

# Analyzing the Most Popular Travel Destinations in China: The Case of Leisure Travelers from Hong Kong

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**Abstract :** Despite the increasing importance of the tourism industry in Mainland China (hereafter known as China), the existing tourism literature has a very limited number of, if any, published articles that examined the popularity of different travel destinations in the country based on non-local tourists. This paper reports the findings of a study that used a descriptive statistics approach to analyze the most visited leisure travel destinations in China from outbound tourists in Hong Kong. Using the aggregated data collected annually in the period 2001 to 2010, empirical findings indicate that Shanghai and Beijing were the most popular destinations. Accordingly, the paper offers practical implications.

**Keywords:** leisure travel, Hong Kong, Popular destinations, China

## Introduction

It is widely known that China is rich in tourism resources, from modern cosmopolitan cities to historical structures. The country features rich ethnic customs, natural sceneries along seaside or in inner mountains, as well as natural products. Irrespective whether a tourist visits the country for her century old Confucius temples or for relaxing in the newly developed modern cities, there are always enough enjoyments or excitements for the tourist to experience in the destination.

The present tourism industry in China has never been that important throughout her history. Zhang and Lew (2003) stated that, with the arduous efforts on development and management, the tourism industry in China will have a very promising future. According to the World Tourism Organization, China ranked fifth among the world's top international tourism destinations in 2000, and the corresponding position will become the first in 2020 (Zhang & Lew, 2003). Hence, understanding the tourism industry in China becomes an importance topic for the country to better receive her inbound tourists.

Although some tourism researchers have attempted to analyze the outbound tourism industry in China as the growth of China's outbound tourism is very phenomenal in the global tourism industry (Guo, Kim, & Timothy, 2007; King & Tang, 2009; Pan, 2003), published articles rarely examined the inbound tourism in China. Breakey, Ding, and Lee (2008) argued it is vital for a destination to identify its markets and to ensure that the product offering is appropriate and the marketing strategy is effective. Similarly, Reid and Pearce (2008) stated the importance of understanding consumers' demand and preferences. This, in turn, leads to the successful promotion and distribution of customized tourism related products. As such, it is crucial to study the preferences, in terms of destination popularity, of inbound tourists to China, which has been largely overlooked by tourism researchers.

Hong Kong has been a Special Administrative Region in China since 1997, meaning that the city is a highly autonomous region with its own financial, juridical, and political system. The rapid economic development in Hong Kong since the 1970s has led to a large increase in national income, and therefore, disposable personal income. Hong Kong's Gross Domestic Product per capita in 2009 was HK\$233,060 (US\$29,880), representing one of the wealthiest regions in the world (Census & Statistics Department, 2010b). In addition, Hong Kong residents have been enjoying the freedom of travel to most countries in the world without visas. In other words, Hong Kong serves as a mature tourist generating origin with many affordable travelers.

It is widely known that the amount of travel and tourism activities is directly related to disposable personal income. In other words, the increase in personal wealth leads to increase in living standard, which in turn, renders the large increase in number of outbound tourists. According to the official data, there were 81.96 million departures made by Hong Kong residents in 2009, up from 68.90 million departures in 2004 (Census & Statistics Department, 2010a). This represents an 18.96% increase over the five-year period. Being Hong Kong's sole geographically connected neighbor on land, China naturally becomes the most visited travel destination by Hong Kong residents. In addition to the geographical proximity, the similarities in culture, food, and life style between Hong Kong and China render the ease for Hong Kong residents travel to China. In a prior study, McKercher (2009)

found two major reasons for Hong Kong residents not to travel are their concerns of lack of foreign language skills and unfamiliarity with new places. Of the total departures for Hong Kong residents in 2009, 82.48% passed through control points that connect Hong Kong with China (Census & Statistics Department, 2010a). This indicates the attractiveness of China to Hong Kong residents.

Although published articles have highly emphasized the importance of better understanding outbound tourists and their preferences, the existing tourism and hospitality literature does not have any prior studies that examined the popularity of different travel destinations in China. Likewise, official publications from both Hong Kong and China have no indications of which places that travelers from Hong Kong, and from other regions, like to visit. In other words, tourism practitioners and policy makers in different travel destinations in China do not have any references to follow during their market planning. In view this arising challenge, this exploratory research makes an initial attempt to investigate the popularity of different travel destinations in China when Hong Kong residents travel for leisure. This research is expected to benefit tourism professionals in China to have a more realistic appreciation of the standing of different destinations in the country.

