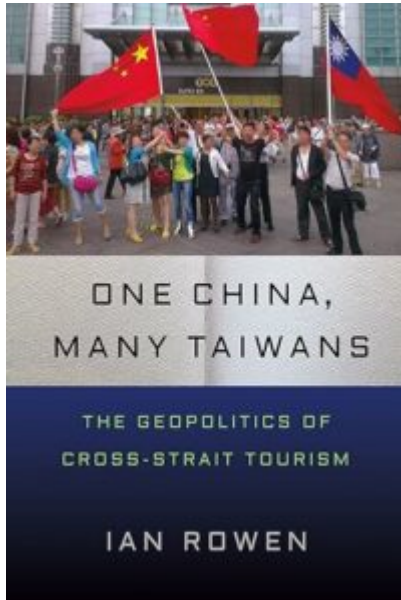


'One China, Many Taiwans: The Geopolitics of Cross-Strait Tourism', by Ian Rowen



Can cross-strait travel between mainland China and Taiwan be used to promote Beijing's view that Taiwan is Chinese territory and to push for unification?

Cross-strait tourism has fluctuated over the past 16 years, taking off in 2008 when the historically China-friendly Kuomintang party (KMT) was in power, then falling after the pro-status quo Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which does not accept Beijing's view of Taiwan, was elected to the presidency in 2016, a position they have retained in subsequent elections. These dynamics are meticulously explored in Ian Rowen's book, which considers cross-strait travel as an exceptional case of tourism geopolitics.

Understanding this turbulence requires a brief elaboration of the development of tourism policies on both sides. In 2008, the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou opened Taiwan to Chinese tourism, initially welcoming groups, and from 2011, independent tourists from select cities. Ma promised that increased engagement with China would bolster Taiwan's economy and ease tensions. After Tsai Ing-wen took office in 2016 and refused to endorse China's views, China restricted outbound travel to Taiwan. From August 2019, China banned independent travel, and from January 2020, also forbade groups. Although there has been talk of reopening tourism, China continues to restrict travel to Taiwan, and Taiwan maintains its ban on group tours to China.

Examining group and independent Chinese tourist experiences at the height of the cross-strait tourist trade, Rowen finds that Taiwanese tour guides ‘performed’ Taiwan as China to placate Chinese group tourists. Consequently, while touring Taiwan, group tourists were enabled to feel that they were still in ‘one China’. By contrast, independent Chinese tourists, who enjoyed direct access to life in Taiwan, unmediated by tour guide patter and inflexible itineraries, expressed multiple and divergent perceptions of Taiwan.

Where Beijing’s rhetoric and Taiwanese tour operators often depicted China and Taiwan as one, temporarily divided, country, subsuming differences under a ‘One China’ ideology, Rowen argues that Taiwanese residents and some independent Chinese travellers acknowledged diversity—including the coexistence of Chinese, Japanese, Pacific, and Indigenous elements—in Taiwan’s everyday spaces.

Rowen brings to his analysis both disciplinary and experiential scope. He is Associate Professor in the Department of Taiwan Culture, Languages, and Literature at National Taiwan Normal University and previously taught sociology and geography in Singapore. Before completing his PhD in geography at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Rowen worked as a translator, tour guide, journalist, artist, and hotelier. From this varied background, Rowen approaches the geopolitics of cross-strait tourism with an understanding of its practical and political dimensions.

The study draws on extensive qualitative research conducted in Taiwan between 2012 and 2020, augmented by time Rowen spent in Shanghai in 2013 and Hong Kong in 2014. Rowen’s methods encompassed multi-sited ethnography and semi-structured interviews, 120 in all, with tourists, tourism industry workers, state officials, industry representatives, and citizens. To supplement his interview and ethnographic analysis, he compared his field notes and interview results with a content analysis of tourist documents including those issued by the respective governments and travel agents, and media texts. His work benefits from this engagement with varied sources.

The book contains two historical and three ethnographic chapters, an update chapter, epilogue, and appendix on methodology. Chapter One gives an overview of Taiwan’s political history and exceptional status. Chapter Two covers mobility between Taiwan and China, detailing the complex institutional and rhetorical frameworks that govern this interaction. These two historical chapters situate the tourist trade within Taiwan’s multiple histories and cross-strait geopolitics post-2008; useful for readers unfamiliar with Taiwan and the cross-strait situation.

