

Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) Of Asia Pacific Region : Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

MICE, abbreviated for "Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions", is regarded as an emerging tourism product which attracts a large number of visitors to many destinations globally. Many countries around the world have employed MICE as a means of attracting business tourists with the aim to gain international incomes and improve balance of payment. Asia Pacific countries are as well among many promoting MICE. There has been a discussion about what the members of "Asia Pacific" countries really are. For this article, "Asia Pacific Countries" means Australia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Darussalam, China, Guam, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Korea, Laos, Republic of Malaysia, New Zealand, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Viet Nam (Citicorp, 2000 and Benoit, 1999). Therefore, to analyze challenges and opportunities associated with the MICE industry in this region, some countries mentioned are cited as examples for the analysis. This article begins with an in-depth look at the current situation of MICE industry in Asia Pacific countries. Analysis on challenges and opportunities of their MICE circumstances are then made.

Keywords: MICE, Asia Pacific, Challenge, Opportunity

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1. Introduction

The Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1995, p. 3) shows that "MICE can be very diverse", covering such aspects as conventions, congresses, conferences, seminars, workshops and symposiums. This definition

signifies that MICE brings together people for a common purpose and is a sub-sector of the tourism industry (Johnson et al., 1999). MICE industry has grown considerably in the last decade (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1995) and it is forecast to continue (Australian Tourist

Table 1. Number of Meetings and Conferences in Asia Pacific Countries from 1995 to 2000

Country	1995/1996	1997/1998	1999/2000	% Share
Australia	203	246	263	22.29
Japan	265	208	200	16.95
Singapore	74	67	86	7.29
Israel	132	97	81	6.86
Thailand	44	76	80	6.78
South Korea	70	92	75	6.36
Hong Kong	80	60	64	5.42
China	84	60	62	5.25
Taipei, China	32	60	52	4.41
Philippines	40	54	42	3.56
Malaysia	46	55	37	3.14
India	38	50	36	3.05
New Zealand	22	25	22	1.86
Indonesia	47	32	19	1.61
Others	48	60	61	5.17
Total	1,225	1,242	1,180	100.00

Source: International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), Data, 2000

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Commission, 1997) particularly in Asia Pacific region (Dwyer & Mistilis, 1999); Hutchinson, 1997), (See Table 1). In addition, Dwyer and Mistilis (1998 p.762) claim that "Within Asia-Pacific region, as economies have grown, so has the development of business and professional association...". This implies that the growth will certainly create impact on other businesses including MICE tourism in Asia region. However, to sustain this growth, there are many challenges and opportunities that all countries of this region must face and which need to be taken into consideration to further develop the MICE industry.

2. Opportunities and challenges for the growth of MICE industry in Asia Pacific Region

There are many opportunities in the Asia Pacific that are conducive to a successful development of the MICE industry. After researching, the opportunities and challenges facing Asia Pacific region for MICE development are detailed as follows:

- **Sufficient availability of MICE-related facilities as opposed to the short supply of "quality" manpower in newly developing countries of the region;**

MICE facility is considered a key factor in supporting growth of MICE industry (Norman, 2000). It is found that most countries such as

Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines are developing world-class facilities for MICE industry with their own substantial government supports (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1995). This would guarantee the bright future of MICE industry of the mentioned countries. Considering MICE facilities in Asia Pacific countries, it is inevitably to consider the number of the convention centers available. Surveys have found that there are at least 49 convention centers across Asia Pacific countries, ready to cater adequately and effectively to the demand of MICE industry (See Table 2).

However, it is noticeable from Table 2 that the aforementioned Asia Pacific countries are categorised both as developed and developing countries. It is possible to say that different levels of national development would cause a problem in maintaining "quality" service. New developing countries may encounter problems due to insufficient human resources to operate available facilities effectively and this may contribute to a decline in MICE industry in this region in the long run. Therefore, the availability of skilled and trained personnel is regarded as a crucial component in the successful long-term development of MICE industry in the Asia Pacific region (Hobson 1994). This key element is also recognised by Mak et al (1992) and Go et al. (1996) to as one of the most important factors in facilitating the growth of all tourism-related business particularly those in the MICE sector.