Having introduced the background of this study, the next section reviews published articles that are pertained to the issue of outbound tourism. In particular, the motivations for people to travel are discussed. A section on data collection then follows. After that, there is a section to present and analyze the findings. The last section summarizes this study and offer suggestions for future research. This study would be of interest to tourism professionals in different destinations of China to establish appropriate policies and right products/services to accommodate travelers from Hong Kong, and likely from other mature and affordable origins.

## Literature Review

The existing tourism literature has a plethora of publications that emphasize the importance of travel and tourism (Gunn & Var, 2002; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999; McIntosh, Goeldner, & Ritchie, 1995). As a

whole, the factors that influence leisure tourists for traveling to a destination broadly fall into two categories of push and pull factors (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996; Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003). King and Tang (2009) further stated that both factors can play a crucial role in short-term and long-term travel movements. Generally speaking, push factors are related to natural psychological and/or social inspirations like relaxation, getting away from the daily environments, and interacting socially with others in the new environment. That is, push factors are related to the origin location. In contrast, pull factors are related to the attractiveness or attractions from a destination. Examples of these attractiveness and attractions include the intangible ones such as destination image and benefit expectations from travelers as well as the tangible ones like scenery spots and sporting facilities. That is, pull factors are related to the destination.

Moreover, from the destination's perspective, expenses from visitors on accommodation, foodservice, retailing, and others during their stay can diffuse to different sectors of the economy. This, in turn, makes a positive contribution to the growth of the local economy. In short, both tourists and the local economy can be benefited from tourism. The effect of push and pull factors directly applies to outbound tourists from Hong Kong. China, which has the advantages of close proximity in geographical connection and cultural similarity, naturally becomes a popular region for outbound tourists from Hong Kong (Census & Statistics Department, 2010a). As such, it is important for tourism policy makers and practitioners in China to understand the profile of this group of relatively affluent tourists and where they like to visit. This, in turn, can assist the preparation of more appropriate services and products.

Despite the large number of outbound tourists from Hong Kong and their significant economic contributions to their chosen destinations, there exists only a small number of published articles that examined the outbound tourism industry in Hong Kong. In an early study, Choi and Tsang (1999) segmented the activities of Hong Kong residents who live in non-government subsidized private estates during their travel. Empirical findings indicated that the activities mainly fell into four categories of sightseeing, outdoor sports, entertainment and outdoor activities, and visiting friends/relatives. In another study, Qu and Wong (1999) examined the profile of Hong Kong travelers, motivation factors, and satisfaction during their cruise travel. The study found that these travelers participated in cruise travel mainly for

escaping from normal life, social gathering, and enjoying the beautiful environment and scenery. Lo and Lee's (2010) recent study shared similar findings on the factors that motivate volunteer tourists from Hong Kong to travel.

Probably due to the convenience and cost effectiveness of package tours, quite a few prior studies have examined the factors that affect Hong Kong outbound tourists' selection of travel agencies (Heung & Chu, 2000) and selection criteria (Lo & Lam, 2004; Wong & Kwong, 2004). Wong and Lau (2001) also studied Hong Kong outbound tourists' behavior and cultural values when they took packaged tours. Likewise, Zhang, Qu, and Tang (2004) examined Hong Kong outbound travelers' preferences and advocated that safety concern is the most critical for these travelers. These findings largely matched McKercher and Hui's (2003) earlier study which stated that safety is of the utmost importance to travelers from Hong Kong. Using a similar instrument like other travel motivation studies, Heung and Leong (2006) analyzed the motives and preferences of university students in Hong Kong. Empirically, university students generally resembled travelers at large as both groups traveled for experiencing different styles, relaxing, and visiting sceneries.