Engaging details pepper the ethnographic section. Chapter Three explores Taiwan's most popular tourist sites. Contrary to assumptions that tourism fosters reconciliation, Rowen shows that in Taiwan the boom in Chinese tourism has stoked tensions. For instance, Rowen's Taiwanese interlocutors observed that tourist destinations had become unpleasantly crowded; after Shilin Night Market was repackaged for Chinese tour groups, Taiwanese people stayed away, and the once orderly National Palace Museum was said by a Taiwanese scholar to have become chaotic to the extent that the management of visitors by the dumpling chain Din Tai Fung would have been preferable. Furthermore, economic benefits promised by Ma Ying-jeou did not eventuate. These unwelcome outcomes fed protests during Ma's second term (2012-2016), as discussed in Chapter Six. Indeed, peak cross-strait tourism coincided with rising Taiwanese national identification.

In Chapter Four, Rowen has the reader join him on an eight-day Chinese group tour departing Shanghai in August 2014 with several construction workers and a family. Based on this experience and interviews with other tourists, Rowen concludes that within such tightly structured tours, Taiwan was 'performed' as China: tour itineraries resembled those conducted in Chinese-controlled territory, the route and commentary elided elements dissonant with pro-unification sentiments, and the tour patronised businesses aligned with the KMT. Thus, the tour's structure, attractions, patronage, and adaptations to meet Chinese expectations produced a sense of being in China among Rowen's travelling companions.

In a striking example of adaption, the group's Taiwanese guide used pro-unification language to cater to the tourists' feelings, an approach Ian Rowen terms 'territorial translation'. For instance, the guide referred to Taiwanese and Chinese people as 'we Chinese' (*women Zhongguoren*). Such usage is rarely heard in Taiwanese discourse today. Rowen notes that the guide also used Beijing's ethnic labels such as 'minority nationalities' (*shaoshu minzu*) for Taiwan's Indigenous peoples. He argues that the guide's territorial translation had the effect of 'making' Taiwan into China.

Away from this circumscribed tour group circuit, independent Chinese tourists encountered Taiwan's everyday diversity. Based on interview and observational data collected between 2012 and 2015, Rowen argues that the independent tourist experience yielded varied personal interpretations. Unlike the more homogenous views of group tourists, independent visitors' attitudes varied widely.

In Chapter Five, Rowen illustrates the range of independent tourists' perceptions of Taiwan. For example, Rowen found that a few independent tourists had

transformative political experiences in Taiwan, such as a young art museum volunteer who learned of Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei at a Taipei bookshop. Several remarked on a gendered 'softness' (*wenrou*) in the appearance and speech patterns of the Taiwanese, with a man from Shanghai, met through a Taiwanese acquaintance, even asserting that Taiwanese men would be outmatched in a fight against Chinese men. Many independent tourists reported enjoying Taiwan as relaxed and friendly, a contrast to China. Others, Rowen argues, noted Taipei's Japanese-style urban spaces and youth cultures, which made Taiwan feel closer to Japan than China. Although Rowen found independent tourists more attuned to Taiwan's diversity than group tourists, he also noted some individuals' indifference to Taiwan's distinctiveness. Overall, the majority believed that in the long term, 'reunification' was inevitable. Thus, both kinds of Chinese tourists tended to see Taiwan as China, while most Taiwanese did not.

Chapter Six moves beyond the period studied in the ethnographic section to address Taiwanese dissatisfaction with the Ma government's China-friendly tourism policies. It connects the dots from Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Movement, which protested against a cross-strait trade agreement that included tourism provisions, to the KMT's electoral defeat in 2016. The chapter details how China strategically reduced tourist numbers to exert pressure on the incoming DPP government, which was countered by the government's efforts to diversify Taiwan's ties beyond China. The epilogue addresses the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on tourism and border reification processes in Taiwan and elsewhere.

Scholars of Taiwan often voice concerns about the marginalisation of Taiwanese perspectives in the realist discourse of global geopolitics. Similarly, Chinese tourists are often portrayed not as individuals but as an undifferentiated mass. Pleasingly, Rowen's ethnographic work engages the reader in conversation with these marginalised voices.

The book, which shows that China's strategic use of tourism failed to bring the two polities closer, will appeal to a broad readership, including academics and students in tourism, anthropology, area studies, and political science, as well as policymakers monitoring cross-strait relations. Beyond academia, general readers will value insights into tourism's intersection with social and political issues and vivid descriptions of how these issues play out in everyday interactions between individuals.

Want more on Taiwan? Here here!

Main image: Tourists in Jiufen, 2018. Credit: Richard Ricciardi/Flickr.

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