

Research on Issues and Countermeasures of Urban Tourism in Shanghai

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Abstract: As the popularity of urban tourism in Shanghai continues to rise, high-quality development in the tourism sector has become a key focus for the government. This paper analyzes core issues faced by tourists, such as high consumption costs, uneven visitor distribution at attractions, and lagging public services. It further explores underlying factors like city price levels and management philosophies related to attraction promotion and development. Based on this analysis, we propose strategies including optimizing travel times and dynamic pricing for attractions; diversifying tourist routes and enhancing promotional efforts; improving infrastructure and service efficiency. The aim is to provide feasible ideas and suggestions for optimizing Shanghai's urban tourism environment, contributing to balanced and efficient development in this sector.

Keywords: Shanghai Tourism; Urban Tourism; Travel Costs; Public Services

1. Research Background

As a key international metropolis in China, Shanghai has long held a central position in the national tourism landscape. With its rich historical and cultural heritage, diverse urban scenery, and developed transportation infrastructure, Shanghai continues to attract numerous domestic and international tourists. In recent years, both tourist reception numbers and tourism revenue have consistently ranked among the top nationwide. In Ctrip's 2025 list of "China's 100 Popular Destinations," Shanghai ranks second, while it is tenth in the "World Tourism Cities Development Report (2023)."¹

To further promote high-quality development in tourism, the Shanghai Municipal Government released the "Three-Year Action Plan for High-Quality Development of Shanghai Tourism (2025-2027)" in 2025. This plan aims to establish Shanghai as China's primary inbound tourism destination, a preferred urban travel location, and a model for deep integration of culture and tourism. It outlines six areas including developing diverse regional products, fostering an open innovation-driven industry, and advancing cultural-tourism technology integration with twenty-one key initiatives specified.³ These policies aim to leverage Shanghai's comprehensive advantages to enhance service quality and improve visitor experiences.

This paper focuses on urban tourism in Shanghai by analyzing current conditions to explore major pain points faced by tourists amid high-level openness and quality development contexts. It delves into root causes of these issues while proposing targeted strategies to contribute ideas and suggestions for creating a more tourist-friendly urban environment.

2. Current Situation

2.1 Shanghai's Urban Tourism Market Remains Booming

In recent years, Shanghai's urban tourism market has been thriving, with a significant increase in domestic visitors and a rapid return of international tourists. According to data from Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, in 2024, Shanghai welcomed 390 million domestic tourists, up 19.6%, including 150 million from other provinces—a growth of 44.1%, highlighting strong interprovincial tourism appeal. In terms of inbound travel, the expansion of visa-free policies led to over 6.7 million international visitors in 2024, marking an impressive year-on-year increase of 84% and maintaining Shanghai's lead nationally.⁴

The surge in exhibitions and performances has further fueled urban tourism enthusiasm through cultural integration. In 2024, the number of various cultural exhibitions, performances, and major events held in Shanghai reached historic highs—engaging local residents while attracting numerous tourists specifically for these experiences.⁵ The "Secrets of the Pyramid: Ancient Egyptian Artifacts Exhibition" at the Shanghai Museum drew large crowds throughout the year. Additionally, renowned artists like Jay Chou and Taylor Swift chose to hold their tours in Shanghai, bringing many fans into the city and boosting concert-related economic activities that benefited hotels, transportation services, dining establishments among others. Furthermore, frequent hosting of major sports events such as the F1 Chinese Grand Prix and ATP Masters Tournament also contributed significantly to tourist interest in visiting Shanghai.

2.2 Abundant Urban Tourism Resources and Comprehensive Supporting Industries

As an international metropolis, Shanghai boasts a rich variety of urban tourism resources, including cultural architecture, natural ecology, and historical heritage.⁶ According to data from Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, by January 2025, the city will have 2 national-level tourist resorts, 7 national-level leisure districts, and 144 A-rated tourist attractions.⁴ Notably, Shanghai features world-renowned landmarks such as The Bund, Oriental Pearl Tower, and Disneyland alongside historically significant sites like the site of the First National Congress of the Communist Party of China and Four Sages Bank Warehouse. Additionally, areas with distinct "Shanghainese" architectural styles like Shikumen and Wukang Road contribute to a diverse tourism landscape.⁷

In terms of supporting industries for tourism, Shanghai has a well-established infrastructure that includes various accommodation options, efficient public transportation networks, and widely distributed tourist information centers. By 2024, there are over 6,300 hotels in Shanghai—148 being star-rated—offering choices ranging from budget-friendly to luxury accommodations to meet different visitor needs.⁴ Furthermore, Shanghai operates the longest metro network in China which covers most central areas while connecting major attractions for tourists' convenience. Currently, there are 61 tourist information centers across all districts and major transport hubs providing consultation services while continuously launching new products and routes as vital channels for promoting tourism culture.

