

## INTEGRATION OF CHINESE TOURISM STRATEGIES INTO UZBEKISTAN'S TOURISM DEVELOPMENT POLICY

*Academic supervisor: Associate Professor **Sayyora Alimovna Zakirova**,  
Head teacher at the department of International Economics  
University of World Economy and Diplomacy  
**Ahmadillo Ibrohimov Muhammadjon o'g'li**  
Master's student, Department of International Economics  
University of World Economy and Diplomacy  
E-mail: [ahmadilloibrohimov4@gmail.com](mailto:ahmadilloibrohimov4@gmail.com)  
Phone: +998 (90) 934-77-73*

**Abstract:** China's tourism industry has undergone dynamic growth and strategic innovation from 2015 to 2024, marked by digital transformation, massive infrastructure investments, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) tourism corridors, and eco-tourism policies. In parallel, Uzbekistan's tourism sector — especially after the 2016 political transition — has pursued rapid reforms, visa liberalization, and infrastructure development to boost its appeal. This study provides a comprehensive review of Chinese tourism development trends and strategies between 2015 and 2024, and analyzes how these strategies have influenced or could influence Uzbekistan's tourism policy. Using a comparative approach, we examine areas where Uzbekistan has adapted Chinese practices, such as digitalization of tourist services and infrastructure investment, and identify opportunities for deeper integration. Case studies of Sino-Uzbek tourism cooperation, including bilateral agreements and BRI-related projects, illustrate practical collaboration. Data visualizations highlight key metrics: tourist arrivals in China and Uzbekistan, bilateral tourist flows, investment in tourism infrastructure, growth of digital tourism services, and the role of BRI in Uzbekistan's tourism. The findings suggest that while Uzbekistan has made significant strides (e.g. simplifying visas and improving infrastructure) in line with global best practices exemplified by China, challenges remain in scaling these initiatives. We conclude that aligning Uzbekistan's tourism development more closely with Chinese strategies offers substantial opportunities for growth, provided that policies are tailored to local context and potential obstacles — such as resource limitations and market differences — are managed. The article is structured as a scholarly work with sections on literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion, and is supported by extensive citations from recent sources.

**Keywords:** BRI, tourism development policy, capacity gaps, competition, rural tourism, smart tourism.

### Introduction

Tourism has become one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors, and policy innovations in leading markets can serve as models for emerging destinations. In the past decade (2015–2024), China has emerged not only as the world's top source of outbound tourists

but also as a pioneer in developing a modern, digital, and infrastructure-rich tourism industry<sup>1</sup>. Uzbekistan, a Central Asian nation rich in Silk Road heritage, remained relatively closed to tourism until the mid-2010s. After 2016, Uzbekistan's government initiated sweeping reforms to open up the country, identifying tourism as a key driver of diversification and growth. Given China's success in leveraging tourism for economic development, a pertinent question arises: **How can Chinese tourism strategies be integrated into Uzbekistan's tourism development policy?** This article addresses that question by comparing the two countries' approaches over 2015–2024 and examining areas of convergence.

**Significance of the Study:** China's experience offers valuable lessons in areas such as digitalization (e.g. cashless payments and online travel platforms), infrastructure development (high-speed rail, airports, hotels), thematic and eco-tourism, and international marketing. Uzbekistan, strategically located on the historic Silk Road, has strong potential to attract cultural and adventure tourists, including visitors from China. In fact, both nations have articulated the importance of tourism in bilateral cooperation, framing it within broader initiatives like the BRI and people-to-people exchange programs. Understanding how Chinese strategies can be adapted to Uzbekistan's context is timely as Uzbekistan aims to rapidly increase tourist arrivals and revenue by 2025.

**Structure of the Article:** We begin with an overview of tourism development trends in China (2015–2024), highlighting key strategies employed. Next, we summarize major Chinese tourism strategies of the period – focusing on digitalization, the BRI's tourism dimension, eco-tourism policies, and infrastructure investment programs. We then review Uzbekistan's tourism policy evolution in 2015–2024, emphasizing post-2016 reforms that transformed its visa regime, institutions, and marketing efforts. The methodology for our comparative analysis is described, followed by detailed findings in which Chinese and Uzbek approaches are compared across multiple dimensions. We include case studies of Sino-Uzbek cooperation in tourism (such as joint forums, investment projects, and cultural exchange programs) to illustrate practical integration of strategies. Data visualizations are provided to give a quantitative grounding to the analysis – comparing tourist arrival trends, mutual tourist flows, infrastructure investment levels, digital service uptake, and BRI project involvement. In the discussion, we examine opportunities (e.g. leveraging China's outbound market and technology) and challenges (e.g. capacity gaps, competition) in aligning Uzbekistan's tourism development more closely with Chinese strategies. The conclusion synthesizes the insights and offers policy recommendations. By drawing on a wide range of sources and data, this study aims to contribute both to academic understanding and practical policy formulation in the realm of international tourism development and cooperation.

## Literature review

**Tourism Development in China (2015–2024):** Numerous studies and industry reports have documented China's dramatic tourism growth and evolving strategies in the last decade. By 2015, China was already the world's fourth most-visited country with 56.9 million international tourist arrivals. Research by the China Tourism Academy and others notes that after a slight

---

<sup>1</sup> China Eases Visa Requirements to Revive Tourism <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-eases-visa-requirements-to-revive-tourism/7276748.html>

downturn in the early 2010s, inbound tourism to China revived post-2015 and reached new highs by 2018–2019<sup>2</sup>. In 2019, China welcomed over **65 million international visitors**, generating nearly \$900 billion in tourism revenue. At the same time, China’s domestic tourism boomed to **5+ billion trips annually**, and Chinese outbound tourism dominated global markets with 155 million outbound trips in 2019. Academic literature (e.g. reports by UNWTO and World Travel & Tourism Council) highlights key factors behind China’s success: **heavy investment in tourism infrastructure**, government-led **policy planning** via Five-Year Plans, rapid digitalization of services, and innovative niche tourism products (such as “all-for-one” tourism and red tourism). Researchers Chen et al. (2020) emphasize that China integrated tourism into its national economic plans, achieving 11% of GDP from tourism by 2017. The literature also notes China’s focus on tourism as a tool for regional development and poverty alleviation, especially through rural and eco-tourism initiatives (Zhang, 2019).

Digitalization emerges as a recurring theme in the literature on Chinese tourism. According to a 2025 analysis by Blimey, Chinese travelers rely heavily on digital platforms at every stage: inspiration via social media (e.g. Xiaohongshu, Douyin), booking through online travel agencies (Ctrip, Fliggy), mobile payments (WeChat Pay, Alipay), and sharing experiences via live-streaming. Over 70% of independent Chinese travelers use online channels to book hotels, flights, and attractions. The pace of digital uptake in China was extraordinary; Dragon Trail Interactive (2017) documented that online travel bookings grew three times faster than the overall travel market, with online penetration rising from 20% in 2015 to a projected 50% by 2020. Moreover, by 2017, over 76% of digital travel sales in China were made via mobile devices – a figure likely even higher by 2020. Academic and industry sources concur that China’s “smart tourism” push, including the use of big data, AI chatbots, AR/VR at attractions, and cashless payments, set a global benchmark in tourism service innovation.

Another significant strand of literature deals with the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** and its tourism implications. While BRI is primarily discussed in terms of infrastructure and trade connectivity, scholars such as Li and Wei (2018) have explored the concept of “Silk Road tourism corridors” fostered by BRI. Official declarations at BRI forums also highlight tourism cooperation: for example, at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, China’s National Tourism Administration signed agreements to deepen tourism collaboration with countries along the Silk Road, including Uzbekistan<sup>3</sup>. In policy discourse, the idea of “BRI tourism corridors” involves creating multi-country itineraries, easing cross-border travel, and investing in shared heritage sites. The **China-Central Asia summit in 2023** underscored this by launching a “China–Central Asia Cultural and Tourism Capital” program and proposing special cross-border tourist train services. Literature from UNWTO’s Silk Road Program provides context on how collaborative marketing and training among Silk Road countries (China and Central Asia included) aim to revive ancient routes as modern tourism circuits.

