

BUSINESS

China seen as key source mkt for VFS Global

Visa application processor bullish on rising demand from mid-income group

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Chinese tourists have exhibited growing preference for personalized and high-quality travel experiences fueled by the rapid growth of the country's middle-income group and robust demand for international travel, said VFS Global, the world's leading visa application outsourcing and technology services provider.

Premium group tours with flexible itineraries are increasingly favored by Chinese tourists, while there is rising demand for long-haul trips to Europe among seniors, Kishen Singh, chief operating officer for China and Mongolia of VFS Global, said in an exclusive interview with China Daily.

Meanwhile, family-friendly and educational tours see particularly strong demand during the summer, and personalized value-added visa application services are gaining popularity among Chinese outbound travelers, Singh said.

"For long-distance travel, Chinese tourists have shown consistent preference for destinations such as Canada, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States. Meanwhile, short-distance travel demand has grown steadily in Japan, South Korea and Thailand," he said.

Singh said Schengen visa applications continue to grow steadily.

"Countries such as Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland remain popular among Chinese travelers due to their rich cultural heritage, world-class education systems and vibrant business opportunities."

He said Canada, the UK and the US also remain robust visa application destinations, largely driven by study abroad programs and family visits.

Visa applications enter a peak season in April, with summer travel approaching and surging demand for outbound travel, which is driven by study abroad programs, educational tours and summer camps, further intensifying application volumes, he said.

"China remains one of VFS Global's largest and most important source markets, with visa applications experiencing rapid growth. The first half of this year witnessed a substantial increase in application volumes, reflecting strong performance compared to the same period in 2024," Singh said.

He pointed out that China's outbound travel landscape is undergoing a transformation. While Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong province's Guangzhou remain the top source cities for visa applications, emerging cities such as Hangzhou, Zhejiang province; Shenzhen,

Guangdong province; Wuhan, Hubei province; and Xi'an, Shaanxi province are experiencing particularly strong year-on-year growth, signaling a broadening interest in international travel beyond China's biggest cities.

At present, VFS Global has more than 400 visa application centers across 16 cities in China, serving visa applications for 40 countries. The company has introduced its first fully digital visa application center in Guangzhou, serving Schengen visa applicants.

Equipped with digital signage, electronic bulletin boards, an intelligent queuing system and an optimized biometric collection process, this center has significantly improved service efficiency and security while delivering a smoother applicant experience.

Singh said VFS Global plans to gradually expand this digital model to other Chinese cities, focusing on extending digital service coverage and continuously optimizing processes to create a better visa application experience for applicants.

Looking forward, the company will expand visa services through initiatives such as "visa at your doorstep," enabling applicants to apply from their preferred locations, as well as enhance existing facilities and services, he added.

When asked about the application of fast-evolving artificial intelligence in visa application processing, Singh said the company pioneered AI and digital innovation by introducing an AI-powered chatbot for UK visa applicants across 141 countries worldwide, including China.

It delivers real-time conversational support through both voice and text input, effectively addressing diverse user needs. "Concurrently, we're developing additional AI and digital products to transform visa and consular services, always ensuring that responsible AI development is aligned with client governments' policies."

Experts said long-distance tours have been increasingly preferred by Chinese travelers thanks to relaxed visa policies and an increase in the number of international flights. The growth of China's outbound tourism will bolster the global tourism sector and the economic recovery of countries that depend heavily on tourism.

Dai Bin, president of the China Tourism Academy, said China's outbound trip segment is expected to see steady growth this year, which will inject strong impetus into the prosperity of the country's tourism sector. He added that Chinese travelers' enthusiasm for outbound trips has unleashed a surge in visa applications.



An employee works on an automated production line of coffee-making machines in Foshan, Guangdong province, on July 24. LIU DAWEI / XINHUA

Private firms help Guangdong top foreign trade table

By ZHENG CAIXIONG zhengcaixiong@chinadaily.com.cn

Private companies in Guangdong province have played a significant role in developing foreign trade in the region.

According to a statement released by the Guangdong Sub-Administration of the General Administration of Customs of China, foreign trade volume from non-governmental companies came to 3.4 trillion yuan (\$475.61 billion) in the first seven months of this year, up 4.7 percent year-on-year and representing 64.2 percent of the province's total.

The steady growth of foreign trade from private companies has effectively promoted the sustainable development of Guangdong's non-governmental economy.

During the same period, imports and exports by State-owned enterprises amounted to 224.33 billion yuan, a year-on-year reduction of 13.8 percent.

As the "main force" behind Guangdong's foreign trade, private enterprises have proactively adapted to changes, pursued innovations and continuously unleashed their vitality, playing a crucial role in advancing Guangdong's high-

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standard opening-up and high-quality development of foreign trade, the statement said.

Meanwhile, Guangdong Customs has actively responded to the concerns of private enterprises, continuously introduced special measures to reduce their burdens, increased efficiency and facilitated Customs clearance to help private enterprises "go global" and expand their scale of imports and exports, it said.

He Tianxing, senior executive of Ehang Intelligent Equipment (Guangzhou) Co Ltd, said the series of policies and measures introduced by Guangdong Customs

have benefited foreign trade enterprises this year.

"The reduction in inspection rates has made it more convenient for enterprises to handle import and export procedures. Customs clearance efficiency has also been significantly improved," he said.

Chen Yongjun, a distinguished professor at Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, attributed the rapid growth of import and export volume from private enterprises to Guangdong provincial government's greater efforts to actively promote the integration of technological innovation and industrial development in the previous months.