Although some prior studies examined the behaviors and patterns of Hong Kong outbound tourists, none of these studies have attempted to relate this group of travelers to different destinations in China. In a recent study conducted by Law and Yip (2010), tourists from Hong Kong to hot spring hotels and resorts in Guangdong revealed that their perceived service quality exceeded their expectations, indicating these consumers' overall satisfaction. A major limitation of the study, however, is that it only covered a very narrow sector of the hospitality industry. The existence of numerous beautiful scenic spots and culturally rich buildings, together with delicious local foods, lower expenses, and relatively short traveling time, among many other factors, strongly hint the importance for analyzing the popularity of different destinations from the perspective of Hong Kong tourists. As such, this study makes an initial, yet novel, attempt to investigate the issue. Findings are expected to benefit the tourism industry in China from better understanding their most popular travel destinations.



## Data Collection

The data used in this study were compiled from the annual domestic tourism survey conducted by the School of Hotel and Tourism Management at a local university in Hong Kong in the period 2001 to 2010. In March to May of each year, a large scale survey was carried out, via telephone interviews, to ask adult Hong Kong residents who were at least 18 years old on different topics of their travel behavior. The questionnaire was originally prepared in English, which was then translated into Chinese by a professional translator using a back-translation process to make sure that the translated questionnaire matched the original one. The translated questionnaire was then pilot-tested by a small group of local Hong Kong residents who were not involved in the large scale survey.

The sampling procedure in each year involved a modified random digit-dialing approach to select interviewees. A two-stage procedure was performed to generate the sample phone numbers. In the first stage, the latest version of the publicly available residential telephone book was used to randomly generate a list of 8-digit telephone numbers. In the second stage, the last two digits of each generated number were truncated, and the remaining six digits were then combined with two independently generated numbers. This formed a new 8-digit number (Law, Cheung & Lo, 2004). The newly formed telephone numbers were then dialed to invite Hong Kong residents to participate in the survey in English or Chinese. In other words, the sample comprised adult Hong Kong residents who could be reached by telephone during the data collection period. In addition to the topic specific questions, a questionnaire asked the demographic data of respondents and their travel experience of pleasure trips in the past 12 months to: i) Pearl River Delta that included Guangdong Province and Macau, ii) other destinations in Mainland China (hereafter known as China), and iii) international (overseas) destinations. In a questionnaire, respondents were clearly informed that a pleasure trip refers to travel which was neither for business nor conference purposes, but visiting friends and/or relatives could be part of the trip. A respondent who responded positively for traveling to China was requested to indicate the main destination of his/her most recent trip. As an initial attempt, aggregated data were used for analysis in this paper to provide an overall performance evaluation of market segment. In

this paper, the percentage of Hong Kong outbound travelers who had visited a destination was used as a proxy for the popularity of the destination. This research analyzed the cumulative demographic data of the respondents who went to China for their leisure travel. Data for Pearl River Delta travel were excluded as trips to these areas are usually in a form of one-day excursion. Table 1 presents the aggregated demographic profile of the Hong Kong residents who had traveled to China in the period 2001 to 2010.

		Number (N=2,235)	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Female	1363	60.98%
	Male	872	39.02%
<b>Household Size</b>	1	148	6.62%
	2	434	19.42%
	3	610	27.29%
	4	625	27.96%
	5	246	11.01%
	6	97	4.34%
	7	19	0.85%
	More than 7	13	0.58%
<b>Age</b>	Missing	43	1.92%
	18 - 25 years old	270	12.08%
	26 - 35 years old	307	13.74%
	36 - 45 years old	512	22.91%
	46 - 55 years old	571	25.55%
	56 - 65 years old	331	14.81%
	66 years old or above	206	9.22%
<b>Education Level</b>	Missing	38	1.70%
	Less than secondary / high school	549	24.56%
	Completed secondary / high school	870	38.93%
	Some college or university	208	9.31%
	Completed college/university degree/diploma	510	22.82%
	Completed postgraduate degree	76	3.40%
<b>Monthly Household Income (HK\$7.8=US\$1)</b>	Missing	22	0.98%
	HK\$9,999 or below	193	8.64%
	HK\$10,000 - HK\$ 19,999	371	16.60%
	HK\$20,000 - HK\$ 29,999	354	15.84%
	HK\$30,000 - HK\$ 39,999	245	10.96%
	HK\$40,000 - HK\$ 49,999	140	6.26%
	HK\$50,000 - HK\$ 59,999	112	5.01%
	HK\$60,000 - HK\$ 69,999	48	2.15%
	HK\$70,000 or above	206	9.22%
Missing	566	25.32%	