**Tourism Development in Uzbekistan (2015–2024):** Compared to China, academic literature on Uzbekistan’s tourism is sparser but growing, especially post-2016. Prior to 2016, Uzbekistan’s tourism sector was relatively stagnant due to strict visa rules, limited marketing,

<sup>2</sup>Inbound tourism bouncing back to new high, report says <https://english.www.gov.cn>

<sup>3</sup>List of Deliverables of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation  
<https://www.chinadaily.com>

and underdeveloped services (Karimov, 2014). Only about **1 million international tourists** visited in 2015–2016, mostly from neighboring countries. The turning point came after President Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed office in late 2016 and declared tourism a priority sector. Government concept papers and World Bank reports note a series of reforms: **simplification of visa policies**, creation of a dedicated State Committee for Tourism Development (later upgraded to a Ministry of Tourism), investment incentives for hotels, and international promotion of Uzbekistan’s Silk Road cities (ADB, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Mirziyoyev’s Concept of Tourism Development 2019–2025 set ambitious targets of 7 million foreign tourists by 2025 (from 2.7 million in 2017). Literature by C. Cooper (2019) and others highlights the **visa liberalization** in 2018–2019 as a game-changer: Uzbekistan introduced an e-visa system in mid-2018 and **visa-free entry for 45 new countries in 2019**, dramatically expanding its openness. Academic commentators (e.g. Petrova, 2020) have compared this to a “big bang” in Central Asian tourism policy.

Statistics confirm the impact: foreign arrivals jumped from **2.7 million in 2017 to 5.3 million in 2018** and **6.7 million in 2019**, a 26% year-on-year increase. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a steep decline to 1.5 million in 2020, but recovery was underway by 2022 (5.2 million) and 2023 (6.6 million). Researchers like Kurbanov (2021) have analyzed these trends, noting that Uzbekistan’s swift rebound was aided by continued reforms and marketing even during the pandemic lull (e.g. virtual promotion, domestic tourism stimulation). Uzbekistan’s strategies have begun to incorporate elements seen in China and other successful markets: for instance, **digital marketing platforms** and partnerships with online agencies have been initiated. An American Journal of Economics and Business Management study by Kim & Yusupova (2025) points out Uzbekistan’s “lack of digital infrastructure” historically, but applauds recent moves to create a **single national tourism platform** and invest in tourism education. The same study suggests benchmarking countries like Turkey (and implicitly China) for centralized tourism governance and digitization to improve competitiveness.

Finally, the literature on **comparative tourism policy** provides a framework for our analysis. Dwyer (2015) emphasizes that policy transfer in tourism must consider local context – what works in one country (like China) should be adapted, not just adopted. There is emerging work on China’s influence in Central Asian tourism: e.g. Turespaev (2023) describes the “rising influence of Chinese tourism on Uzbekistan,” noting both the influx of Chinese tourists and Chinese investments in hotels and attractions. Studies by the Uzbek Tourism Research Institute highlight the potential of attracting Chinese visitors as a key growth area, while also cautioning about cultural and linguistic preparedness (Abdukhakimov, 2019). The concept of “learning from China” is explicitly mentioned by Uzbek officials – for instance, Uzbekistan’s Deputy PM Aziz Abdukhakimov in 2019 lauded China’s tourism success and expected Chinese tourist numbers to soar as Uzbekistan actively participates in BRI. This supports the idea that Uzbek policymakers are consciously looking to Chinese strategies for inspiration. In summary, the literature suggests that China’s tourism development from 2015–2024 was characterized by robust growth, strategic planning (digital, infrastructure, BRI integration), and global leadership in outbound tourism. Uzbekistan, during the same period, underwent a dramatic policy shift from closed to open, achieving fast growth by implementing reforms that, perhaps not coincidentally, mirror some of China’s emphases (e.g. infrastructure, simplified visas, heritage tourism development). However, there remains a gap in scholarly research explicitly connecting Chinese strategies to Uzbek policy changes – a gap this article aims to fill through comparative analysis and case studies.

## Methodology

This research employs a **qualitative comparative case study methodology** complemented by analysis of quantitative indicators. The primary approach is a comparative policy analysis: China and Uzbekistan are treated as two cases, with their tourism strategies and outcomes from 2015 to 2024 systematically compared.

The methodology provides a structured way to explore how Chinese tourism strategies have been or could be woven into Uzbekistan's policy fabric. By the end of this study, we aim to have identified concrete areas of integration, assessed their effectiveness, and highlighted what more can be done to align Uzbekistan's tourism trajectory with successful elements of China's experience, all while acknowledging the contextual differences.

## Findings

### 1. Tourism Development Trends in China (2015–2024)

China's tourism industry in 2015–2024 was characterized by **robust growth until 2019, a severe pandemic-induced contraction in 2020–2021, and a strong recovery by 2023–2024**. Figure 1 illustrates the trend in international tourist arrivals for China and, for comparison, Uzbekistan over this period. China saw international arrivals increase from about 57 million in 2015 to around 65 million in 2019, before a sharp plunge during COVID-19 and a rebound by 2023. Notably, China's count of "international arrivals" includes a large proportion of visits from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. In 2018, for example, 74% of inbound visitors to China were from Hong Kong/Macau (many of them same-day visitors). Excluding those, roughly 14 million "foreign" tourists visited mainland China in 2018 – a record high at that time. By 2019, total inbound visits (all origins) reached 65+ million, while foreign overnight tourists were around 15 million (China's rank remained 4th globally).



Figure 1. International Tourist Arrivals (2015–2024)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://wtcc.org/>

**Domestic and Outbound Tourism:** In addition to inbound tourism, China's domestic tourism exploded in this era. Domestic trips rose to **6 billion annually by 2019**, and revenue from domestic tourism hit \$840 billion. Chinese travelers also became the world's top outbound market. The number of outbound trips grew from ~117 million in 2015 to **155 million in 2019**, with Chinese tourists spending \$127.5 billion abroad that year. This outbound boom had direct implications for countries like Uzbekistan, which started targeting Chinese visitors as a new source market.

**Pandemic Impact and Recovery:** The COVID-19 pandemic brought Chinese tourism to a standstill in early 2020. China essentially closed its borders, leading to a near-zero inbound tourist count for 2020–2021 (except for a small number of business or family visitors under quarantine). Figure 1 shows China's international arrivals collapsing in 2020–2021. The Chinese government pivoted to supporting domestic tourism during this period, with measures such as travel vouchers and promoting local attractions. By 2022, domestic tourism in China had largely rebounded, though inbound remained minimal due to continued quarantine requirements. In late 2022 and early 2023, China lifted travel restrictions, and by 2023 signs of recovery in inbound tourism emerged. Foreign visits in 2023 were still below 2019 levels, but by 2024 China projected a return to near full recovery (the **first three quarters of 2024 saw ~94 million inbound trips**, over 90% of 2019's equivalent period). Industry analyses in 2024 noted a swift rebound in domestic tourism and a partial rebound in inbound tourism, with **international visitor spending in China reaching a record ¥1 trillion in 2024** (about \$140 billion, 10% above 2019). This indicates that despite fewer foreign tourists, those who did visit (and including visitors from Hong Kong) spent more, possibly due to higher-cost travel packages or longer stays post-pandemic.

Figure 1: International Tourist Arrivals in China and Uzbekistan, 2015–2024 (in millions). China's inbound tourism (blue line) grew steadily until 2019 (~65 million), plummeted in 2020–2021 due to COVID-19, and is recovering by 2023–24. Uzbekistan's inbound tourism (orange line) shows a sharp rise post-2016 reforms (from ~1.3 million in 2015 to 6.7 million in 2019), a pandemic drop in 2020, and a rebound by 2023<sup>5</sup>.