2.3 Distinctive Urban Image with Strong Appeal to Tourists

Shanghai's urban image is increasingly mature, showcasing its international cityscape that connects the world. In recent years, Shanghai has reinforced its city branding through various official communication channels, promoting an open, inclusive, and innovative spirit globally. In 2024, the city released a promotional video titled "Shanghai: Linking the Future," focusing on the daily lives and diverse activities of foreigners in Shanghai. This video covers scenes of technological innovation, artistic creation, urban exploration, and business exchanges.⁸ By breaking away from traditional promotional formats with immersive visuals and diverse perspectives, it conveys an invitation for people worldwide to co-create the future in Shanghai while fostering a positive atmosphere for international tourism promotion.

From tourists' perspectives, Shanghai's brand image is unique and enhanced by social media engagement. An increasing number of travel bloggers (KOLs), fashion influencers, photographers, and other new media creators have chosen Shanghai as a key content creation site. Through short videos, photo essays, live streams, etc., they depict elements like old alleys, urban nightscapes, artistic cafes, and trendy exhibitions—crafting an image that blends cosmopolitanism with local life. Most tourists gain their initial understanding of Shanghai's identity through these mediums. With social media amplifying this effect tourists transition from mere recipients to active participants and creators of the city's brand image, attracting more visitors eager for exploration aesthetic experiences and cultural interests.

3. Issues

3.1 The Cost of Urban Tourism for Visitors is Prominent

As the popularity of tourism in Shanghai continues to rise, the high cost of accommodation has become increasingly evident. Among all travel expenses, accommodation, tickets, and dining are the main expenditures, with accommodation costs being particularly striking. Despite a large number of hotels in Shanghai, those located near attractions and city centers maintain high prices. According to numerous visitor reviews on Ctrip during the 2025 "May Day" holiday period, hotel prices have risen significantly; one guest noted that a normally 300 yuan hotel now costs nearly 1000 yuan—simply unaffordable. While hotels farther from popular areas may offer better value for money, they incur additional transportation costs and time.

Moreover, dining prices in Shanghai are also steep. There was once an online buzz about "Shanghai currency" reflecting its high living costs. Some trendy restaurants or specialty snack shops charge exorbitant prices but fail to deliver satisfactory experiences, leading to visitors' dissatisfaction over spending more yet receiving less food. A notable example is the Peace Hotel's single meal priced at 298 yuan due to its association with the TV drama "Blossoms Shanghai," which consists merely of "a piece of bread and a cup of water." This overpriced meal not only exceeds most tourists' expectations but has also been criticized online as an "stupid tax."

The ticket prices for attractions further contribute to the high tourism costs in Shanghai. For instance, tickets for Shanghai Disneyland range from 435 yuan during off-peak seasons to 799 yuan during peak times; similarly, tickets for the upcoming Shanghai Lego Land opening in July 2025 will start at 319 yuan. For a full day at Disneyland—including admission plus other expenses like dining and souvenirs—the total can approach one thousand yuan—a significant financial burden especially for young people and students.

3.2 Uneven Development of Urban Tourism Resources and Overcrowding at Popular Attractions

In recent years, Shanghai has seen a trend of overcrowding at popular attractions, with tourists concentrated in a few well-known sites. This leads to severe congestion that exceeds the maximum capacity of these areas. For instance, during holidays, places like The Bund and Yuyuan Garden experience a surge in visitors, prompting police to deploy thousands of officers for crowd control and implement measures such as metro station closures to ensure safety and order. The dense crowds and complex traffic restrictions not only shift the focus from sightseeing to people-watching but also significantly detract from the overall travel experience.