Table 1 - Demographic Profile of Travelers

## Findings and Discussions

In total, 16,093 Hong Kong residents were successfully contacted over the ten-year period. Among these respondents, 2,235 had visited China (excluding Guangdong Province and Macau) in the past 12 months. According to Table 1, the outbound Hong Kong tourists to China were mainly males (60.98%), with a household size of 3 to 4 people (55.25%), in the age groups of 36 to 45 and 46 to 55 (48.46%), received secondary or below education (63.49%), with monthly household income of HK\$20,000 to HK\$39,999. Although the monthly household income was slightly higher than the official figures, other demographic data generally matched the published data (Census & Statistics Department, 2010c). Such a demographic profile states that a typical Hong Kong outbound traveler to China is a mid-aged male who received the basic education, and with a middle- to high-level of family income.

More importantly, the ten most popular travel destinations are, in descending order of popularity (or percentage of visits), Shanghai, Beijing, Fuzhou, Nanning, Haikou, Kunming, Hangzhou, Changsha, Jinan, and Chengdu. Table 2 lists the percentage of Hong Kong travelers who had visited these destinations. Furthermore, Figure 1 outlines the geographical distribution of the destinations in China that were visited by Hong Kong travelers.

1	2	3	4	5
Shanghai 22.7%	Beijing 21.1%	Fuzhou 8.8%	Nanning 6.1%	Haikou 5.6%
6	7	8	9	10
Kunming 5.1%	Hangzhou 4.3%	Changsha 3.8%	Jinan 3.8%	Chengdu 3.6%

Table 2 - The Ten Most Popular Travel Destinations in China (2001-2010)

Note: The figure underneath a destination represents the percentage of Hong Kong travelers who had visited the destination.

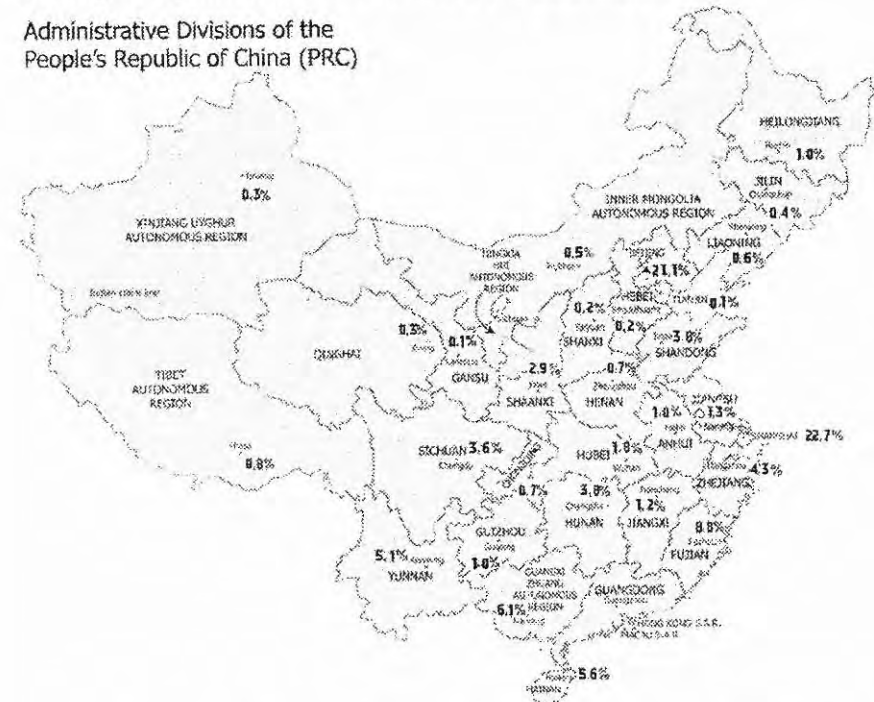


Figure 1 - Graphical Sketch of the Popularity of Various Travel Destinations in China

As indicated in Figure 1, the most popular travel destinations are mainly located in coastal regions or in major cities. Although Hong Kong tourists had visited different destinations, 84.9% of them traveled to the 10 most popular destinations. Other than the destinations listed in Table 2, Xian had received 2.9% of the visitors; whereas all other destination had less than 2.0% of Hong Kong travelers visited. This indicates the heavily uneven distribution of destinations.