Several **strategic trends** underpinning China's tourism development in this era can be discerned:

- **Policy and Governance:** China continued its top-down strategic planning for tourism. The 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) included tourism as a pillar for service sector growth and rural poverty alleviation. The government merged the tourism administration with the Culture Ministry in 2018, creating the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, to better integrate cultural heritage with tourism development. Chinese authorities also recognized weaknesses in inbound tourism (e.g. cumbersome visas, lack of internationalized services) and by 2019 had studies recommending easier visa policies and improved facilities. Those recommendations translated into action post-pandemic: in 2023, China announced **new measures to attract foreign tourists**, including reinstating visa-free entries, simplifying visa applications, expanding flights, and enabling foreign use of Chinese digital payment apps. These measures demonstrate China's adaptability in policy to changing circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> Uzbekistan Tourism Industry Statistics <https://tourcentralasia.com/>

- **Infrastructure Boom:** The period saw massive expansion of tourism-related infrastructure in China. Over 2015–2019, China built or expanded hundreds of airports, high-speed rail lines, highways to scenic areas, theme parks, and hotels. By 2018, China's hotel industry had 2,500 new hotel projects in the pipeline. International hotel brands as well as domestic chains aggressively expanded. Iconic projects like Shanghai Disney Resort (opened 2016) and Universal Beijing Resort (opened 2021) exemplify the scale. The **World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC)** reports that China's capital investment in travel and tourism was **\$170 billion in 2019**, second only to the United States. Even during COVID, China continued investing; in 2022, travel and tourism investment in China was about \$146 billion. These investments have given China world-class tourism infrastructure, from efficient airports to a vast inventory of hotel rooms, which far surpasses Uzbekistan's capacity.
- **Digitalization and Innovation:** As noted in the literature, China embraced digital tech in tourism. All major tourist attractions introduced online ticketing, many deployed **smart tourism** systems (real-time visitor tracking, AI guides, etc.), and virtually all merchants accept mobile payments. For foreign visitors, however, this digital environment was initially a barrier (non-Chinese credit cards didn't work on local apps). Recognizing this, by 2023 China enabled foreign tourists to use WeChat Pay and Alipay with international cards. Chinese travel companies pioneered new forms of marketing, such as live-streaming travel product sales – a trend highlighted by marketing analysts (Yang, 2025) where travel influencers sell tour packages in real-time to thousands of viewers. These innovations kept Chinese consumers engaged and travel-hungry, even when international travel was paused. Domestically, digital health codes during COVID allowed safe tourist movement within China's vast domestic market by late 2020, mitigating the downturn.
- **Product Diversification:** China's tourism offerings expanded beyond the classic Golden Triangle (Beijing–Xi'an–Shanghai). There was a significant push for **heritage and eco-tourism**. China established its first official national parks system in 2021 (e.g. Sanjiangyuan, Zhangjiajie National Park), consolidating protected areas and promoting sustainable visitation. **Rural tourism** became a trend, with government programs encouraging urban Chinese to visit countryside villages (often as poverty-relief initiatives). Niche segments grew: red tourism (visiting Communist revolutionary sites) saw millions of domestic tourists, while segments like sports tourism, health/wellness retreats, and cruise tourism also developed. By 2024, industry voices anticipated more **customized themed tours (sports, wellness, ecology)** to cater to specialized interests. China's ability to innovate products meant its tourism sector could attract repeat visitors and disperse tourist flows geographically.

In summary, China's tourism trend over 2015–2024 is one of strong growth enabled by strategic government support and innovation, disrupted by a global crisis, and now recovering with adaptive measures. The stage is set for China to remain a tourism powerhouse into the next decade, with forecasts that by 2035 its tourism GDP contribution will double and reach 14% of GDP. This context is important when comparing Uzbekistan, which in the same period started from a much smaller base and faces the challenge of catching up or at least learning from China's trajectory.

## 2. Key Chinese Tourism Strategies (2015–2024)

Drawing from the above trends, we distill several **key strategies employed by China** in tourism during 2015–2024, which serve as potential models:

- **a. Digitalization of Tourism Services:** China integrated digital technology into virtually every aspect of tourism. This includes marketing (social media, online travel agencies), sales (e-commerce for tickets and hotels), on-site experience (digital guides, QR-code info panels, AR-enhanced exhibits), and after-service (online reviews, digital payment rebates). The ubiquity of smartphones in China (over 1 billion smartphone users by 2024) created fertile ground for these services. A major facet was the dominance of **cashless payments** – foreign observers note that many international visitors had to adapt to paying by scanning QR codes for everything, as cards or cash are secondary. The Chinese government also promoted initiatives like “智慧旅游” (smart tourism), encouraging scenic spots to use real-time monitoring to manage crowds. The benefits of this digitalization are multi-fold: efficiency (shorter queues due to e-ticketing), data collection (better understanding of tourist behavior), and attractiveness to tech-savvy travelers. According to Mastercard’s Greater China president, digital connectivity and payment systems have been a focus to make travel easier, and by 2024 were significantly improved for foreigners too.
- **b. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Tourism Corridors:** China leveraged the BRI not just for trade, but also for cultural and tourism exchange. Politically, tourism was seen as a soft-power tool to “bring peoples together” along the new Silk Road. Practically, this translated into bilateral tourism agreements, cultural exchange programs, and infrastructure projects that facilitate tourism. For example, China helped fund or construct transportation projects in BRI countries (airports in Laos and Cambodia, roads in Pakistan, etc.) that indirectly boost tourism. In Central Asia, Chinese investment in roads and rail can improve access to remote tourism sites. Moreover, China initiated specific programs: the 2019 BRI forum called for establishing “**BRI tourism corridors**”, an idea echoed by leaders of countries like Pakistan. While still a concept, this envisions seamless multi-country routes for tourists (e.g. an easier journey following the ancient Silk Road through Central Asia). In 2023, President Xi announced concrete steps such as a China-Central Asia tourism capital rotation (choosing cities to spotlight for tourism) and launching special tourist trains between China and Central Asia. These strategies show China’s intent to integrate tourism with its foreign policy initiatives, creating shared opportunities. Uzbekistan, being on the Silk Road, is directly relevant here – Samarkand or Khiva could be candidates for “tourism capitals,” and the proposed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, though primarily for trade, could carry tourists as well.
- **c. Eco-Tourism and Sustainable Policies:** China’s rapid tourism growth raised sustainability concerns (e.g. overcrowding at popular sites, environmental impact). In response, China’s strategy included developing eco-tourism and imposing stricter environmental protections at tourist sites. The government elevated ecological civilization as a priority; in tourism, this meant establishing national park pilots, capping daily visitor numbers at sensitive sites (like Jiuzhaigou or Yellow Mountain), and promoting off-season travel. Community-based tourism in rural areas was encouraged to both alleviate urban tourist crowds and reduce rural poverty. For instance, around 2018–2020, China’s State Council identified hundreds of “tourism villages” to receive support for homestay development and marketing. The **All-for-One Tourism** concept introduced in 2016 also ties into sustainability: it encourages holistic

regional planning so that entire regions (not just single attractions) offer diverse tourism experiences, thereby spreading out visitor pressure. While China still faces challenges (e.g. balancing mass tourism with conservation), these policy directions signal an approach that Uzbekistan could emulate in developing its own nascent eco-tourism offerings (like yurt camps or mountain trekking routes).

• **d. Tourism Infrastructure Investment:** Perhaps the most visibly impressive strategy is China's enormous investment in tourism infrastructure. This strategy is clearly evidenced by financial data: in 2019, China invested approximately **\$170 billion in travel and tourism capital projects**, building everything from transport links to entertainment complexes. The government often provided seed funding or favorable loans for infrastructure in less-developed regions to kickstart tourism there. A notable example is the high-speed rail extension to Dunhuang (a Silk Road oasis) which made it far more accessible to tourists. Another is the upgrade of Guilin's airport to boost nature tourism in Guangxi. China's approach wasn't just government spending; it also actively attracted **private investment** into tourism. Tech companies invested in theme parks, real estate developers built resorts, and online platforms invested in physical experience centers. The strategy is that infrastructure enables and stimulates demand – and indeed, new airports and rail lines have consistently been followed by tourism growth in connected areas. Figure 2 (left panel) compares the scale of tourism infrastructure investment between China and Uzbekistan. Even on a logarithmic scale, China's investment dwarfs Uzbekistan's: for instance, in 2019 roughly \$170 billion vs. perhaps a few hundred million in Uzbekistan. This gap underscores differences in capacity, but also the aspirational target for Uzbekistan if it seeks similar impact.