Meanwhile, many culturally valuable mid-sized attractions remain under-visited. For example, Fuxing Island in eastern Yangpu Area—once a hub for modern shipbuilding with rich industrial heritage—has immense potential for industrial heritage tourism and urban ecological tourism but suffers from neglect due to ineffective development. As a result, it sees very few visitors; its metro station is one of the least trafficked in the city, leading to significant resource waste while failing to showcase its tourist appeal adequately. In contrast, attention remains fixated on a handful of landmarks while numerous historically rich locations are overlooked.

3.3 Low Efficiency of Public Services and Infrastructure

Firstly, public transportation signage lacks uniformity in translation which can confuse foreign tourists. At People's Square Metro Station, "People's Square" is correctly translated into English; however, nearby bus stops still use pinyin "Ren Min Guang Chang," making it difficult for non-Chinese speakers to navigate effectively. Tourists often find themselves asking locals or using their phones for translations—a time-consuming process that adds anxiety during their travels. Such issues are prevalent across core tourist areas like Lujiazui and The Bund as well.

Secondly, there is an insufficient number of convenience facilities that have long been criticized by both tourists and residents alike. Nanjing Road Pedestrian Street experiences high foot traffic yet has sparse trash bin distribution; this results in littering which tarnishes street aesthetics and diminishes first impressions of the city among visitors. Additionally, public restroom placements need improvement—for instance along Huangpu River's leisure area where restrooms exist but are poorly located or hard-to-reach without third-gender facilities available.⁹

A more pressing issue lies within digital navigation services being underutilized; smart tourism potential remains untapped here as exemplified by The Bund where although text-based guides are provided by Shanghai's cultural bureau on official platforms primarily in Chinese language—with little support for other languages like English or

Japanese—it fails short on delivering deeper insights into each building's unique story through mere textual explanations alone thus hindering comprehensive understanding about historical context surrounding urban evolution.

4. Reasons

4.1 High Prices in First-Tier Cities and Premium Locations

Shanghai, as a typical first-tier city in China, has consistently high overall price levels. According to the Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau, the per capita disposable income for residents in 2024 is 88,366 yuan, with average consumption expenditure reaching 52,722 yuan—both ranking first nationwide.¹⁰ This reflects the generally high costs of food, housing, transportation, and entertainment in Shanghai. For visitors from second- and third-tier cities or even county-level towns, the stark difference in consumption levels can be quite striking upon their arrival in Shanghai; this is especially true for core areas where prices exceed expectations.

In tourist-heavy regions like East Nanjing Road, Lujiazui, Middle Huaihai Road, and Yuyuan Garden—where tourism-related industries are concentrated—the premium becomes even more pronounced due to limited space and high commercial value leading to soaring rental costs. A report by Colliers indicates that rental prices for core business districts reached 59.53 yuan per square meter daily in the second half of 2023; regional business district rents averaged at 26.87 yuan while emerging districts averaged at 16.89 yuan.¹¹ Under such significant rental pressure across hotels, restaurants, and retail stores alike must raise prices on goods and services to cover costs—directly increasing tourists' financial burdens.

Additionally, ticket prices for major attractions remain high due to brand effects and landmark scarcity. With a concentration of tourism resources around iconic landmarks that hold strong bargaining power over pricing—for instance—the Oriental Pearl Tower charges an adult admission fee of 199 yuan or up to 299 yuan for a package including three spheres despite visitor complaints about its cost-to-experience ratio being disproportionate; its status as an irreplaceable landmark keeps acceptance relatively high among tourists.

4.2 Inadequate Promotion and Development of Scenic Areas

Insufficient promotion of scenic areas has led to the neglect of many quality resources, contributing to the uneven popularity of urban tourist attractions in Shanghai. Nowadays, tourists increasingly rely on recommendations from platforms like Douyin, Rednote, Ctrip, and Fliggy when choosing travel destinations. If a scenic area lacks marketing and operations on these mainstream platforms—such as promotional activities, visitor reviews, or unique highlights—it becomes difficult for tourists to discover it. Additionally, offline promotion is also lacking. During major cultural tourism events like China Tourism Day and the Shanghai Tourism Festival, media attention often focuses on popular spots such as Disneyland, The Bund, Oriental Pearl Tower, and Yuyuan Garden; meanwhile, many small or emerging attractions miss opportunities to participate in these high-traffic events.