Tables 3 and 4 provide a brief description for each of the ten most popular destinations.

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CITY	SUMMARY
Shanghai	It is the largest metropolis in China and one of the most historically significant cities. It is a flourishing international metropolis, known worldwide for its highly developed industrial, commercial and financial components.
Beijing	As the capital city of the People's Republic of China, Beijing is the nation's center of government, economy, culture, and international activities, as well as serving as a transportation hub to the entire country. Beijing has a long history, serving for 800 years as the capital city with plenty of culturally rich buildings and modern structures. It is also the place where the government officials housed.
Fuzhou	Fuzhou is the provincial capital of Fujian Province. It also one of china's major coastal opening cities. Fuzhou is famous for its hot springs which is one of the three major hot spring areas of the whole country.
Nanning	It is the capital of Guangxi Province and the city is full of rich ethnic customs. It is a typical South Asia city with features of tropical natural scenery and facilities of modern city.
Haikou	This is the provincial capital at the northern tip of Hainan Province. It is an island city which has beautiful tropical seaside scenery, pleasant weather and tourist facilities. Moreover, the tourism price is relatively cheaper than Sanya.

**Table 3 - Brief Description of the Top Five Most Popular Travel Destinations**

Apparently, Shanghai is the most popular destination to travelers from Hong Kong, with 22.7% of the travelers visited the city for leisure. Being the largest cosmopolitan city in the country and one of the largest in the world, Shanghai is well-known for its well developed industrial, commercial, and financial industries. The city is also full of tourism related facilities, world class restaurants, and sightseeing spots, together with the establishments of numerous international and local hotel chain properties. The close resemblance of Shanghai and Hong Kong in terms of tourism and infrastructure development can naturally attract travelers from Hong Kong. Yang, Yuan, and Hu (2009) made a similar claim about Hong Kong and Shanghai. Likewise, Beijing is the second most popular travel destination

CITY	SUMMARY
Kunming	It is the capital city of Yunnan Province and is also known as "the City of Perpetual Spring" because of the mild climate. It is one of the major Southeast Asian transportation hubs with rich tourist resources, beautiful plateau landscape, long history, and ethnic folklore. It is known as the Kingdom of Animals, Plants, and Non-Ferrous Metals.
Hangzhou	Hangzhou is the capital of Zhejiang Province. It is the southern end of the Beijing Hangzhou Grand Canal. As one of the seven capital cities in ancient China, Hangzhou is famous for its beautiful scenery of the West Lake, silk, and tea products. Marco Polo praised Hangzhou as the most beautiful city in the world.
Changsha	Changsha, as the capital city of Hunan Province, has a long history. Changsha is also the hometown of Mao Zedong and other leaders of the Communist Party of China. It is also China's new entertainment city.
Jinan	Jinan is the capital city of Shandong Province in the East Coast of China. Examples of the famous attractions around the city are Mountain Tai and Confucius' Temple.
Chengdu	This is the capital city of Sichuan Province. Chengdu has many places of interest and surrounded by six world heritages such as Jiuzhai, and Giant Buddha of Leshan. It is also famous for its traditional arts, ethnic folklore and Sichuan food. The city is a major transportation hub in southwestern China, which is the main access to the Tibet.

**Table 4 - Brief Description of the Next Five Most Popular Travel Destinations**

in China to tourists from Hong Kong, with 21.1% of the respondents visited the city. As a capital city of the country, Beijing houses headquarters of many government departments, as well as business and cultural centers. Beijing holds many international events. In addition, Beijing has been the capital city for hundreds of years, leading to the existence of numerous culturally rich tourism sports. These factors, together with the convenience of transportation, make Beijing an attractive place for leisure travelers from Hong Kong. In their study of analyzing the role of Beijing, Kim, Sun, and

Ap (2008) stated that Beijing serves as a good tourist destination. Additionally, the popularity of Shanghai and Beijing matches the findings of Law et al.'s (2004) study which stated Hong Kong travelers, among a list of 23 activities, rank sample local food, city sightseeing, visit scenic landmarks, and shopping as the most important. Findings from other studies on outbound tourists in Hong Kong also revealed similar findings (Lo & Lee, 2010; Qu & Wong, 1999; Zhang et al., 2004).