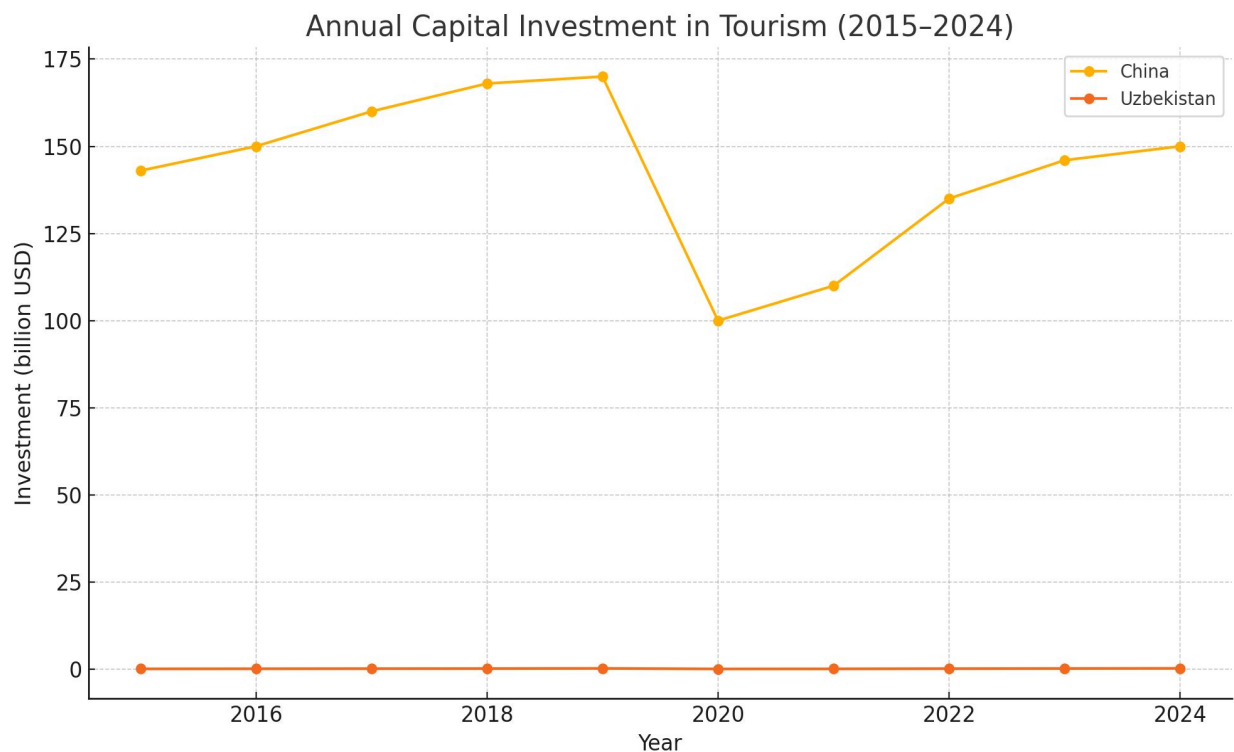


Figure 2: **Left:** Annual Capital Investment in Travel & Tourism (2019 vs 2022, China vs Uzbekistan). China invested on the order of \$150–170 **billion** per year in tourism infrastructure (hotels, transport, etc.), whereas Uzbekistan’s investment is only a few tenths of a billion (estimated \$0.2–0.3 billion). Note the logarithmic scale; the disparity is several orders of magnitude. **Right:** Expansion of Uzbekistan’s Visa Facilitation as a proxy for digital tourism service growth.

- **e. Marketing and Branding Initiatives:** China’s tourism strategy also involved aggressive marketing, both domestically (to encourage travel to less-known regions) and internationally (to build a favorable image and attract visitors). Domestically, campaigns like “Beautiful China” and specific provincial tourism years kept travel enthusiasm high. Internationally, China organized events such as the **EU-China Tourism Year 2018**, and tourism promotion offices worldwide engaged social media influencers and hosted roadshows. Cultural events (e.g. Chinese lantern festivals held abroad) indirectly marketed China as an alluring destination. Another tactic was the use of **major events** – for example, the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and the 2019 International Horticultural Expo in Beijing – to draw tourists and showcase China’s offerings. While these marketing efforts are harder to quantify, their inclusion in China’s strategy mix is well documented in UNWTO reports.

In summary, the key Chinese strategies of digitalization, BRI integration, eco-tourism, infrastructure investment, and savvy marketing created a synergistic effect. China built a highly competitive tourism sector that not only serves domestic needs but has global influence. Each of these strategies holds lessons for Uzbekistan, which has already begun to implement some (as discussed in the next sections) but can further integrate them to boost its tourism development.

### 3. Evolution of Uzbekistan’s Tourism Policy (2015–2024)

Uzbekistan’s tourism policy underwent a dramatic transformation between 2015 and 2024. Under President Islam Karimov (pre-2016), Uzbekistan had a restrictive approach: visas were required for most visitors (except a handful of CIS neighbors), bureaucratic hurdles like **invitation letters and mandatory hotel registration** deterred casual tourists, and the state-controlled tourism company Uzbektourism had a monopolistic role. Tourism arrivals were stagnant at around 1 million annually in the mid-2010s. The **turning point** came with the new administration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who took office in late 2016 and immediately prioritized opening up the country.

Key phases and components of Uzbekistan’s tourism policy evolution include:

- **Initial Reforms (2016–2018):** Mirziyoyev’s government declared tourism a strategic sector for economic growth and job creation. In early 2017, a State Committee for Tourism Development was established to coordinate policy (later reorganized as the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Heritage). Uzbekistan began easing visa rules: in 2017 it simplified visa processes for 27 countries and introduced visa-free transit for 5 days via Tashkent airport for certain nationalities. A pivotal change occurred in **February 2018**, when Uzbekistan **abolished visa requirements for 7 countries** (including key markets like Japan, South Korea, Turkey). By that year’s end, France and Tajikistan were added to visa-free lists, and crucially, **an e-visa**

**system was launched** in July 2018 for 51 countries<sup>6</sup>. The e-visa allowed travelers to apply online without needing an in-country sponsor, a radical departure from the old letter-of-invitation regime. These steps were directly linked to immediate tourism growth; as noted, arrivals jumped to 2.7 million in 2017 and 5.3 million in 2018. The feedback from the tourism industry was overwhelmingly positive, citing the visa reforms as the “single most effective catalyst” for tourism inflow (World Bank, 2018).

- **Comprehensive Strategy and 2019 Breakthrough:** In January 2019, President Mirziyoyev approved the “Concept of tourism sector development 2019–2025”. This strategy document outlined ambitious goals: 7 million foreign tourists by 2025, \$2 billion in tourism exports, and large increases in tourism’s share of GDP and employment<sup>7</sup>. To achieve these, the concept listed measures like improving infrastructure, attracting investment, developing new tourism products, and marketing abroad. The year 2019 indeed became a **turning point**. Starting 1 February 2019, **Uzbekistan introduced a 30-day visa-free regime for citizens of 45 more countries**, including all EU member states, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and others. This opened Uzbekistan to most of the world’s high-spending tourist markets. By summer 2019, Uzbekistan had one of the most liberal visa policies in the region – a stark contrast to just a few years prior. Additionally, a “silk visa” joint initiative with Kazakhstan was piloted to allow tourists with one country’s visa to visit the other (though full implementation is pending). The impact was immediate: tourist arrivals rose to 6.7 million in 2019 (a 26% increase from 2018) and foreign tourism earnings grew substantially.

