

Research on Suzhou's Inbound Tourism Reception Capacity Evaluation and Improvement Paths Under the Background of Expanded Visa Exemption Policies

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Abstract: The convergence of expanded transit visa-free ports and the global "China Travel" surge has pushed China's inbound tourism into a period of explosive growth. Suzhou recorded 5.736 million inbound visitors in 2025, with foreign exchange earnings nearing USD 1.9 billion, yet soft-service deficits are becoming increasingly visible. Drawing on policy documents, in-depth interviews with tour guides, and on-site fieldwork, this paper evaluates Suzhou's inbound tourism reception capacity across five dimensions—transport connectivity, language services, scenic commentary, payment convenience, and international communication. It identifies core bottlenecks including a dual shortage of foreign-language talent, "last-mile" gaps in public service internationalization, misalignment between mobile payment systems and visitor habits, insufficient commentary supply, and brand recognition constraints. Countermeasures are proposed covering hierarchical talent cultivation, micro-internationalization of public services, seamless payment environments, culturally decoded tourism products, and Shanghai-Suzhou coordinated outreach.

Keywords: Inbound Tourism; Reception Capacity; Visa Exemption Policy; Suzhou; Internationalized Services

1. Introduction

Since 2024, China has repeatedly expanded its transit visa-free ports. The number of countries enjoying unilateral or mutual visa exemption has risen to 79. The "China Travel" topic has surpassed 700 million views on overseas social media platforms. According to data from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, China received 131.902 million inbound tourists in 2024, a year-on-year increase of 60.8%, including 26.94

million foreign tourists, up 95.5%. In 2025, inbound visitors reached 154.5 million, including 35.17 million foreign visitors, up 30.6% year-on-year.

Suzhou has jumped on this bandwagon. Suzhou received 1.15 million overnight inbound tourists in 2024, an increase of 110 percent year over year, and tourism foreign exchange earnings amounted to USD 1.5 billion. In 2025, the number of overnight inbound tourist arrivals in Suzhou reached 1.34 million and foreign exchange earnings approached USD 1.9 billion, ranking first among cross-city leisure tourist groups departing from Shanghai's port cities. Studies indicate that compared with mature tourism countries such as France and Japan where tourism revenue from incoming visitors accounts for 2% and 1.34% of GDP respectively, China's current ratio is only 0.5%, showing that there is still a market growth space of hundreds of billions of yuan behind this trillion-yuan market potential. A systematic deficit exists in internationalized services, travel convenience, and product design within destination cities. Despite Suzhou having policy documents like the Trial Measures for Promoting Inbound Tourism in Suzhou, the actual reception operations suffer from deficits in foreign language tour guide availability, public transportation internationalization, mobile payment integration, and limited supply of scenic spot commentary services.

Reception capacity is not a new topic in tourism studies. Most existing studies focus on calculating carrying capacity and measuring facility saturation, yet there is relatively little micro-level research examining soft service capabilities. This article changes the evaluation lens from "how many receivables" to "how well done". Combining document analysis, individually depth interviews and field data collection, identify the key bottlenecks in Suzhou's transit tourism to tourist destination

model and provide a reference for building Suzhou into a world-class tourist destination.

2. Current Development and Policy Initiatives

2.1 Market Scale and Tourist Source Structure

Suzhou's inbound tourism market has kept up strong post-pandemic recovery. In 2024, the city welcomed 1.15 million overnight inbound tourists, up 110%, with foreign exchange earnings of USD 1.5 billion, up 42%. In 2025, overnight arrivals reached 1.34 million, up 16.5%, and earnings approached USD 1.9 billion, up 25.7%.

Visitor profiles reveal three dependencies. First, heavy reliance on Shanghai port traffic: locally received direct groups account for less than one-third of the total. Second, a high proportion of business tourists—corporate delegations and conference groups. Third, deep-tourism visitors (garden and ancient architecture enthusiasts, research-driven tourists) report high satisfaction, yet conversion rates among casual sightseers remain low.

