

Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations for Sino-Thai Cross-Border Cultural Tourism Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: The Belt and Road Initiative aims to promote cooperation in infrastructure construction, trade cooperation, cultural exchanges, and other aspects among the countries along the route. Over the past decade, the implementation of this initiative in Thailand has achieved remarkable results, injecting new vitality into Sino-Thai cultural exchanges. The implementation of visa exemption policies has made personnel exchanges between China and Thailand more convenient, providing new opportunities for cultural interactions. Cultural exchanges help to enhance the understanding and friendship between the peoples of the two countries, promoting cooperation in culture, education, and other aspects. As a key medium of cultural exchange, the tourism industry plays a very important role. This paper discusses the opportunities and challenges of Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and proposes corresponding strategies. The aim is to help promote cultural exchanges and mutual learning, contributing to the construction of a closer Sino-Thai community of shared destiny.

Keywords: Belt and Road, Cultural Exchange, Opportunities and Challenges, Strategy

1. Introduction

In September and October 2013, Xi Jinping, the President of China, proposed the significant initiatives of building the "New Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (collectively referred to as the "Belt and Road"), aimed at strengthening the connections between Asian countries, enhancing the level of economic cooperation, and promoting common development [1]. Thailand, located at the heart of the Indochina Peninsula and serving as a juncture between the terrestrial Silk Road and the maritime Silk Road, is an important partner in responding to China's Belt and Road initiative. Under this initiative's framework, Sino-Thai cooperation in various fields has continuously deepened, with cultural tourism cooperation becoming an important part of their friendly exchanges. The "China Corporate Overseas Image Survey Report 2020: Belt and Road Edition" reveals that among 12 countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and South America co-building the Belt and Road, Thai public awareness of the Belt and Road construction is the highest at 93%.

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Moreover, 77% of Thai respondents recognize the positive impact of the Belt and Road construction on regional and global economies, which is 16% higher than the average approval rate [2]. Over more than a decade, Belt and Road cooperation has gradually taken root in Thailand, becoming a significant driving force in promoting the development of Sino-Thai relations, thus providing strong support and assurance for Sino-Thai cultural tourism cooperation. Deepening Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation can promote mutual understanding and friendship between the peoples of the two countries, drive economic prosperity, protect and inherit cultural heritage, and enhance cultural exchanges and mutual learning. However, despite certain achievements, there are still some challenges and issues faced. This paper aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road initiative, as well as the corresponding strategies, in hopes of contributing valuable insights to the research on Sino-Thai cultural tourism cooperation.

2. Sino-Thai Cross-Border Cultural Tourism Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative

China and Thailand are connected by mountains and rivers, bound by blood relations, neighbors in residence, and integrated in culture, forming a deep friendship. The foundation for cross-border cultural tourism between China and Thailand is robust. Princess Sirindhorn of Thailand has always practiced the concept of "China and Thailand being one family" over the decades, tirelessly learning and spreading Chinese culture. In 2019, Princess Sirindhorn was awarded China's highest foreign honor, the "Friendship Medal," a full affirmation of her significant contributions to Sino-Thai friendship and an important manifestation of the "China and Thailand being one family" concept. Today, the idea of "China and Thailand being one family" has deeply rooted in people's hearts, continuously driving the bilateral relations toward a better future [3].

The history of people-to-people exchanges between China and Thailand can be traced back to the early Han dynasty in the 2nd century BC, as recorded in the "Han Shu - Geography." The friendly journey between China and Thailand has been witnessed through the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties, with cooperation in politics, economy, culture, and other fields gradually deepening. Both countries have a long history of cultural ties. According to historical records, the Zhuang ethnic group in Guangxi, the Dai ethnic group in Guizhou, and the main ethnic group in Thailand, the Thai people, share a common cultural origin, providing a solid cultural foundation for Sino-Thai cultural tourism cooperation. Thailand, as an important tourist destination in Southeast Asia, attracts a large number of Chinese tourists. China, being one of the world's largest tourism markets, plays a significant role in promoting Thailand's tourism industry. Following the announcement of the visa exemption policy, the search volume for Thailand on the Ctrip platform increased by more than 90% within just one hour. From February 5 to 14, 2024, a total of 3,086 direct flights from China entered through the six airports managed by the Airports of Thailand (AOT), marking a 202.6% increase compared to the same period. The implementation of the visa exemption policy successfully revitalized Thailand's tourism confidence and improved safety levels across various sectors of the tourism industry. This positive measure has provided ample opportunities for Sino-Thai cultural tourism cooperation. Furthermore, since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2004, strategic designs at the upper levels of both governments have laid a solid foundation for close cooperation and exchanges, including in culture. Both governments highly value the achievements of the Belt and Road construction. In November 2022, the two countries signed the "Cooperation Plan for Jointly Advancing the Belt and Road Initiative between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand." In October 2023, the Prime Minister of Thailand was invited to China to attend the third Belt and Road International Cooperation Forum. In an interview, he said, "The Belt and Road Initiative is a policy to promote international cooperation