Table 2 Examples of Convention Centers in Asia Pacific Countries

Asia Pacific Country	Convention Centers
Japan	1. Tokyo International Exhibition Center 2. Tokyo International Conference Hall 3. Pacific Convention Plaza Yokohama 4. Tokyo International Forum (TIF) 5. Congress, Convention and Exhibition center Source: www.icca.nl , www.bigsight.or.jp , www.joho-kyoto.or.th , www.pacifico.co.jp ,
Singapore	1. Singapore Expo 60,000 2. Singapore International Convention & Exhibition Center (SICEC) 3. World Trade Center Singapore Source: www.asiaconvention.com
South Korea	1. COEX (Convention and Exhibition) 2. International Convention Center 3. Pusan Exhibition and Convention Source: www.asiaconvention.com
Taiwan	1. Taipei International Convention Center (TICC) 2. Taipei World Trade Center (TWTC) 3. World Trade Center Taichung Source: www.icca.nl , www.tptaiwan.org.tw , www.twtc.org.tw and www.wtctxg.org.tw
China	1. Beijing International Convention Center (BICC) 2. China International Exhibition Center 3. China World Trade Center (CWTC) 4. Shanghai International Exhibition Center 5. Shanghai International Convention Center Co., LTD 6. Shanghai Trade Mart 7. China World Trade Center Zhejiang (CWTCZ) Source: www.asiaconvention.com
Macao	1. Macao Cultural Center 2. Macao Exhibition Center 3. Macao Forum 4. Macao Landmark Convention and Exhibition Center 5. Tourism Activities & Conference Center Source: www.bicc.com.cn , www.asiaconvention.com , www.intex-sh.com

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Hong Kong
Indonesia
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Asia Pacific Country	Convention Centers
Hong Kong	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center(HKCEC) 2. Hong Kong International Trade and Exhibition Center(HITEC)
Indonesia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Balai Sudirman 2. Bali - International Convention Center 3. Jakarta Convention Center (JCC) 4. Jakarta Fairgrounds <p>Source:www.asiaconvention.com,www.bali-convention.com and www.jcc.co.id</p>
Malaysia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Malaysia International Exhibition &Conference Center(MICEC) 2. Putra World Trade Center (PWTC) 3. Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel, Petaling Jaya
Philippines	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cebu International Convention Center 2. AIM Conference Center Manila SGV 3. Cultural Center of The Philippines International 4. Convention Center (PICC)
Viet Nam	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Giang Vo Exhibition Center 1 main Hall 2. Ho Chi Minh City International Exhibition and Convention Center 3. Kasati Center 4. Reunification Palace 5. Viet Nam International Convention Center <p>Source:www.mines.com, www.pwtc.com.my, www.sunway.com.my, www.asiaconvention.com,www.vnpt.com.vn and www.icca.nl</p>
Thailand	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bangkok Convention Centre (BCC) 2. Bangkok International Trade & Exhibition Centre(BITEC) 3. Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre (QSNCC) 4. Pattaya Exhibition and Convention Hall (PEACH) 5. Impact Exhibition Centre <p>Source: www.asiaconvention.com</p>

Source : International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), Data, 2000

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Given this assumption, it is reasonable to conclude here that MICE is essentially a complex industry which demands an assortment of skills in management, marketing, negotiations and communications from manpower in the industry (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1995).

● **Adequate technological advancement but needs remain for "human-provided" services in Asia Pacific;**

Regarding other supporting facilities for MICE development, technological advancement in the airline industry is viewed as one of the factors shaping the growth of MICE industry in Asia Pacific. Singh (1997) says that technological developments have significantly impacted to travel industry in Asia Pacific. More fuel-efficient aircrafts used by Asia Pacific airlines (Boeing 777, 747 and Airbus A340) have lowered operating costs, increased airline seat capacity and provided more comfort. This leads to more purchasing capacity of travelers wanting to visit this region. In addition, technological development in airlines industry also improves the way in which the product is delivered (Sign, 1997). Ticketless travel provides more convenience to customers and, at the same time, saves airlines up to 30% of their distribution costs (Klyne et al, 1997). Another aspect of technological advancement that heightening MICE expansion in Asia Pacific is a de-regulation of business visa granting process. In Australia, for example, the Ministry of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs has

announced measures to boost MICE industry by waiving the fee for single-entry business visas in 31 countries with access to the Electronic Travel Authority (ETA) which is made available to more than 55 airlines and more than 22,000 travel agents worldwide (Anonymous, 1999). This clearly underscores the importance of technological advancement that can help facilitate the MICE businesses in the region. However, Landler (1999) says that although technology can provide more effective services, human staff are still needed as in the future, travelers may require human-provided services due to consumer behavioral changes. This is seen as a major challenge for Asia Pacific countries which must figure out how to properly combine both technology and human-provided services to the utmost satisfaction of travelers.