On the other hand, inadequate development within scenic areas results in poor visitor experiences and lack of appeal. Some areas may have substantial promotions but still fall short due to incomplete development that leads to a disparity between reputation and actual experience. For instance, while Shanghai Film Park in Songjiang Area receives significant online promotion as a filming location for the hit drama "Blossoms Shanghai," outdated facilities and insufficient maintenance result in negative feedback from visitors who feel it does not justify its ticket price—ultimately harming long-term development prospects for the site.

4.3 Insufficient Management Refinement

The fundamental reason for the low efficiency of public services and infrastructure in Shanghai's urban tourism lies in the lack of refined management. In recent years, Shanghai has continuously invested in urban infrastructure, achieving a leading "hardware" level nationwide. However, many facilities have not seen corresponding upgrades in "software," resulting in practical and user-friendly deficiencies. For instance, as mentioned earlier, bus stop signs still commonly use pinyin for station names like "Ren Min Lu" and "Jiang Su Lu," which are unfamiliar and difficult to understand for most foreign tourists; even Chinese people find pinyin impractical.

The outdated management philosophy regarding urban infrastructure reflects deeper issues. In the early stages of construction, focus was primarily on whether projects were completed or met standards, with little consideration given to convenience or user-friendliness. For example, when planning garbage bins and public restrooms, many areas failed to adequately consider foot traffic and tourist behavior patterns from the outset, resulting in low accessibility and numerous complaints from visitors that further diminish satisfaction.

Digital navigation and information services also highlight the issue of prioritizing construction over management. While some attractions offer electronic guides, they often lack audio explanations or accurate images that match real scenes; multilingual support is typically absent as well. The root cause lies in insufficient maintenance and updates after these features go live without incorporating visitor feedback—leading to services that remain superficial rather than practical.

5. Strategies

5.1 Encourage Off-Peak Travel and Dynamic Pricing for Accommodations and Attractions

To alleviate the cost pressure on tourists during peak travel periods, it is essential to promote off-peak travel and implement dynamic pricing strategies. Currently, many visitors flock to popular attractions during holidays, leading to a shortage of accommodations and increased prices. Government agencies can encourage reverse tourism through promotional campaigns and discount vouchers aimed at attracting local visitors during weekdays or the low season (November-December). Additionally, more attractions should adopt tiered ticket pricing similar to Shanghai Disneyland's model, which differentiates between weekday, weekend, and holiday rates. This approach can help guide tourists away from peak times, reducing wait times and overall expenses.

Furthermore, it is advisable to encourage tourists to explore areas beyond city centers by expanding suburban tourism options. Tourists should be guided to discover affordable yet culturally rich non-popular attractions at the city's edges or in nearby suburbs. These locations often offer better dining value and lower overall travel costs. For example, the Guangfulin Cultural Site in Songjiang Area has become a popular suburban destination due to its free admission and pleasant visiting environment.

5.2 Support the Development of Niche Attractions, Create Boutique Travel Routes, and Enhance Promotional Efforts

It is recommended to collaborate deeply with tourism platforms to increase the exposure of small and medium-sized scenic spots through advertising and route design. In the digital age, tourism consumption heavily relies on online platform recommendations and reviews; thus, strengthening partnerships with platforms like Ctrip, Dianping, and Fliggy is an effective way to boost visibility for these attractions. Local cultural tourism departments or management can utilize targeted advertising to reach specific tourist groups by leveraging big data to identify interests such as "local tours" or "family trips," enhancing promotional effectiveness. Additionally, various travel routes can be designed that organically integrate lesser-known sites into visitors' itineraries—for example, creating an "Industrial Memory and Green Ecology" route around Fuxing Island Park, Green Hill Park, and Yangshupu Power Plant Ruins in Yangpu Area.

Utilize major events like the Shanghai Tourism Festival to strengthen publicity for small attractions and raise public awareness. Annual events such as the Shanghai Tourism Festival or China Tourism Day attract significant media attention; therefore, it is advisable to leverage these opportunities for promoting smaller scenic spots. During parades or cultural performances at these festivals, collaboration with Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism could allow smaller venues to participate in exhibitions featuring unique themed floats or performances that engage tourists. Media coverage combined with online-offline channels will help more citizens discover that "beyond The Bund and Disneyland, there are many other places worth visiting in Shanghai."

Targeted exploration and support for developing niche attractions should aim at creating emerging tourist destinations to alleviate visitor pressure on popular sites. To achieve balanced urban tourism development requires continuous discovery of new destinations that reduce reliance on traditional hotspots. It is suggested that

government departments implement special support policies providing guidance for potential niche sites along with financial subsidies and planning resources. For areas rich in historical culture yet underdeveloped—like Fuxing Island—introducing creative industries or planning riverside promenades can maximize spatial value while also improving infrastructure (such as visitor centers) enhances overall experience encouraging a flow of tourists across different city regions alleviating congestion at popular locations.

5.3 Optimize Feedback Mechanism, Focus on Tourist Needs, and Improve Tourism Infrastructure

It is recommended to enhance the research mechanism or tourist feedback channels by providing platforms for tourists to express their needs. Shanghai can leverage its existing digital infrastructure by integrating functions from platforms like the "12345" citizen hotline, "Suishenban" App, and "Leyou Shanghai" WeChat account to establish a "Tourist Feedback" section for receiving complaints and suggestions. This will allow for timely identification of core tourist demands through categorized processing and public disclosure. Additionally, it is suggested to implement regular follow-ups and satisfaction surveys after peak holiday periods via questionnaires or phone calls to identify common issues and optimize services. Relevant departments should also proactively gather genuine reviews from major social media platforms to bridge the information gap between tourists and managers, facilitating precise optimization of tourism services.

Focusing on core tourist needs, existing tourism facilities should be optimized based on actual conditions. Infrastructure requires ongoing maintenance, updates, and human-centered modifications rather than being a one-time project in order to meet diverse tourist demands. In terms of traffic signage, it is advisable to standardize signs at subway stations, bus stops, and scenic area entrances with clear Chinese-English translations while avoiding mixed pinyin or ambiguous meanings for effective guidance. For convenience facilities such as trash bins, restrooms, seating areas, and charging stations—these should be reasonably increased or renovated based on big data insights regarding visitor flow hotspots—and management along with cleaning frequency must be enhanced accordingly. Furthermore, improving digital navigation systems by regularly updating content on WeChat accounts with multilingual descriptions as well as offering voice explanations and service recommendations will reflect the city's warmth in detail.

6. Research Conclusion

As Shanghai's urban tourism market continues to heat up with rapidly increasing visitor numbers; the municipal government actively promotes policies aimed at high-quality development in tourism reflecting its goal of becoming a world-renowned travel city. With rich tourism resources alongside comprehensive supporting industries coupled with a unique urban image; Shanghai demonstrates strong appeal both nationally and internationally.

This study reveals that despite rapid growth in urban tourism within Shanghai; several issues have emerged: first is the high cost burden faced by tourists particularly concerning accommodation costs dining expenses as well as entrance fees; second there exists uneven resource development leading visitors concentrated around key attractions resulting in significant underutilization of lesser-known sites; lastly deficiencies exist within public services and infrastructure lacking user-friendly amenities which adversely affect overall visitor experiences.

Through an in-depth analysis these underlying causes are summarized including high living costs prevalent within first-tier cities combined with severe premium pricing near popular locations insufficient promotion and development efforts surrounding attractions plus an emphasis placed upon construction over management when building infrastructures—all factors constraining balanced sustainable growth across Shanghai's urban tourism sector.

Based upon this analysis three targeted strategies are proposed: firstly encourage off-peak travel promoting dynamic differential pricing models for accommodations and attraction tickets alleviating pressure during peak times; secondly actively utilize various promotional resources enhancing visibility and development opportunities for smaller attractions creating diversified travel routes addressing imbalances among popular sites versus those less frequented; thirdly focus intently upon meeting core traveler requirements refining functionality within touristic infrastructures alongside establishing robust feedback mechanisms elevating convenience levels whilst

ensuring greater personalization throughout urban touring experiences—hoping this research aids relevant authorities optimizing associated frameworks thereby contributing towards advancing high-quality developments across Shanghai's vibrant metropolitan landscape.

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