Uzbekistan also focused on **infrastructure and investment** starting around 2018–2019. Recognizing a shortage of international-standard accommodations, the government incentivized hotel development. For instance, a 2019 presidential decree offered **subsidies and tax exemptions for new hotels**, and even covered part of the interest on loans for hotel construction. The number of accommodation facilities in Uzbekistan exploded from only 142 hotels in 2017 to 914 by 2018 (after regulations were relaxed to register guesthouses). Total hotel rooms increased from a mere 1,700 in 2017 to over 20,000 in 2018. This extraordinary jump reflects how previously many small guesthouses operated informally due to strict rules, but reforms allowed them to register and be counted. By 2023, Uzbekistan had grown to 1,750 accommodation facilities with 28,000 rooms (as per national stats), and aims for **64,000 hotel rooms by 2025**. The government itself invested in infrastructure: for example, \$100 million was allocated in Feb 2021 specifically for tourism infrastructure development (e.g. roads to tourist sites, visitor centers). Figure 2 (right panel) above highlights the visa facilitation aspect of digital services – showing how the count of visa-free nationalities shot up from <10 in 2015 to ~90 by 2023, and e-visas covered 56 countries by 2023. This exemplifies Uzbekistan’s adoption of a digital, user-friendly approach.

- **Pandemic Response and Recovery (2020–2024):** COVID-19 severely hit Uzbekistan’s tourism, with arrivals dropping to 1.5 million in 2020 (a 78% drop). The government took measures to support the sector: tax holidays for tourism businesses, and a “Safe Travel Guaranteed” hygiene certification program for hotels and attractions to build traveler confidence. By late 2020, Uzbekistan was among the first in the region to reopen to tourists

<sup>6</sup> Uzbekistan Visa Information <https://central-asia.guide/>

<sup>7</sup> Shavkat Mirziyoyev: 2019 will be a turning point in development of tourism <https://www.uzdaily.uz/>

with testing requirements. As a result, by 2022 foreign arrivals bounced back to 5.2 million, close to pre-pandemic figures. Uzbekistan continued reforms even during the pandemic; for example, in 2020–21 it further expanded visa-free entry to more countries (Ukraine, GCC countries like Saudi Arabia from 2023). In 2022, Uzbekistan introduced a **five-day visa-free transit** rule for 30+ countries to attract stopover visitors. These steps likely contributed to the swift recovery. By 2023, as mentioned, arrivals were at 6.6 million – just shy of the 2019 record – and for 2024 the target was set at **7–10 million** visitors.

- **Post-2022 Ambitions:** With tourism rebounding, Uzbekistan has set new ambitions, many of which echo Chinese influence. For instance, in late 2024 Uzbekistan and China signed a **visa-waiver agreement for ordinary passport holders** (to come into effect in 2025). This reciprocal visa-free arrangement is a strong sign of aligning with China’s idea of facilitating travel between Silk Road countries. Uzbekistan is also pursuing more air connectivity: the national carrier (and private airlines) expanded routes to Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Specific to China, flight frequencies have jumped (from 18 weekly flights in 2023 to 54 by late 2024), and Uzbekistan aims for 100 flights/week in the near future. The government is encouraging Chinese investment in tourism infrastructure: examples include Chinese companies planning to build a 4-star hotel in Bukhara and develop tourism zones as part of regional agreements. Tourism human capital is also a focus – the Silk Road International University of Tourism was established in Samarkand in 2018 to train professionals (with international faculty, possibly including Chinese partnership, given China’s expertise in tourism education). By 2024, Uzbekistan positioned tourism as a “driver of the economy” and clearly sees China as a key partner; officials have explicitly stated that Chinese tourists could become the main source and that Uzbek cities along the Silk Road are being presented specially to Chinese audiences.

In essence, Uzbekistan’s tourism policy evolution can be summarized as a shift from **isolation to openness, from stagnation to rapid growth**. The reforms undertaken mirrored many global best practices, some of which China also experienced (e.g., easing travel, investing in infrastructure, leveraging cultural heritage). Uzbekistan’s success in quadrupling tourist numbers between 2016 and 2019 demonstrates effective policy implementation. However, it started from a low base, and the absolute numbers (6-7 million tourists) are still modest compared to China or other major destinations. The next section compares Chinese and Uzbek approaches side by side to identify where Uzbekistan has already adopted Chinese-like strategies and where further integration might be beneficial.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Uzbek Approaches

This section juxtaposes China’s and Uzbekistan’s approaches across several dimensions, highlighting **areas of adaptation** and potential lessons. The comparative insights are summarized theme-wise:

**a. Visa Policy and Travel Facilitation:** One of the most striking areas of convergence is visa policy liberalization. China traditionally had a strict visa regime for inbound tourists (with limited visa-free arrangements primarily for neighbors like Singapore or for transit in select cities). By contrast, Uzbekistan since 2018 dramatically opened up, surpassing China in visa friendliness. By 2023, Uzbekistan allowed visa-free entry for 90 countries, whereas China still

required visas for most nationalities (China did not implement large-scale visa-free entry for Western tourists, aside from short transit exemptions). In this sense, Uzbekistan did **not** model after China (which is cautious on visas for foreigners) but rather took inspiration from global norms of openness. However, China's recent focus on simplifying visas and resuming visa-free policies in 2023 indicates a recognition that ease of entry matters for competitiveness. Uzbekistan clearly understood this earlier – likely from observing tourism-driven economies – and made itself far more accessible. Uzbekistan's introduction of **e-visas** in 2018 also paralleled a trend that China adopted internally (China started offering electronic visa applications for tour groups and some individual visas in recent years). The **digital visa service** is something both have converged on, though Uzbekistan's e-visa portal was arguably ahead of China's timeline. As a result, Uzbekistan today has a simpler entry process for many travelers than China does, which is a competitive advantage in attracting international tourists (especially from Europe and the Americas). This is one area where Uzbekistan leapfrogged even its mentor; Chinese tourism strategists might in fact look to Uzbekistan's success as evidence supporting loosening their own visa rules.

**b. Digital and Cashless Services:** In terms of tourism digitalization, China is far ahead, but Uzbekistan is catching up. Chinese tourists expect to use apps for everything; Uzbek tourism businesses have started adapting by accepting China's digital payments and listing on Chinese apps. For example, many hotels in Uzbekistan now advertise that they accept **UnionPay cards** and even Alipay/WeChat Pay (through local fintech partnerships) to accommodate Chinese visitors. Uzbekistan's Tourism Ministry launched a mobile app "Visit Uzbekistan" providing information and e-services, albeit on a small scale compared to Chinese "super-apps". There is evidence of **Chinese influence**: the "China Friendly" certification system implemented in Uzbekistan since 2019–2020 encourages local hotels and restaurants to provide Chinese-language services, adapt menus to Chinese taste, and incorporate digital payment options used by Chinese. This concept is akin to how many destinations worldwide adjusted to Chinese tourist preferences, but Uzbekistan's organized approach shows it's actively trying to integrate a strategy to attract Chinese travelers. Conversely, Chinese tourism businesses have not yet had to adapt to Uzbek tourists in similar ways simply due to the imbalance in flows. As Figure 3 shows, the flow of tourists is heavily from China to Uzbekistan rather than vice versa.



Figure 3: Bilateral Tourist Flows between China and Uzbekistan (2015–2024). The number of Chinese tourists visiting Uzbekistan (blue) grew from a few thousand in 2015 to around 50–60 thousand in 2019 (pre-COVID) and 2024. Uzbek tourists to China (orange) have been much fewer (peaking ~15 thousand in 2019, ~25 thousand in 2023). Both flows dropped to near zero in 2020–2021, then resumed by 2023. (Data compiled from Uzbekistan’s Statistics Agency and news reports.)