2.2 Policy Initiatives and Service Innovations

To seize opportunities brought by visa exemption policies, Suzhou Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism Bureau formulated the Trial Measures for Promoting Inbound Tourism in Suzhou, forming a three-tier policy framework covering customer acquisition reward, overseas promotion, and service optimization.

On travel convenience, the "One Code for Traveling Suzhou" platform and the Suzhou Pass co-branded card with China Eastern Airlines (over 4,000 cards issued to date) enable integrated access to scenic spots, metro, and bus rides. Suzhou service centers have been established at Shanghai Pudong International Airport and Wuxi Shuofang International Airport. An online convenience platform provides guidance on mobile SIM card applications, payment registration, foreign bank card binding, and ticket reservations.

On talent development, the Suzhou Cultural Tourism International Volunteer Alliance gathers more than 300 volunteers proficient in 22 languages, among whom foreign volunteers account for over 20%. The alliance has developed audio guide scripts in 12 languages for Suzhou Museum, Zhouzhuang, and other

scenic spots.

On international communication, Suzhou has incorporated inbound tourism into the national "Hello, China" tourism image promotion pilot program, conducting overseas campaigns themed "24 Hours in Suzhou" via TikTok and YouTube, and expanding the Central European market through the China Cultural Center in Budapest.

3. Evaluation of Reception Capacity and Core Problems

3.1 Transport Connectivity: Sound Hardware, Weak Internationalized Details

Suzhou's metro system is well-developed by domestic standards. Ticket machines offer English interfaces and accept both mobile payment and cash. However, there is no English audio guide on the site, and some signs are not translated accurately. Some signs use pinyin ("Shidaiguangchang") rather than English equivalents ("Times Square"). Temporary notices carry no translation. Inside the train, English text on maps is present but the font is minuscule; The electronic display also only shows Chinese. The bus system fares even worse: Except for emergency notices, bus routes, station names, and onboard announcements are all Chinese-only — leaving the system virtually inaccessible to DIY tourists.

These details are trivial in isolation. Stacked together, they send a signal that the city is not genuinely prepared. Administrators tend to equate internationalization with "whether English exists" rather than "whether English works," a design-perspective misalignment harder to remedy than funding gaps.

3.2 Scenic Commentary: Not Enough People, Not Enough Languages, Not Enough Depth

The Humble Administrator's Garden—arguably Suzhou's most famous classical garden—employs exactly two English-speaking guides (one inside, one at the external desk). An 80-minute tour costs CNY 240–320. During a weekday site visit at 14:00, neither was available. Of four to five observed foreign groups that afternoon, only one had secured a live guide; the rest relied on audio devices in English, French, German, and Japanese. A machine cannot answer why a particular rock formation alludes to a specific Tang dynasty poem. Lion Grove Garden offers human commentary in Chinese

only. Suzhou Museum maintains a single English guide, unavailable for advance booking. Spanish, Italian, and Russian commentary is essentially nonexistent, even though visitor numbers from these markets are climbing. Existing English commentary tends to stick to surface-level descriptions—"built in 1509, covering 5.2 hectares"—and stops there. It does not decode garden aesthetics, feng shui layout principles, or the poetic allusions behind pavilion names.

3.3 Language Services: Structural Talent Deficit and Uneven Signage

English-speaking tour guides at classical gardens are largely outsourced; in-house staff are minimal. Less-commonly-spoken-language guides are so scarce that during the 2025 peak season, Soochow University bilingual students had to be pulled in as emergency support. Frontline hotel staff's language skills are another major pain point — for Spanish and Italian-speaking tourists, the main grievance centers on poor language support in hotels. Despite previous expert-led revisions organized by foreign affairs authorities, mistranslated and non-standard signs persist at metro stations, bus stops, and scenic surroundings.

The root of this talent shortage lies in meager compensation. Tour guiding has never been a high-paying profession in Suzhou. Post-COVID industry contraction caused massive permanent attrition, and young graduates show little interest in entering the field. A self-reinforcing cycle has solidified: attrition drags down service quality, poor quality restricts market expansion, and a shrinking market further suppresses talent inflow.