## **Implications and Conclusions**

Through the analysis of the data collected in 10 years' domestic tourism surveys conducted in Hong Kong, this paper has examined the most popular travel destinations in China. To recap, the inbound tourism industry in China has been experiencing an unprecedented growth in importance and popularity but published articles rarely, if ever any, studied the issue. As such, this study makes a meaningful contribution to the literature by empirically showing the popularity of travel destinations in the country.

Although this study is limited in scope in terms of number of origins and number of analyzed variables, findings do offer some insightful implications to the tourism industry in China. First, as indicated in the previous section, Shanghai and Beijing had received a disproportionately large percentage (a total of 43.8%) of travelers from Hong Kong. Although it is good for Shanghai and Beijing to receive a large percentage of tourists from Hong Kong, such an unevenly distributed percentage indicated the weak position of other destinations for attracting tourists from Hong Kong, and likely from elsewhere. An emerging and urgent need for most, if not all, other destinations is thus to strengthen their marketing strategies by providing the most attractive packages and improving their infrastructure, leading to the improvement to draw Hong Kong tourists for visiting. Additionally, since all considered destinations are in China, it is reasonable to assume that there would not be much difference on personal safety, epidemic control, and political and social environment. Variance in other factors such as quality and availability of accommodation, food, transportation, scenic attractions, and climate, however, does exist. These will all eventually lead to the overall evaluation of value for money. As such, government departments at the

destination or municipality level should ensure that the quality of tourism related facilities and services can be maintained at a commonly agreed standard. Destination Marketing Organizations can then carry out appropriate promotions for individual destinations. Similarly, China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), the National Tourism Organization in the country, can formulate proper policies for different tourism sectors to keep up with a national standard such as star-rating for accommodation sites, yet allowing sufficient flexibility for different destinations to emphasize and invest on their uniqueness like local foods, location landmarks, and scenery spots. Additionally, more important factors as well as value-added services can, and probably should, be included when designing tour packages. Examples of these additions could be custom-made advice on travel information and all-inclusive packages that are convenient to Hong Kong travelers who are often busy during their daily lives.

Tourism practitioners should realize the importance of tourist receiving destinations by conducting effective marketing strategies to promote their products to specific groups of travelers. In particular, both Law et al. (2004) and Zhang et al. (2004) stated the necessity and importance for overseas destinations to take advantage of their potential as a major leisure destination for tourists from Hong Kong. Such an action will directly benefit the destination from economic growth. Tourism researchers have advocated the importance of adopting the right marketing strategies to the right group of consumers at the right time (Kotler et al., 1999). Apparently, the low popularity of many destinations in China strongly suggested the ineffectiveness of the marketing strategies that are carried out by these destinations.

A major limitation of this study was the sole inclusion of tourists from Hong Kong to China, which makes it not possible to generalize the findings to tourists from other origins. It is reasonable to believe that tourists with different cultures, e.g. tourists from Western countries, will be more interested in the cultural buildings in China as compared to tourists from Hong Kong. As such, a natural extension of this study is to incorporate the behavior of visitors from a wide range of geographical regions. Another limitation of this study was the inclusion of only the main destination in the most recent trip. In other words, destinations in other trips were not included



in this study. Also, due to data unavailability, this study did not analyze the relationship between the popularity of a destination and its degree of socioeconomic development. It is thus worthwhile for future research to examine this issue in detail. As well, it would be interesting to analyze the longitudinal changes of tourism policies in China, and its influence on the popularity of different destinations. Lastly, future studies can examine the popularity of different destinations on a longitudinal basis. For instance, the Olympic Games in 2008 would make Beijing particularly appealing to international visitors in certain years.

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<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/china/hainan/haikou>  
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<http://www.cnto.org/hangzhou.asp>  
<http://destguides.ctrip.com/china/changsha/district148/importantdata.html>  
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<http://www.cnto.org/jinan.asp>  
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[http://www.cdta.gov.cn/syssource/mainpage/cdta\\_nweb/default.asp?pageid=423](http://www.cdta.gov.cn/syssource/mainpage/cdta_nweb/default.asp?pageid=423)

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