From Figure 3 and sources: about **50–60 thousand Chinese tourists visited Uzbekistan in 2019** (and similarly expected in 2024), whereas Chinese tourism in Uzbekistan was negligible before 2017 (only ~7,000 in 2016). This growth coincides with Uzbekistan’s visa easing and marketing in China. Uzbek visitors to China were only ~15 thousand in 2019 and ~25 thousand in 2023 – a much smaller volume, reflecting population size and income differences. The disparity implies Uzbekistan must tailor its services to Chinese tourists more than vice versa. Indeed, Uzbek tour operators increasingly hire Mandarin-speaking guides, translate signage into Chinese, and promote Silk Road sites as part of the shared China-Central Asia heritage. These efforts mirror strategies that other countries successful with Chinese tourists have used (like Thailand or Singapore), underlining Uzbekistan’s learning curve in catering to a digital-centric clientele.

**c. Infrastructure and Investment:** China’s model of heavy infrastructure investment cannot be matched by Uzbekistan in absolute terms, but Uzbekistan has clearly embraced the idea that improving infrastructure is essential for tourism growth. We see the government channeling funds into new airports (e.g. Samarkand’s airport was completely rebuilt in 2022, tripling

capacity), roads (the drive from Tashkent to the Ferghana Valley via Kamchik Pass was improved for tourist buses), and amenities in tourist cities (Samarkand now has a modern “Tourist Hub” with hotels and entertainment, partially inspired by integrated resorts seen abroad). Uzbekistan has opened up to **foreign investment** in this sector as well: the Emirates have invested in Khiva’s touristic infrastructure, and Chinese investors have shown interest in theme parks and hotels. A recent example is the high-level dialogue between Shenzhen (China) and Bukhara (Uzbekistan) in 2025, where nearly 20 cooperation intentions were signed, including projects in tourism and green infrastructure. Such partnerships indicate a transfer of knowledge and possibly capital – Shenzhen’s transformation story was explicitly cited as an inspiration for Bukhara’s development. Another point of infrastructure comparison is **aviation**: China built one of the world’s largest domestic airline networks, whereas Uzbekistan has limited air connectivity. Recognizing this, Uzbekistan has started aviation reforms – splitting the national airline from airports to allow more efficient management, inviting foreign carriers (like Air Arabia now operating in Uzbekistan), and planning a new terminal for Tashkent airport. These moves, while not directly copied from China, align with global best practice which China’s success underscores: more flights = more tourists. The quick jump from 18 to 54 weekly flights between China and Uzbekistan in 2023–24 is a direct consequence of policy focus; it was made possible by an **intergovernmental air services agreement** expanding flight rights. China’s approach of using policy to increase transport links is being emulated here.

However, in terms of **scale and financing**, differences remain. China’s tourism infrastructure is often financed domestically or via its vast capital reserves. Uzbekistan often relies on external support – e.g. World Bank loans for tourism development and seeking foreign direct investment due to budget constraints<sup>8</sup>. This means Uzbekistan must prioritize which projects to pursue. One could argue that by observing China’s experience, Uzbekistan can better prioritize high-impact infrastructure (for instance, focusing on improving road/rail connectivity among Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva – the key tourist circuit – similar to how China prioritized connecting its Golden Triangle cities with high-speed rail). There is evidence of this prioritization: Uzbekistan is upgrading rail links (a high-speed rail line already connects Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and by 2024 extended to Khiva). Plans for a direct China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway could further open a route for adventurous travelers from China across the Tian Shan into Uzbekistan – literally creating a modern Silk Road rail journey.

**d. Tourism Products and Thematic Development:** China diversified its tourism product range extensively; Uzbekistan is also diversifying, but with a heavy focus on its unique selling proposition: Silk Road heritage and Islamic historical sites. Both countries share an emphasis on cultural tourism. In China, historical attractions like Forbidden City, Terracotta Army, etc., are major draws; Uzbekistan’s analogs are the Registan of Samarkand, Ichan Qala of Khiva, and Bukhara’s old city. Uzbekistan has capitalized on this by restoring monuments and pursuing UNESCO World Heritage listings. Learning from China’s heritage tourism management (where sites are both preserved and made tourist-friendly with museums, night illumination shows, etc.), Uzbekistan has started similar initiatives – for instance, **light shows on Registan square** and restoration of ancient caravanserai into museums or boutique hotels (with advice from international experts, possibly Chinese among them, as China has experience

<sup>8</sup> CENTRAL ASIA UZBEKISTAN INFRASTRUCTURE GOVERNANCE ASSESSMENT  
<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/>

restoring Silk Road-era sites like those in Xi'an or Dunhuang). Uzbekistan has also taken note of China's success in **rural tourism and ecotourism**. Although nascent, Uzbekistan's government is encouraging community-based tourism in mountain villages (e.g. guesthouse networks in Nurata Mountains) and yurt stays in desert areas. This parallels China's earlier push to turn rural areas into tourist destinations for economic benefit, a policy which China termed "tourism-driven poverty alleviation". In fact, Uzbek officials in the Ministry of Economy have explicitly studied China's poverty reduction programs, including tourism, as per cooperation documents in SCO forums.

Another area is **specialized tourism**. China has niches like MICE (meetings and conferences), sports (e.g. Hainan as a surfing spot), TCM health tourism, etc. Uzbekistan is beginning to explore similar avenues: hosting conferences (Samarkand has a new large conference center used for the UNWTO GA 2023), promoting adventure sports (like heli-skiing in winter in the Tien Shan, akin to China's development of ski resorts), and inviting film productions (the film tourism angle – China has studios that attract tourists, Uzbekistan in 2021 started promoting itself as a film shooting location to gain exposure). While these are smaller scale, the pattern shows **Uzbekistan observing successful strategies elsewhere (including China) and trying to adapt them**.

**e. Institutional Framework and Governance:** China's tourism success comes partly from strong institutional coordination (central government directives implemented by provinces, a clear marketing strategy from CNTA/Ministry of Tourism). Uzbekistan has restructured its institutions to improve coordination. The formation of the Tourism Ministry and involvement of the Prime Minister's office in tourism oversight (Deputy PM leads the sector) is intended to ensure multi-agency alignment – something China excels at (e.g. public security, transportation, commerce ministries in China all cooperate on tourism initiatives under State Council guidance). Uzbekistan also seeks international partnerships to compensate for its limited institutional experience; for example, UNWTO and USAID have been advising on strategy and marketing. Cooperation with China is also part of capacity building – Uzbekistan regularly sends delegations to China for training (e.g. Chinese courses for tour guides, hospitality training exchanges). The Memorandum on tourism cooperation (2017–2020) that Uzbekistan signed with China provided for sharing of best practices in destination marketing and quality standards, which likely helped shape Uzbek institutions' approach to quality (for instance, adopting a hotel star classification that aligns more with international norms).

Overall, the comparative analysis reveals that **Uzbekistan has adapted several Chinese (and global) practices**: easing travel access (though even more aggressively than China in visas), improving infrastructure (albeit at a smaller scale, but with recognition of its importance), embracing digital tools (launching e-visas, promoting online marketing), and diversifying products (while emphasizing its own strengths). Uzbekistan's approach can be seen as a rapid convergence towards international tourism development norms, many of which China also followed or set.

However, differences naturally persist, largely due to scale and resource constraints. China's domestic market alone guarantees tourism flows (billions of trips) – Uzbekistan's domestic tourism is small (perhaps a couple of million trips, often not counted formally). China's financial muscle for investment is incomparable. Additionally, China's tourism strategies are

backed by huge state-owned enterprises and private tech giants, whereas Uzbekistan's private sector in tourism is just emerging. These differences imply that Uzbekistan cannot wholesale copy China, but rather **selectively integrate strategies** that fit its context. For example, digitalization in Uzbekistan might focus on critical services like e-visas and online promotion, rather than trying to develop homegrown super-apps. Infrastructure investment might rely on attracting foreign investors (potentially Chinese ones under BRI programs) rather than huge state spending.

One interesting contrast is in **outbound tourism focus**: China's government has a strategy for outbound tourism (they use it as diplomacy and encourage certain outbound flows), whereas Uzbekistan's focus is almost entirely inbound (Uzbekistan does not yet have a need to manage outbound tourism since relatively few Uzbeks travel abroad for leisure, though that number is rising with income growth). This means Uzbekistan's policy energy is all about drawing foreigners in and getting its citizens to explore their own country, whereas China balances inbound and outbound strategies (sometimes even restricting outbound to support domestic tourism recovery, as seen in delayed full outbound restoration post-COVID).