3.4 Payment and Reservation Convenience: Advanced Policies, Broken Scenarios

Alipay and WeChat Pay have opened up to foreign bank cards including Visa, Mastercard, and JCB, raising per-transaction limits to USD 5,000 and annual caps to USD 50,000. New users enjoy a 60-day waiver on handling fees for daily purchases under CNY 1,000. Yet the binding process—downloading the international app version, uploading passport photos, and waiting for identity verification—strikes first-time visitors as a hurdle. Some refuse outright, citing privacy concerns. Transactions over CNY 200 incur a roughly 3% surcharge, a non-trivial cost in high-value purchase scenarios. More problematic is coverage blindness: taxis, night

market stalls, and small restaurants often accept only domestic cards or cash, creating the absurd situation where a visitor holds a bound account but cannot complete a transaction. Tourists over fifty, who generally prefer cash or physical cards, find ATMs and currency exchange counters sparse.

Reservation systems are similarly fragmented. While major scenic spots like the Humble Administrator's Garden still offer manual window ticketing, certain restaurant and scenic-spot mini-programs do not support registration with overseas mobile numbers, forcing tourists to rely on hotel front desk intermediation.

3.5 International Communication: Volume Without a Label

Suzhou Service Center at Pudong Airport, Suzhou Pass word-of-mouth promotion, and YouTube and TikTok operations have generated some recognition for "Visit Suzhou, China." Yet Suzhou has no international airport. Every foreign visitor must transit through Shanghai (or occasionally Wuxi). The absence of direct accessibility frequently squeezes Suzhou out of ten-day China itineraries. After more than a decade of overseas promotion, Suzhou still lacks a distinctive, instantly recognizable brand label comparable to Beijing's "historical capital," Shanghai's "global metropolis," or Xi'an's "ancient capital icon." Labels such as "Oriental Venice" and "City of Classical Gardens" have not yet transformed into irreplaceable travel motivations. Local officials privately call this "transit tourism"—visitors see one or two gardens, stay one night or none, and leave.

4. Countermeasures

4.1 Build a Hierarchical Foreign-Language Talent Cultivation System

A pyramid-shaped talent strategy is proposed. At the base: establish inbound tourism talent incubation bases relying on tourism and foreign language majors at Soochow University and Suzhou University of Science and Technology, using credit recognition, internship subsidies, and fast-track employment channels to attract students in less commonly spoken languages (Spanish, Italian, Arabic). At the middle tier: implement the individual tour guide studio incentive policies specified in the Trial Measures, encouraging senior guides to mentor newcomers while raising tour subsidies and social insurance

benefits. Guide income should be tied to commentary depth and tourist evaluations, breaking the old pattern where effort made no difference. At the apex: recruit high-end talents with backgrounds at international tourism organizations or overseas destination management institutions to lead product design and service quality standards. Mandatory basic English training for frontline staff in hotels, catering, and taxis should be enforced, with language proficiency incorporated into star-hotel evaluation and re-inspection criteria. Non-compliant properties should be given a deadline for rectification.

4.2 Launch Micro-Internationalization Renovation of Public Services

Urban internationalization resides in details, not landmarks. For transport: unify translation standards (using meaning-based rather than phonetic translation), enlarge English fonts on metro carriage maps, add English scrolling to electronic displays, and pilot bilingual announcements on high-traffic bus routes serving scenic areas. For catering and accommodation: promote bilingual picture menus and equip multi-language electronic ordering systems at restaurants near scenic spots; mandate alternative Wi-Fi authentication solutions (passport registration, room-code login) at hotels, and distribute multi-language check-in guides at front desks. For public spaces: install intelligent translation devices and multi-language inquiry terminals at major transport hubs, scenic spots, and commercial districts; ensure all temporary public notices and safety reminders carry English translations. Micro-internationalization requires no massive infrastructure projects. What it needs is for administrators to walk, look, and ask from the foreign tourist's perspective—again and again.

