palestine are written with Israel or Jordan, or frequently with both of them together.

Figure 4 shows the information of Mafengwo and Baidu are tidied up in the following two tables.

Table 3. Information of Comparison in Mafengwo

Country / Region	Questions and Answers	Travel Notes
Israel	163	2535
Palestine	1	635
Jordan	96	1248

Figure 4. Information of Comparison in Mafengwo

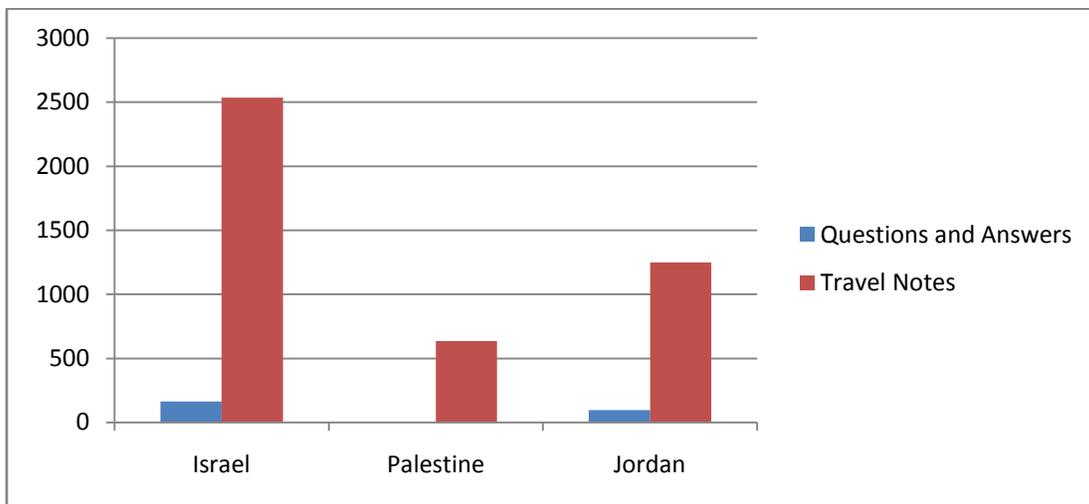
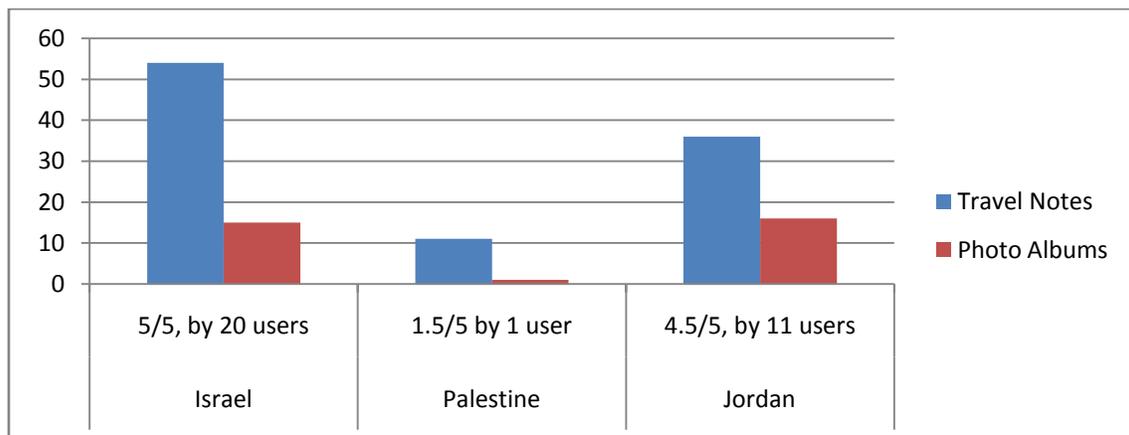


Table 4. Information of Comparison in Baidu

Country / Region	Ranking	Travel Notes	Photo Albums
Israel	5/5, by 20 users	54	15
Palestine	1.5/5 by 1 user	11	1
Jordan	4.5/5, by 11 users	36	16

Figure 5. Information of Comparison in Baidu



According to the above data, several analyses could be put forward. Firstly, with reference of result from Mafengwo and Baidu, it is easily seen that data from those three websites has similar tendency, in other words, the data from Qyer is statistically reliable. Secondly, Middle East is not a popular destination of Chinese tourist compared to Europe, Thailand and Japan etc., but the impression and feedback from travelers who went to Israel is generally positive. Furthermore, seems like tourists visit Palestine with an “in passing” manner, which means that Palestine is not a must to them; they just visit Palestine because it is neighbor to Israel or Jordan. Visitors are interested in Palestine much less than Israel, therefore the number of notes, pictures taken or even ranking of Palestine’s journey is much less than Israel’s one.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the analysis in above sections, we could find out that, visitors from China may have a much less impression of Palestine than Israel. However, this is very abnormal, because both are in the same region; also Palestine is characterized by rich cultural heritage and religious features, in addition to big diversity in environment and climate. Ideally, it is expected that visitors have almost the same level of impression and interest in both regions.

We may find out both objective and subjective reasons for this reality. For objective reasons such as entry limitations and restrictions imposed by Israeli occupation authorities, such as Israeli military checkpoints spread along main roads in the West Bank. Also, the whole Middle East region is not a popular destination of Chinese tourists. These issues are very difficult to be solved by Palestine only, but for some subjective part, there are several possible methods for improvement.

Since tourists are usually more interested in visiting Israel or Jordan than Palestine, it must be some specific reasons, it could be the better service of travel agency, or the travel-related arrangement from Israeli or Jordanian side is better than Palestine. This is due to the fact that the Palestinians do not have any control on more than 60% of the West Bank area (C areas according to Oslo Accord). In other words, the Palestinians do not yet have an independent state like Israel and Jordan. Also, Israeli tourism agencies play negative role by warning tourists not to visit the Palestinian territories. It is clear also that the Palestinian tourism agencies do not do their job well in encouraging tourists to visit Palestine. Therefore, on the long run, the strategic solution is political, which is ending Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip according to the UN resolutions, and building peace in the whole region between Israel and Palestine.

In addition, academic or cultural-oriented event is another possible solution. The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) Discover Palestine by An-Najah National University (2014) is an exceptional instance. According to Stefanelli (2016), it is the first MOOC for introducing Palestine, more than a half of participants considered themselves interested in Palestinian archaeology, even some participants give positive feedback and plan to visit Palestine after the course.

However, Stefanelli (2016) also pointed out that only 247 students participated in the course in 2015 session, which is quite a small number compared to some other MOOCs. Only one student was from China, it is very unreasonable when considering China has the largest population in the world. As a summary, more advertisement about this course should be spread over, especially in Chinese cultural platform; it is also beneficial to prepare some material written in Chinese in order to attract the largest target population.

Since Palestine has brilliant and splendid history, the main reason for the tourism issue may be because Chinese people have very limited knowledge of Palestine. If relevant MOOCs and other introductory material could be disseminated, it is optimistic that Chinese tourists could be fascinated by Palestinian history.

In conclusion, this paper had introduced the current situation of Occupied Palestine (Israel), West Bank of Jordan River and Gaza Strip, current Chinese outbound tourism, and challenges of Palestinian tourism. The issue could be improved by reducing political tension and making peace in the region, as well as more advertisement of Palestinian history and culture to China, e.g. a MOOC is a great option.

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