In summary, Uzbekistan's approach has been moving in the direction of China's in terms of valuing tourism as an economic driver and employing modern tools, but it is at an earlier stage of development. The comparative analysis shows numerous **areas of synergy** (e.g. Silk Road branding, digital service adoption, infrastructure building) where integration of Chinese experience into Uzbek policy is either already happening or could be enhanced. The following section will highlight specific case studies of China-Uzbekistan tourism cooperation that exemplify these points.

## 5. Case Studies of China-Uzbekistan Tourism Cooperation

To illustrate the practical interplay of Chinese and Uzbek strategies, we present several case studies and examples of bilateral cooperation in tourism:

**Case Study 1: 2017 Memorandum and the 2017–2020 Tourism Cooperation Program.** When President Mirziyoyev visited Beijing in May 2017 for the Belt and Road Forum, among the agreements signed was a tourism cooperation agreement between China's CNTA and Uzbekistan's Tourism Committee<sup>9</sup>. This led to a formal **Program for Development of Cooperation in tourism 2017–2020**. The program outlined steps such as: increasing exchange of information and promotional materials, developing joint Silk Road tour packages, and facilitating the participation of each other's tourism businesses in expos. As part of this, Uzbek tourism officials held roadshows in multiple Chinese cities, and Chinese tour operator delegations were invited to Uzbekistan on familiarization trips. One tangible outcome: Chinese tour companies started including Uzbekistan in their Central Asia itineraries. The number of Chinese visitors to Uzbekistan, though modest, began rising after 2017 – from around 20 thousand in 2017 to 37 thousand in 2018. This program also coincided with Uzbekistan introducing a 10-day visa-free transit for Chinese tourists in 2018 (initially if they held an onward ticket, though later Chinese tourists got full visa-free in 2020). The **success** of this

<sup>9</sup> List of Deliverables of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation  
<https://www.chinadaily.com>

period of cooperation is evident in Chinese tourist growth and greater awareness in China about Uzbek destinations. Challenges included language barriers and lack of Chinese restaurant options in Uzbekistan – which Uzbekistan addressed by initiatives like the “China Friendly” program. The program’s conclusion in 2020 came amid the pandemic, pausing some momentum. However, both sides regarded it positively and renewed interest post-pandemic.

**Case Study 2: Tourism Year of Uzbekistan in China 2024.** In a bid to reinvigorate tourism ties after COVID-19, Uzbekistan and China designated 2024 as the “Tourism Year of Uzbekistan” in China. The launch event took place in Beijing in December 2024, featuring Uzbek cultural performances and an investment forum focused on tourism. High-level participation (Uzbekistan’s Tourism Committee Chairman Umid Shadieiev was present) underscored its importance. The goals were to **raise Uzbekistan’s profile among Chinese travelers**, attract Chinese investment in Uzbek tourism projects, and ultimately increase tourist flows both ways. Notable initiatives under this banner:

- Uzbekistan significantly increased the number of promotional events in China – attending at least four major travel fairs and organizing 10 roadshow events across Chinese cities in 2024.
- The direct flight frequency was tripled (as previously noted) to improve accessibility.
- Marketing campaigns on Chinese social media were ramped up, often highlighting the ancient Silk Road cities as “exotic yet historically linked to China” – leveraging the shared heritage (for instance, the story of Chinese monk Xuanzang visiting Samarkand, etc., is used in promotion).
- Investment forum led to Chinese companies signing expressions of interest to **Case Study 3: Silk Road Tourism Initiatives – UNWTO Silk Road and China’s Cultural Silk Road Program.** Uzbekistan and China are both active players in the **UNWTO Silk Road Programme**, which provides a multilateral platform for Silk Road countries to cooperate on tourism. In 2019, Uzbekistan hosted a Silk Road Tourism Ministers meeting in Samarkand, where China was a key participant. Jointly, they discussed standardizing visa processes and creating combined itineraries across countriesunwto.org. This laid groundwork for the bilateral visa-waiver that came in 2024 (China seldom grants visa waiver, so the 2024 agreement with Uzbekistan is notable). Additionally, under China’s **Cultural Silk Road** initiative (announced at the 2023 summit)<sup>10</sup>, there are plans to rotate a Cultural and Tourism Capital city. Uzbekistan, rich in culture, is poised to benefit: indeed, Samarkand was quickly designated the “Tourism Capital of the Islamic World 2023” by another body, and one can foresee an Uzbek city being named a China-Central Asia Tourism Capital soon, which would bring Chinese tourist attention. This cooperative marketing elevates secondary cities. For example, if Khiva (Uzbekistan) and Xian (China) were twinned as tourism capitals in a given year, it could encourage tourist exchange and joint tour packages (e.g. “visit the two ends of the Silk Road”). While still conceptual, it’s a case of strategic alignment: China’s broad initiative finds a willing partner in Uzbekistan to bring it to life.

---

<sup>10</sup> Full text of Xi Jinping’s keynote speech at China-Central Asia Summit <https://www.idcpc.org.cn/>

**Case Study 4: Joint Investments – Example of Samarkand Tourist Center (Eternal City).** Samarkand in 2022 opened a new tourist complex called the “Great Silk Road Tourism Center,” which includes multiple hotels, a conference hall, and the “Eternal City” cultural park with artisan workshops and exhibits. This \$320 million project was funded through a public-private partnership; importantly, it attracted foreign investors from several countries, including some interest from Chinese firms for its second phase. While Emirati and local investors led initially, Chinese companies supplied a lot of materials and some construction expertise (Chinese firms are competitive in building infrastructure quickly). During construction, Uzbek officials consulted with Chinese theme park designers to incorporate features that might appeal to Asian tourists. Now operational, the Eternal City hosts events and festivals, and in 2023 it was a focal point for UNWTO delegates. The case here is about **knowledge transfer and indirect cooperation**: though not a Chinese investment per se, Chinese know-how influenced the design (e.g., nighttime light show technology likely sourced from China). In Bukhara, as another example, a Chinese investor has committed to building a 4-star hotel (as reported in 2025). This not only brings capital but also Chinese market linkages (the investor will of course market the hotel through Chinese channels). These cases show that beyond government MOUs, the private sector is forging China-Uzbekistan tourism links, which ultimately integrate strategies – Chinese efficiency and standards meeting Uzbek hospitality and culture.

## 6. Opportunities and Challenges in Aligning with Chinese Strategies

Building on the comparative analysis and case studies, we identify key **opportunities** and **challenges** for Uzbekistan in aligning its tourism development more closely with Chinese strategies:

### Opportunities:

**Chinese Investment and Expertise:** Chinese strategies often come with financing. Uzbekistan’s alignment with BRI means it can attract Chinese investment not just in hard infrastructure but in tourism projects like hotels, theme parks, and transport services. For example, Chinese conglomerates that run theme parks (like Fantawild or OCT) could be interested in a Silk Road-themed park in Uzbekistan. Chinese banks could finance tourism facilities under BRI if presented as part of people-to-people connectivity. There’s also an opportunity to get **Chinese expertise in digital infrastructure** – for instance, maybe collaborating with Alibaba or Tencent to integrate Uzbekistan’s tourism services on WeChat mini-programs or Alipay’s platform (some initial steps already done for payments). This could raise Uzbekistan’s profile among Chinese users effortlessly. Additionally, Chinese construction companies can build quickly – Uzbekistan could leverage that to meet its ambitious 64,000 hotel room target by 2025 by involving Chinese contractors for new hotel developments at a lower cost or faster pace (with conditions to hire/train locals, etc., to ensure knowledge transfer).