● **Improved political stability but there needs to be greater concentration on economic development**

In recent years, the Asia Pacific region has become more politically stable than it has ever been (Singh, 1997). Take the Philippines, Vietnam and China as examples. In the past, there were many democratic demonstrations in these countries but at present they tend to pay more attention to national economic development. Particularly, the Philippines where tourism was adversely affected by civil strife together with terrorism and natural disasters in the past is now having the fortunes of the tourism industry as a

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result of the political, social and economic reforms of the current government (Shaw, 1997). Tolhurst (1998) also states that "Part of Australia's appeal is that the country is seen as a sunny, safe and politically stable destination". Given these circumstances, the countries in Asia Pacific appear steeped with opportunities to develop MICE industry. When Asia Pacific countries enjoy political stability, more people particularly business visitors will be inclined to set up meetings, exhibitions and conventions there. However, political stability is not the only factor helping to expand the MICE. Economic stability also plays a crucial role ensuring prosperity of the sector. It is discovered that after political turmoil or turbulence, most countries in the Asia Pacific found themselves in need of a recovery period for economic development and restructuring. Therefore, to harness the full benefits from MICE industry, it is challenging for countries after political changes in Asia Pacific to try to turn their economic situations around as quickly as possible.

◆ **Generous policy support and cooperation from respective governments, ironically causing downside through fierce competition among the regional MICE markets.**

It is found that the governments of most countries in the Asia Pacific have exhibited desires to implement policies to enhance the growth of their MICE industries. Governments of Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand are actively

promoting their cities as convention and exhibition destinations. In Thailand, the government has given its backing to the private sector to establish exhibition centres in important cities like Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Phuket, where the demand for exhibitions and conventions is on the rise. Thailand is so serious about exploring its options that it has established the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau specifically to handle MICE-based promotional affairs. A strategic report prepared by the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Trade Exhibition Association estimates that exhibitions and conventions generate revenues of around 7.5 billion baht each year in Thailand (Reed, 2002). As well, in Hong Kong, the government has supported Hong Kong Polytechnic University to launch a series of executive training programs to enhance meetings and convention management in Asia Pacific (Nolasco, 2002).

In Australia, Norman (2000) reveals that the Western Australian Tourism Commission (WATC) with support from Western Australian government has allowed Perth Convention Bureau to execute a major marketing plan over the next 18 months and to ensure convention organisers around the globe know about the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre and what facilities Perth has to offer. WATC believes that the estimated flow-on effect to regional areas directly from PCEC will be about Aus\$11 million each year. Besides, the government of each country has formulated its own policies to spur

and sustain the progress of MICE industry. Those governments have entered into joint marketing ventures and commercial co-operations with neighbouring countries. For example, Singapore and Indonesia collaborate in the promotion of Bintan Island in Indonesia, with plans for more initiatives covering other Indonesian islands. Singapore and Indonesia have also identified seven target markets in the U.S., Europe, and Asia in which both countries will spend US\$800,000 over the next 2 years advertising themselves as tourism and MICE destinations (Singh, 1997).

The above examples show that most countries in the Asia Pacific are rigorously raising profile of their destinations in more ways than one. More opportunities are being created to develop MICE industry but at the same time intense competition among them would lead to a problem of price undercutting in a bid to claim larger market share. This is in line with the opinion of the Commonwealth of Australia (1995) that while MICE is growing, so too is the extent of competition between destination with in Asia Pacific. For example, Japan and Singapore have come up with plans to increase the number of international conventions they hosted, immediately sending other countries in the Pacific to devise similar strategies to maintain their edge in the MICE competition. The stiffened competition represents one of the challenges for all Asia Pacific countries. To overcome this problem, Steven (1988) suggests that price control policy should be mutually issued within the

region. All Asia Pacific countries should join forces to develop MICE industry so that the region can benefit from MICE in a sustainable fashion.

● Easing of travel restrictions but business visa needs to be carefully granted

In the past, traveling between countries in the Asia Pacific region used to be a hurdle. However, at present, with a strong demand for travel, a number of Asia Pacific countries have lifted some travel restrictions. For example, the Taiwanese government has an open door policy for 15 countries with a visa-free entry. In Malaysia, the government's decision to allow travelers a 3-day visa-free increase a large number of travelers (Singh, 1997). It can be said that the relaxation will definitely boost MICE growth. However, easing travel restrictions may unleash a host of negative ramifications for the host countries and ultimately, for the MICE industry. Granting visa easily without careful consideration may push up crime rate and could threaten national security of the respective countries. This may jeopardise MICE industry since the security scare would likely deter visitors who feel it not worthy to sacrifice personal safety for easy visa approval. As well, transport and immigration issues should be carefully taken into account (Standfield, 1998). Therefore, it remains a challenge for all countries in Asia Pacific to find appropriate and effective measures to carefully screen people entering their borders.