4.3 Develop a Coexisting System of Seamless Payment and Diversified Transaction Options

The shift should be from policy compliance to seamless user experience. Bilingual quick-start guides for mobile payment should be placed at the Shanghai Pudong Airport Suzhou Service Center, hotel front desks, and scenic spot entrances, with volunteer assistance for first-time card binding to eliminate hesitation. Partnerships with UnionPay International, Visa, and Mastercard should expand foreign-card POS terminals and QR-code coverage across key

scenic spots, hotels, restaurants, and taxis, with prominent acceptance signage. Foreign currency exchange counters and cash ticket windows should be added at high-traffic sites including the Humble Administrator's Garden and Tiger Hill to accommodate senior tourists and small-sum transactions. Develop a Tourism E-Wallet Based on Suzhou Pass. Support one-click registration, pre-recharge, and balance refund for overseas mobile numbers, also interoperable with Alipay and WeChat, enable a "spend first, settle later" model. Foreign card transaction fees are subsidized by the government. Mandate taxis, night markets and street food vendors to accept foreign bank card mobile payments to eliminate service blind spots. Payment convenience is not a technical problem; it is a governance-resolve problem.

4.4 Develop Cultural In-Depth Decoding Tourism Products

Tourism development should shift from a sightseeing-focused model to an experience-driven one. It is proposed that Suzhou launch garden aesthetics workshops, including bonsai pruning, rockery appreciation and Kunqu Opera appreciation, and provide professional multilingual tour guides for on-site real-time commentary. Develop industrial tourism, TCM wellness and silk craft themed itineraries to build distinctive tourism relying on manufacturing and intangible cultural heritage advantages. Launch modular tourism packages named "48 Hours in Suzhou" and "72 Hours in Suzhou". Integrate tourism resources including classical gardens, ancient towns, museums and intangible cultural heritage, thereby lowering the decision costs of inbound visitors when planning their trips. Develop Shanghai-Suzhou joint travel routes tailored to visitor volumes at Shanghai entry ports: such as chartered vehicles from Pudong International Airport directly to Suzhou classical gardens, luggage delivery service, and multi-language butler services. Transform transit stays into overnight visits. The core proposition of product design is to make tourists feel that Suzhou is well worth a special trip just for this unique experience.

4.5 Deepen Shanghai-Suzhou Coordination and Targeted Overseas Communication

Formulate the Service Standards for Integrated Inbound Tourism of Shanghai and Suzhou. Establish seamless connections between

the service centers at Shanghai airports and local hotels, scenic spots and transportation services in Suzhou, and roll out the "One-Code Access" service covering customs clearance in Shanghai and scenic entry in Suzhou. Transform publicity from "blanket coverage" to "precision drip irrigation": For the European market, Tap into the China Cultural Center in Budapest to bring travel operators and travel bloggers on familiarization trips and create user-generated content (UGC). For the North American market, Partner with Expedia and TripAdvisor in North America to build exclusive Suzhou sections and offer English-language customer service. Target Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asia, and promote short-distance vacations by virtue of geographical advantages. Launch the "Overseas Cultural and Tourism Ambassadors" Program. Engage expatriates and international students in Suzhou to showcase the city from an external perspective for higher credibility. The essence of communication is not "I say I am good"; it is "letting those who have been here say it for me."

5. Conclusion

The expansion of visa exemption policies has brought traffic to Suzhou, but traffic does not equal retention. This paper's five-dimensional evaluation confirms that Suzhou has achieved a foundation in hardware scale and policy framework. The real deficits are in soft-service capabilities: foreign-language talent attrition, public-service detail failures, payment scenario fragmentation, insufficient commentary depth, and a blurred brand label. These issues span tourism, transport, commerce, foreign affairs, and finance authorities; no single entity can resolve them alone.

Suzhou needs to shift from "being able to receive" to "being able to retain." Talent cultivation, micro-internationalization renovation, and payment environment

optimization address the basic question of whether visitors can arrive and spend conveniently. Culturally decoded products, Shanghai-Suzhou integration, and precise overseas communication address the motivational question of why Suzhou specifically. Only by converting transit visitors into overnight tourists and one-time visitors into repeat customers can Suzhou capture its fair share of the trillion-yuan inbound tourism market increment and complete its transformation from a Jiangnan garden city to a world-class destination.

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