**Regional Hub Potential:** If Uzbekistan aligns well with China’s tourism corridor vision, it could become a hub for Chinese tourists to explore wider Central Asia. For example, a tourist from China might come to Uzbekistan (because it’s more developed in tourism infrastructure) and then take an excursion to Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan as part of a multi-country trip. Uzbekistan can seize this by building itself as the **“gateway to Central Asia”** – a branding that would be bolstered by hosting a lot of tourism connectivity (flights, multi-entry visas, etc.).

This complements China's efforts to boost Central Asian tourism; China is encouraging its citizens to visit the region (Chinese tourist numbers to Kazakhstan surged in 2023–24 when borders reopened). Uzbekistan being the most open and historically famous destination can ride that wave, which is an opportunity created largely by China's outbound policy shift focusing on neighboring regions.

### Challenges:

**Marketing in a Competitive Environment:** Every country is now courting Chinese tourists. Uzbekistan, though unique, competes with other Silk Road destinations (like Kazakhstan's Almaty, which is marketing its natural beauty to China, or the Middle East which also positions itself on historic trade routes). China's tourists have many options; getting a sizable share requires sustained marketing investment. Uzbekistan's tourism marketing budget is small compared to those of competing destinations. China's own influence can help (e.g. Chinese media coverage gave a boost), but Uzbekistan will need to continuously engage Chinese travel agencies, online KOLs (influencers), etc. This is a challenge because it requires understanding Chinese consumer behavior deeply and possibly hiring marketing reps in China.

**Cultural and Regulatory Differences:** Adopting Chinese strategies can sometimes clash with local ways. For instance, China's tourism industry can be very state-directed (the government can order price controls during holidays, etc.), whereas Uzbekistan is moving toward a market economy approach. Trying to replicate heavy-handed management could stifle private sector involvement if done poorly. Also, Chinese tourism thrives on certain enabling factors like huge domestic tour operators (CITS, etc.) that have scale – Uzbekistan's tour operators are mostly small.

**Infrastructure Funding Constraints:** To truly integrate Chinese-level infrastructure, Uzbekistan needs funding that it might not have. There is a risk of over-relying on Chinese loans which could lead to debt (a concern sometimes raised regarding BRI projects). Uzbekistan will have to carefully negotiate terms for Chinese-funded projects in tourism (ensuring they are sustainable and do not just serve Chinese tour groups exclusively, for example). A challenge is obtaining investments that align with Uzbekistan's vision (like eco-friendly resorts, not just mass tourism facilities that could damage heritage if not controlled). Essentially, saying "yes" to all Chinese investment offers might bring short-term gains but could pose long-term issues if projects aren't well integrated into national plans (e.g., if a Chinese company built a large hotel in a small village without local integration, it could flop or cause social issues). Uzbekistan's policymakers must thus strategically guide investments – something that requires capacity and experience they are still building.

In fact, ongoing dialogues between the two countries' tourism authorities can facilitate Uzbekistan skipping some "trial and error" by directly applying proven solutions. The **China–Uzbekistan tourism sub-committee**, expected to be set up under their intergovernmental cooperation commission, could be a platform to address issues like standardizing hotel ratings to Chinese expectations, simplifying currency exchange (maybe more ATMs that accept UnionPay), and even joint tourist protection (like legal assistance for tourists – something China does via embassies, and Uzbekistan could coordinate for Chinese visitors in emergencies).

## Conclusion

From 2015 to 2024, China's tourism sector demonstrated how strategic vision, substantial investment, and technological innovation can elevate a country into a tourism powerhouse. Over the same period, Uzbekistan emerged from relative tourism obscurity to become one of Central Asia's fastest growing destinations by adopting a bold reform agenda. This research set out to examine how Chinese tourism strategies have been integrated into Uzbekistan's tourism development policy and what the implications are for the future.

**Summary of Findings:** China's key strategies – digitalization, infrastructure expansion, policy support (ease of travel), product diversification, and international outreach – have largely proven effective in stimulating tourism growth and resilience. Uzbekistan, especially post-2016, has mirrored many of these strategies in its own context. The country drastically simplified travel access (a move very much in line with what Chinese inbound tourism experts have been urging for China itself), invested in improving tourist sites and accommodations, and embraced digital tools like e-visas and online promotion, which are hallmarks of modern tourism governance as seen in China. Our comparative analysis shows Uzbekistan has achieved commendable progress: international arrivals rose multi-fold, the tourism sector's contribution to GDP increased (from around 2% in 2015 to 5% in 2019, pre-pandemic, according to World Bank data), and the country's image abroad shifted positively.

Bilateral cooperation between China and Uzbekistan in tourism has deepened, exemplified by agreements, growing tourist flows, and cultural exchange programs. The “**Tourism Year of Uzbekistan in China 2024**” and the mutual visa-free agreement are landmark steps that symbolically and practically bind the two nations' tourism futures. These efforts align with the broader Belt and Road ethos of connectivity and suggest that Uzbekistan is viewed by China as a key partner in promoting Silk Road tourism.

**Concluding Thoughts:** Integration of Chinese tourism strategies into Uzbekistan's policy has so far been a win-win trajectory. Uzbekistan benefits from the experience and market access China provides, while China gains a stable, friendly destination for its tourists and a partner in promoting cultural exchange along the Silk Road. The years 2015–2024 were about laying the groundwork – tearing down barriers, building facilities, and establishing partnerships. The coming decade (to 2030 and beyond) can be about consolidation and maturation of this integration.

If current trends continue, by 2025–2030 we could envision scenarios such as: Chinese tourist arrivals in Uzbekistan reaching into the hundreds of thousands annually; joint China-Uzbek tourism heritage sites (for example, a Silk Road UNESCO World Heritage serial nomination that both countries collaborate on); and Uzbek cities like Samarkand becoming as familiar a name in China as, say, Prague or Bali are today for Chinese travelers. This would mark a remarkable journey from 2015 when Uzbekistan was barely on the Chinese tourist radar.

To sustain this progress, both countries should remain committed to open dialogue and adaptive management of tourism flows. The ancient Silk Road thrived on the exchange of goods and ideas; the modern tourism Silk Road can thrive on the exchange of visitors and mutual hospitality. In integrating Chinese tourism strategies, Uzbekistan is effectively accelerating its

journey on the Silk Road of tourism development, moving toward a future where tourism not only contributes significantly to its economy but also strengthens the cultural bridge between East and West. The evidence from 2015–2024 suggests this is an attainable vision, as long as policy integration is pursued thoughtfully, inclusively, and with an eye on long-term sustainability.

### References:

1. **VOA News (2023):** Akmal Dawi, “China Eases Visa Requirements to Revive Tourism.”
2. **UzDaily (2019):** “Shavkat Mirziyoyev: 2019 will be a turning point in development of tourism.”
3. **Trade.gov – U.S. International Trade Administration (2023):** “Uzbekistan – Travel and Tourism.”
4. **China Daily (2017):** “List of Deliverables of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.”
5. **UzDaily (2017):** “Uzbekistan and China discuss cooperation in tourism.” –
6. **China Briefing (2023):** Giulia Interesse, “China Unveils New Measures to Boost Tourism and Attract International Travelers.”
7. **China Briefing (2024):** “China’s Tourism Sector Forecast to Hit a Record ¥13.7TN This Year”
8. **TourCentralAsia (2023):** “Uzbekistan Tourism Industry Statistics.”
9. **Kazinform (2024):** Zhanna Nurmaganbetova, “57.7 thousand Chinese tourists visited Uzbekistan.”
10. **Global Times (2024):** “2024 Tourism Year of Uzbekistan in China opens...” –
11. **China Daily (2019) / English.gov.cn:** “Inbound tourism bouncing back to new high, report says.” – Joint report by WTA and China Tourism Academy
12. **WTTC Press Release (2023):** “Capital investment fuels growth in Travel & Tourism...”
13. **Kim & Yusupova (2025), AJEBM:** “Measures to Promote Uzbekistan as a Tourist Destination on the International Stage.”
14. **Mastercard News (2024):** “How China is rolling out the virtual (and digital) red carpet for tourists.”
15. **Xinhua / Macau Business (2023):** “Uzbekistan eyes closer cooperation with China in a ...”