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◆ **Best Environment for MICE industry but peoples in Asia Pacific countries need to be more flexible in accepting different international cultures**

Environment includes everything around us (Native access, 2002) and it is indisputably vital for the MICE industry to grow. It is found that noise, traffic, air and water quality, energy sources and provision of green space are all challenges for the countries in the Asia Pacific (Toh et al., 2001). However, it is noted that environmental concern in this region has been increasing. In Singapore, Toh et al. (2001) say that at present Singaporeans are more environmentally conscious and that its laws against environmental violations are very strict. Although laws help protect the environment, they may run counter to MICE development if they prove to be too rigid. For example, in Singapore, chewing gum in public places is banned, as it is perceived as an undesirable Western import (The Hindu, 2002). This may make businesspersons, especially those from western countries, feel uncomfortable and offended and they may choose to turn to other destinations for MICE. Therefore, the countries should be more sensitive to cultural differences if they wish to conduct a successful MICE industry.

In addition, social environment is a key concern for MICE visitors. Take Thailand as an example. Thailand has been portrayed by many foreigners as the land of smiles (IT&CMA, 2002) and this has become a positive image drawing

in a large number of tourists. However, Thailand is now facing a social problem stemming from external cultural influences. Toh et al. (2001) write that prostitution-related problems such as AIDS is on the increase as a result of the rapid growth in tourism. The question now is how the Asia Pacific countries can go about finding preventive strategies to counter problems from cultural degradation if they still want to exploit benefits from MICE industry.

◆ **Accessibility to Asia Pacific countries**

Accessibility is regarded as being crucially helpful to the growth of MICE industry in Asia Pacific. It is apparent that most delegates and organizers wanting to join MICE need airlines to access the host countries. Airports, as an indispensable supporting infrastructure, is of great significance. Countries having convenient airports seem to have advantages over those with less developed facilities and they make for more interesting choices of convention venues. Evidently, many countries in the Asia Pacific have convenient and technologically advanced airports. In Thailand, the Bangkok International Airport at Don Muang, which is an important transportation hub in Asia-Pacific, can accommodate a large volume of visitors (Kittiprapas, 1999). In addition, "Suvarnabhumi", the second international airport, will be operational tentatively by the end of 2005. Already, it has been billed as the largest international airport in South Asia (Reuter, 2002).

This serves as a credible indication that Thailand harbours a great deal of potentials of being a "quality" host of MICE.

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration is when the exhibitions and trade show take place in any countries, shipping ports are also important in order to transfer exhibition equipment or trade apparatus to exhibition venue. It becomes advantageous for host countries to have efficient shipping ports to attract attention of potential MICE visitors. In Thailand, most of the international trade traffic flows through the 'Klong-Tuey' Bangkok Port and the 'Laem Chabang' Port in the Eastern Seaboard (ESB) (Kittiprapas, 1999). This capacity would help transform Thailand into one of the leading countries for MICE in the Asia Pacific region.

3. Conclusion

The above analysis shows both opportunities and challenges that Asia Pacific countries are facing. It is fair to say that Asia Pacific countries hold many advantages and potentials for development of MICE industry with sufficient modern facilities, strong governmental policy supports, political stability, advanced technology, less travel restrictions, good environment and effective accessibility in place. However, when taking a close look at the advantages, there remain rooms for improvement and challenges to be met. First, although Asia Pacific countries have sufficient MICE facilities,

they need to have higher quality manpower to fulfill the MICE demand. Second, regarding the MICE technology, even Asia Pacific countries have paid close attention to technological development for MICE, they should also factor in human-provided services, which are regarded as a necessity for the growth of MICE. Third, the countries need to forge political stability while, at the same time, putting emphasis on boosting national economic development. Fourth, as evident in many Asia Pacific nations, there are inter-government policy supports and cooperation for MICE and therefore, all Asia Pacific governments should create strategies and initiatives or measures to keep themselves from excessively competing against one another in the MICE market. Fifth, travel restrictions should be eased in the interest of the MICE industry's prosperity although careful attention ought to be paid to business visa granting process since this could reflect negatively on the country if not handled properly. Sixth, although it is said that Asia Pacific holds the best environment for MICE industry, the region needs to be more flexible in accepting different international cultures. Last, the Asia Pacific provides effective accessibility essential for MICE development. Improvement of the standard of accessibility should extend not only to airport and aviation aspects but also to shipping ports which are necessary for transporting large-scale exhibition cargo.

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ABSTRACT

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