

Lainie Anderson: South Australia could benefit from a Chinese tourism-led recovery

Lainie Anderson, Sunday Mail (SA)
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Sam Debell and Xiao Budian, of the Chinese folk-rock band Shanren, at Cleland Wildlife Park.

BY 2020, more than 200 million cashed-up Chinese tourists are expected to explore the planet every year.

It's a multibillion-dollar tourism bonanza that could solve South Australia's employment woes many times over, but how do we lure them beyond Sydney and the Great Barrier Reef let alone the Eiffel Tower and Buckingham Palace?

If you think the answer lies in the historic China Australia Free Trade Agreement that officially comes into effect today, think again. (For the record,

a China-South Korea Free Trade Agreement comes into effect today, too, and it's apparently generating triple the amount of interest inside China than ours.)

Yes, we have cuddly koalas and clean air, and Australia is a top bucket list destination for China's 1.357 billion residents who are rapidly emerging into middle-class global rovers.

But it's not as simple as flashing a few furry animals, translating our websites and laying out the Mandarin welcome mat.

When you think of Chinese tourists, chances are you think of a middle-aged couple in slightly nerdy hats.

In reality, Chinese women aged 25-34 are now the best demographic to target because they spend more money (often on status-defining luxury brands that are 30 per cent cheaper outside China) and stay longer on overseas holidays than their compatriots in other age brackets as well as other international tourists.

Sam Debell and Xiao Budian, of the Chinese folk-rock band Shanren, at Cleland Wildlife Park.

"Lots of Australians automatically assume we can mention the word 'Australia' and the Chinese will fall in love," says Adelaide-based Chinese Language and Cultural Advice director Jing Cao, "but this is just one country on a very long list."

And it's a list that includes the world's biggest tourism hitters.

Britain has just expanded its mobile visa fingerprinting service from nine Chinese cities to 50 and launched a Britain is GREAT social media campaign.

Canada markets Chinese skiing instructors on its major slopes, France markets luxury, and countries including the US have relaxed visa requirements to allow multiple visits for 10 years (Australia has just matched America's visa deal).

So how can South Australia's tourism operators, wineries and restaurants tap into this potentially lucrative but fiercely competitive market?

Mr Cao says the answer could lie not in China but in the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students in Australia.

There's a huge spike in Chinese visitors to Adelaide over the Chinese New Year, and often it's family and friends visiting the city's 20,000 Chinese students.

And their No. 1 motivator to travel is social media.

Mr Cao says savvy SA operators make it easy for Chinese tourists to take photos featuring their branding; they offer a friendly, Aussie environment that's backed by Mandarin speakers, signage or brochures to ease often intimidated Chinese tourists out of their comfort zone; and their menus include alternatives to cheese and wine platters because many Chinese are lactose-intolerant.

Tourism Minister Leon Bignell says SA's Chinese visitor numbers have jumped from 18,000 to 32,000 since 2013 and he'd like to see Adelaide become "Australia's China-friendly city" with Mandarin signage at the airport and in the city.

There are a few things in SA's favour: our wine, the OZAsia Festival, the planned casino expansion and new luxury hotels, and the recent \$9 million federal commitment to expanding Kangaroo Island airport for interstate flights.

But let's think bigger. How about getting every school student to learn Mandarin instead of just a fraction compared to French, German and Japanese?

How about injecting life into tired Chinatown and giving our Chinese New Year celebrations some international, major event appeal as Melbourne is doing?

And putting Mr Bignell's passion aside, I'd say we need a mindshift from the government about the value of tourism — particularly as we transition to the so-called new economy.

Even before we began to lose mining jobs, tourism directly employed three times more South Aussies than mining. Around one in 15 people work directly or indirectly in tourism and studies show that for every extra \$160,000 of tourism spending, a new job is created.

Chinese tourists now account for one in every five tourism dollars spent in Australia, parting with \$19 million a day in the past year.

That's jobs on a lactose-free platter if we can lure a few more of them here, so let's start shouting "Ni hao".