in a wide range of fields, including trade, investment, tourism, and culture. It plays an important role in driving the construction of land, sea, and air infrastructure in ASEAN countries, greatly promoting inter-state mutual benefit cooperation." The process of Sino-Thai exchanges has seen the signing of a series of important agreements (Table 1), providing direction for continuously strengthening the relationship between the two countries and promoting cooperation in economic investment, social exchange, cultural education, and international relations. This has led to the emergence of a new type of friendly national relationship between China and Thailand, serving as a model in contemporary international society [4].

Table 1: Partial List of Important Agreements Signed Between China and Thailand

| Signing Date | Agreement Name |
|---------------------|--|
| August 2001 | Joint Communiqué between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Thailand |
| April 2004 | Joint Statement on the Cooperation Plan for the 21st Century between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Thailand |
| April 2004 | Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Thailand |
| April 2012 | Sino-Thai Strategic Cooperation Joint Action Plan (2012–2016) |
| October 2013 | Development Perspective Plan for Sino-Thai Relations |
| December 2014 | Joint Press Communique between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand |
| September 2017 | Memorandum of Understanding on Jointly Advancing the Belt and Road Construction between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand |
| November 2019 | Joint Statement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand |
| November 2022 | Joint Statement on Building a More Stable, More Prosperous, and More Sustainable Community of Shared Destiny between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Thailand |
| October 2023 | Joint Press Communique between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand |
| October 2022 | Joint Action Plan for Sino-Thai Strategic Cooperation (2022–2026) |
| October 2022 | Cooperation Plan for Jointly Advancing the Belt and Road Initiative between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand |

3. Opportunities and Challenges in Sino-Thai Cross-Border Cultural Tourism Cooperation

Since the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative, Sino-Thai cooperation in various fields has yielded fruitful results, particularly in the field of cultural tourism. Before the pandemic in 2019, income from foreign tourists in Thailand accounted for about 12% of the country's GDP, with Chinese tourists reaching about 11 million, becoming the largest source market for Thailand's tourism industry. This fully demonstrates the huge potential and opportunities for Sino-Thai cultural tourism cooperation.

Despite the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global tourism industry, bilateral trade between China and Thailand reached \$131.2 billion in 2021, \$135 billion in 2022, and \$103.964 billion in 2023, showing that the development momentum of economic and trade exchanges between the two countries remains strong. In Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation, opportunities for cultural exchange and interaction can provide important support for the establishment and development of relations between the two countries. Through cultural exchange and interaction, the tourism industries of China and Thailand can achieve resource complementarity, market sharing, economic cooperation, and win-win results. Both countries have long and rich historical cultures, such as China's Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and Thailand's Grand Palace, temples, etc. These historical and cultural relics attract tourists from all over the world and provide a foundation for cultural exchanges between the two countries. By visiting and learning about each other's history and culture, tourists can better understand and appreciate the unique charm of each other's country, enhancing friendship and mutual trust between the peoples of the two countries. Cooperation in developing tourism routes and launching customized tourism products can offer more diversified and personalized tourism options to meet the needs of different tourists. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha stated, "The friendly relations between Thailand and China have a long history, and the peoples of the two countries support each other like relatives and friends." Cultural exchange and interaction opportunities in Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative have significant meaning and role. By strengthening cultural exchanges, tourism resources can be shared, and markets expanded, promoting economic cooperation and win-win for both countries. Therefore, China and Thailand should actively promote cultural exchanges and interactions, innovate products and services, expand market channels and promotion through the opportunities and policy support provided by the Belt and Road Initiative, creating broader development space for Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation.

Furthermore, opportunities for cultural exchange and interaction provide a platform for innovation and cooperation in Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation. Cultural exchanges between the two countries can promote innovation in tourism products and services, stimulating the creativity and innovation of entrepreneurs and practitioners. For example, China and Thailand have jointly organized various cultural and arts festivals, folk performances, international tourism exhibitions, etc., showcasing traditional culture and modern art of both countries, attracting more visitors to participate and experience. Taking the Spring Festival as an example, as the oldest and most important traditional festival in Chinese culture, it is a festive day for family reunions and ushering in the new year. The Year of the Dragon Spring Festival is the first New Year after the United Nations General Assembly resolution included the Lunar New Year as a United Nations holiday. In the Jia Chen Dragon Year of 2024, "Chinese Year" was upgraded to "World Year," and Thailand's festive atmosphere was even richer. The "Happy Spring Festival" event, as an important festival of cultural exchange between China and Thailand, has become an important platform and link for the people of both countries to celebrate the festival together after 20 years. It is evident that opportunities for cultural exchange and interaction bring affinity and attraction to Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation. However, there are also some challenges, such as language communication barriers, cultural differences, market competition, security issues, etc. Therefore, appropriate strategies and measures need to be taken in promoting Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation.

4. Strategies for Sino-Thai Cross-Border Cultural Tourism Cooperation

In recent years, China and Thailand have achieved significant results in the field of cultural tourism cooperation, thanks to the active promotion by both governments and strong market demand. The "China-Thailand as One Family" tourism cooperation is an important component of the Sino-Thai relationship. Thailand, with its rich tourism resources and the warm hospitality of its people, has

become a top destination for many Chinese tourists. The Thai government has identified China as the most important target market for its tourism industry, reflecting not only the immense potential of our tourism market but also the complementarity and cooperative space between China and Thailand in the tourism sector.[5] Furthermore, as a pivot country in China's promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia, tourism cooperation has become an important field for enhancing bilateral cultural exchanges and fostering goodwill among the peoples. However, some security issues, such as shootings in Bangkok, have brought short-term impacts to the originally robust recovery momentum of Sino-Thai tourism cooperation, resulting in a decline in the number of tourists and affecting the confidence of tourists in the medium and long term to a certain extent. The implementation of visa exemption policies has to some extent reshaped tourism confidence. Faced with the unstable factors of tourism safety, China and Thailand should remain confident, deepen tourism cooperation, and jointly address challenges. By strengthening tourism safety guarantees, promoting tourism model innovation and service upgrades, expanding market channels and publicity efforts, and continuously driving the development of Sino-Thai tourism cooperation forward, we can contribute to the friendship between the peoples of the two countries and regional prosperity.

4.1. Strengthening Sino-Thai Tourism Safety Measures

During the Spring Festival in 2024, hotel bookings by mainland Chinese tourists to Thailand increased nearly 21-fold year-on-year, with hotels in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, and other areas becoming highly sought after, indicating a rapid rise in the number of Chinese tourists traveling to Thailand. In this context, ensuring the personal safety and legal rights of tourists has become an important task in Sino-Thai tourism cooperation. Therefore, it is necessary to regard "tourism safety measures" as a key focus for long-term attention and include it in the agenda for Sino-Thai tourism cooperation. For instance, to better protect the personal safety and legal rights of tourists, China and Thailand should strengthen the establishment and improvement of tourism safety guarantee systems. This includes, but is not limited to, the formulation and implementation of relevant laws and regulations, standardized training for tourism practitioners, and enhanced supervision over new forms of tourism. Through these measures, a solid institutional safety guarantee for tourists can be provided, helping to restore confidence in traveling to Thailand. Moreover, the real-time sharing and dissemination of tourism safety information play a crucial role in reducing tourism safety risks. China and Thailand should enhance exchange and cooperation in the area of tourism safety information, regularly issue travel safety tips, and remind tourists to be aware of safety risks at their destinations. At the same time, efforts should be increased through various channels to promote awareness of tourism safety knowledge, thereby enhancing tourists' awareness of safety. In terms of tourism safety measures, attention should be given to the reasonable arrangement of tourists' itineraries. Official channels and the tourism industry should guide tourists to make suitable itinerary arrangements based on their actual situations and tourism safety information. This can help reduce the tourism safety risks for visitors in Thailand and enhance the travel experience.

4.2. Promoting Tourism Model Innovation and Service Upgrades

With the rapid development of the tourism industry and the continuous demand for enhanced travel experiences, traditional tourism products and services can no longer satisfy the diverse needs of tourists. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance the competitiveness of Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism by promoting tourism model innovation, product innovation, and service upgrades. Innovating Sino-Thai tourism models requires increasing the external promotion and dissemination of high cost-effective, high-quality tourism products. Especially, it is important to launch "personalized," "diversified," and "demand-driven" tourism products targeted at different groups such

as young tourists and family tourists. Attracting tourists with high-quality, cost-effective tourism products could involve introducing unique cultural experience products, such as Sino-Thai cultural exchange activities and traditional handicraft experiences. These cultural innovation products will not only attract more tourists to China and Thailand but also facilitate cultural exchange and interaction between the two countries. Secondly, service is the core element of Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation; thus, enhancing service quality and levels is key to promoting cooperation. Training tourism practitioners to enhance their service awareness and professional competence can provide higher quality tourism services. Supporting pragmatic cooperation between leading Sino-Thai tourism enterprises, strengthening tourism talent development, and improving the service level of tourism practitioners will offer tourists a higher quality travel experience. Relying on deep cooperation between Sino-Thai tourism departments and related industry associations, promoting quality tourism products in both markets through multi-channel, multi-platform, and comprehensive promotion efforts is essential. Additionally, introducing smart technology to improve tourism information consultation and navigation services can enhance tourists' travel experience and satisfaction.

4.3. Expanding Market Channels and Promotional Efforts

In Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation, expanding market channels and promotional efforts are crucial elements. Through reasonable market channels and effective promotional strategies, the exposure and recognition of tourism products can be increased, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and attractiveness of the cooperation. Regarding market channels, the cooperating parties can jointly develop and utilize various channels including international, domestic, regional, and online to broaden the sales channels and coverage of tourism products. On the international level, collaborative efforts can be made to showcase unique cultures to tourists and industry professionals worldwide through tourism expos, promotional events, and cooperative project roadshows. Domestically, partnerships can be established with travel agencies, OTA platforms, and other tourism-related institutions to expand the distribution channels and sales network of products. Targeted promotional activities can also disseminate the tourism products and advantages offered by both parties in the target market, attracting more tourists to choose cultural tourism. Promotional methods can be diversified, including traditional media advertising, online marketing, and social media promotions. In terms of traditional media, tourism magazines, television programs, and advertising through various media channels can be used to showcase the features and advantages of the cooperative projects. For online marketing, search engine optimization and online advertising can enhance website visibility and rankings, increasing the click-through rates and attention from target tourists. Additionally, social media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, and others can be utilized to post content and activities related to cultural tourism cooperation between the two countries, attracting shares and follows from fans, thus expanding the impact and recognition of the cooperation.

5. Conclusion

As an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative, Sino-Thai cross-border cultural tourism cooperation not only possesses tremendous developmental potential and strategic significance but also serves as a powerful bond for enhancing friendship and facilitating exchanges between the peoples of the two countries. Through cultural tourism cooperation, the people of China and Thailand can better understand each other's cultures, promoting mutual understanding and affinity among the populace. This plays a significant role in deepening the friendship between the two countries and advancing cooperation in political, economic, technological, and other fields. China and Thailand should strengthen their cooperation to jointly address security issues, innovate tourism models,

improve service quality, expand market channels, and enhance promotional efforts. This will provide a higher quality tourism experience for the peoples of both nations, promote cultural exchange and interaction, and take the Sino-Thai relationship to new heights. It is believed that in the near future, Sino-Thai cultural tourism cooperation will become a new highlight of regional cooperation, contributing to the construction of a closer China-Thailand community of shared destiny.

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