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Hong Kong Bounces Back

The hospitality and tourism industry in Asia as a whole and Hong Kong in particular have just gone through one of the most difficult periods in its history as a result of the SARS outbreak from March-May 2003. But, as the Chinese word for crisis, 危機, implies, every crisis brings both threats and opportunities. While the spread of the SARS epidemic has delivered a severe blow to the industry, the adversity has enabled the emergence of a much stronger product; in terms of a cleaner environment and reinvigorated tourism sector. The industry has experienced tremendous support, cooperation and cohesive efforts to rebuild tourism through closer partnerships and collaboration between the public and private sectors. The crisis has also allowed the industry to reflect on its current marketing strategies and future development plans.

Despite recent difficulties and the challenges ahead, we can predict that the future prospects for the industry are, in fact, extremely bright. The World Tourism Organization predicted in its "Vision 2020" report that mainland China will emerge as the world's top tourist destination by 2020, with annual visitors arrivals of more than 130 million; surpassing France, the U.S., and Spain, which currently occupy the top three slots. Hong Kong and other East Asian countries will certainly benefit from this trend, with Hong Kong estimated to receive 58 million visitors annually by 2020.

Another notable trend for the next 10 years will be the emergence of outbound tourism from mainland China. According to various estimates, approximately five to 10 percent of the population is said to have the economic mobility to travel abroad: applied to the most conservative figure of five percent of 1.3 billion, this will result in 65 million outbound tourists from the mainland every year. To put this into perspective, remember that Japan, which is one of the largest producers of international tourism, sent out 17.5 million tourists in the year 2002. So this means that in the foreseeable future we can expect to see four times as many mainland Chinese tourists around the world, as opposed to Japanese tourists.