The provincial government has actively adjusted the structure of foreign trade, creating fundamental conditions for private enterprises to achieve the results of accounting for nearly two-thirds of the province's import and export volume in the first seven months, he said.

"Meanwhile, Guangdong's private enterprises have seized the opportunity of the postponement of the tariff war between China and the United States to promote exports to the US and other Western countries and adjusted the

market structure to explore new markets involved in the Belt and Road Initiative," he said.

But Chen warned that the foreign trade development prospects of private enterprises still face market uncertainties in the months ahead.

He urged the private companies in the province to further enhance the competitiveness of exported products and diversify the global market to ward off global market uncertainties and ensure that Guangdong's annual foreign trade proportion remains at more than one-fifth of the country's total.

Guangdong, China's biggest foreign trader, relies heavily on imports and exports for economic growth.

The province, a global production base, achieved a foreign trade volume of 5.4 trillion yuan from January to July, a year-on-year increase of 4.3 percent and representing 21 percent of the country's total.

Guangdong's trade growth rate outpaced the national average by 0.8 percentage point.

The province's total exports reached 3.44 trillion yuan in the seven months ending July, up 1.7 percent year-on-year, while imports grew much faster by 9.3 percent to hit 1.96 trillion yuan.

Abu Dhabi strengthens economic ties with nation

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Abu Dhabi is stepping up efforts to strengthen its economic partnership with China in areas ranging from artificial intelligence to advanced manufacturing, as the largest emirate in the United Arab Emirates aims to diversify beyond oil and position itself as a global hub for future industries.

"China is a vital partner in Abu Dhabi's economic transformation journey, particularly as the emirate further accelerates its economic diversification into high-growth, knowledge-driven sectors," Hamad Sayah Al Mazrouei, undersecretary of the Abu Dhabi Department of Economic Development, said during an exclusive interview with China Daily recently.

The UAE and China have forged a strong bilateral relationship over the past few decades. China has been the UAE's largest trade partner for years. What began as a \$2 billion trade relationship between the UAE and China in 2000 has expanded 50-fold, reaching \$102 billion in 2024, official data show.

The undersecretary said the UAE-China economic relationship has expanded well beyond trade into long-term collaboration on industrial projects, innovation and sustainability.

"Our bilateral cooperation has matured far beyond trade flows. It now encompasses transformational investments, next-generation infrastructure and clean

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energy collaboration," he added. "Chinese investment into the UAE has grown 16 percent, while the UAE's investment into China has surged by 120 percent, reflecting reciprocal trust and institutional confidence."

Looking forward, the undersecretary said he believes Abu Dhabi and China share highly complementary strengths across several future-focused sectors, paving the way for deeper bilateral cooperation in key areas including advanced manufacturing and

industrial integration, clean and renewable energy, AI, life sciences as well as food and water security.

"There is a strong strategic alignment between Abu Dhabi's sector-focused clusters and China's global industrial strengths," he noted. "Initiatives such as the Smart and Autonomous Vehicle Industries Cluster, the AgriFood Growth and Water Abundance Cluster, and the Health, Endurance, Longevity and Medicine Cluster reflect Abu Dhabi's targeted approach to economic development. These clusters closely mirror China's leadership in advanced manufacturing, clean energy, biotech and smart logistics."

A flagship of Abu Dhabi-China collaboration is JOCIC Park, where nearly 40 Chinese firms have collectively invested over \$10 billion in energy equipment, chemicals and smart manufacturing, helping Abu Dhabi significantly scale up its industrial capabilities.

"Abu Dhabi and China are not just trading partners, they are co-architects of a new global economic era, grounded in mutual respect and driven by a shared vision of future-ready growth," he said.

In 2024, the launch of the Qingdao Overseas Integrated Service Center marked the partnership's new phase, he said. The center serves as a gateway for Chinese enterprises to expand in the Middle East while giving Abu Dhabi companies access to Chinese technology and expertise. Priority areas include high-end manufacturing,

new energy, advanced materials and information technology.

"Abu Dhabi is rapidly expanding its innovation ecosystem and views China as a key strategic partner in the development of future-oriented, technology-led industries," he said. "The partnership potential spans a wide range of priority sectors, starting with AI and advanced technologies."

Abu Dhabi, home to the world's first graduate-level AI university — the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence — is actively pursuing joint AI research initiatives with Chinese institutions to apply AI in areas including healthcare, energy, urban planning and language processing.

The emirate is also pushing into smart cities, urban innovations and the mobility sector, with opportunities for Chinese firms in 5G-enabled systems, internet of things applications, electric vehicles and battery technology. In fintech and digital finance, Abu Dhabi sees scope for Chinese companies to work alongside Abu Dhabi counterparts in cross-border payment solutions, e-KYC (know your customer) systems, and digital asset products tailored to emerging markets.

"Abu Dhabi presents a future-ready environment rooted in innovation, where Chinese enterprises and institutions can collaborate not only for shared economic benefit, but also to codevelop global benchmarks and breakthrough technologies that address pressing development challenges across sectors," he said.

Line of work



A recent drone image captures the ongoing construction of a bridge along the Fuyang-Huaibei High-Speed Railway, which will soon connect three previously unserved counties in Anhui province. China Railway Construction Corp's 24th bureau reported that it successfully placed the final 700-metric-ton box girder in a significant 799-girder project. This milestone marks a crucial step toward the railway's full connection, signaling massive progress in boosting integrated development of the region. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY