

## **The merging of the China National Tourism Administration and the Ministry of Culture speaks volumes about Beijing's view towards the role of outbound travel**

Last week, the world of Chinese outbound tourism changed. Not only was Xi Jinping reappointed as president of China by all 2,970 members of the National People's Congress (NPC), with no more limit on the number of terms he can serve, a major change also took place for tourism. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of March State Councillor Wang Yong announced that within the institutional restructuring plan of the State Council the Ministry of Culture and CNTA China National Tourism Administration are to be merged into a new Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

The move, according to the official announcement, "... is aimed at coordinating the development of cultural and tourism industries, enhancing the country's soft power and cultural influence, and promoting cultural exchanges internationally".

There had been rumours for many years that the CNTA would either be upgraded to full ministry status or that it would be swallowed up by the Ministry of Culture. It seems that, assuming that the State Council plan will not encounter any opposition in the NPC, the Ministry of Culture now has won this battle.

For outbound tourism it is very interesting that "enhancing [China's] soft power and cultural influence and promoting cultures exchanges internationally" are the main arguments, pointing clearly towards outbound tourism as opposite to domestic or inbound tourism. It also spells out in remarkably clear words what China's outbound tourism is all about from the government's point of view: Soft power and increased influence. Good news therefore about this confirmation of the ongoing support of the Chinese government for outbound tourism despite the hundreds of billions of USD deficit when considering the spending by Chinese travellers abroad compared to the spending of international visitors to China and the anti-hedonism campaign still going on in many other fields.

The history of the CNTA dates back to 1964, when it was established within CITS China International Travel Service. At this stage, government function and enterprise management was combined; CNTA and CITS had different names but shared the same staff. In 1982, as part of the policy of separation of enterprise from administration, CITS became specialised in all travel-related service, while CNTA concentrated on national tourism management. Still, CNTA still has been until now commercially active, for instance as the organiser of CITM China International Travel Market, the main Chinese tourism fair.

What will happen to Dr. Li Jinzao – the CNTA chairman who has worked tirelessly to put Chinese tourism as a topic onto the national and international agenda – remains to be seen. He might fully concentrate in the future on his role within the recently-established WTA World Tourism Alliance, of which he is the official "founder" according to the WTA website.

Certainly, with Xi Jinping moving closer to being the new "emperor" of China, and tourism finally given ministerial status, the fundamentals of China's outbound tourism have changed more than ever since the introduction of the ADS Approved Destination Status system in 1995 and the 1997 proclamation of the "Provisional measures concerning the administration of outbound travel of Chinese citizens at their own expense", which for the first time officially recognised the existence of the wish of Chinese citizens to travel internationally for leisure purposes.

As COTRI has been saying for years: *China's outbound tourism – You ain't seen nothin' yet!*