

The Stability of Southeast Asia as a Reliable Tourist Source for China: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Since the initiation of reform and opening-up, China has witnessed remarkable growth in inbound tourism, attributable to its increasing openness to the global community and a burgeoning emphasis on tourism development. Among the notable trends, Southeast Asia has emerged as a dependable and predominant source of tourists for China's inbound market. This research delves into the factors contributing to Southeast Asia's status as a stable tourist source for China, examining elements such as geographical location, abundant tourism resources, economic conditions, historical connections, and cultural ties between the regions. By utilizing official data on Southeast Asian tourists visiting China and studying the mutual relationship between the two areas, this paper presents an in-depth analysis. Based on the findings, this study provides pertinent recommendations for sustaining and further developing Southeast Asia's position in China's tourism market.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, China travel market, tourist source, cause analysis

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, China's international tourism has experienced rapid growth, attracting a significant influx of foreign tourists. Southeast Asia consistently stands out among the top contenders in China's inbound tourism market, maintaining a stable relationship with China. Understanding the reasons behind Southeast Asia's status as a reliable tourist source for China is crucial as it facilitates better alignment with the tourism preferences of Southeast Asian travelers and fosters further advancement in China's inbound tourism market.

2. Overview of Southeast Asia as a Stable Tourist Source for China's Tourism Market

Southeast Asia is not an independent entity in the global tourist market; it is categorized under the broader East Asia and Pacific tourist areas. However, Southeast Asia has a distinctive and significant relationship with China due to its unique geographical proximity, economic ties, cultural connections, and social interactions. Consequently, Southeast Asia is often considered an integral part of overseas tourist destinations when examining China's inbound tourism market, given its special significance and close association with China.

Southeast Asia comprises 11 countries, with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia being particularly important. These five countries are collectively referred to as the five ASEAN countries and hold a pivotal

position in Southeast Asia. Notably, they are also the primary driving force behind Southeast Asia’s travel to China market, which is crucial in shaping the region’s tourism dynamics with China.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the development trajectory of Southeast Asia’s travel market to China. For this purpose, statistical data on the number of tourists from the five ASEAN countries visiting China has been carefully selected for ten years since 1990 (refer to Table 1 and Figure 1) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1999-2019). While specific data from 2019 to 2023

could not be obtained due to the epidemic, the analysis of Table 1 and Figure 1 indicates a generally increasing trend in the number of Chinese tourists from the five ASEAN countries.

The five ASEAN countries serve as typical representatives of Southeast Asia’s tourist market in China. The continuous and steady growth in the tourism market between Southeast Asia and China underscores the vital role played by Southeast Asia in stabilizing China’s inbound tourism source. Despite the challenges posed by the epidemic, Southeast Asia’s position remains indispensable in contributing to China’s inbound tourist arrivals.

Table 1. Number of Visitors from Five ASEAN Countries to China in Different Years (Unit: 10,000)

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Singapore	7.17	26.15	39.94	75.59	100.37	97.14	90.53	92.50	94.12	97.84
Malaysia	3.68	25.18	44.10	89.96	124.52	112.96	107.55	116.50	123.32	129.15
Thailand	6.79	17.33	24.11	58.63	63.55	61.31	64.15	75.30	77.67	83.34
the Philippines	7.89	21.97	36.39	65.40	82.83	96.79	100.40	113.50	116.85	120.50
Indonesia	2.69	13.28	22.06	37.76	57.34	56.69	54.48	63.40	68.31	71.19
total	28.22	103.91	166.6	327.34	428.61	424.89	417.11	461.2	480.27	502.02

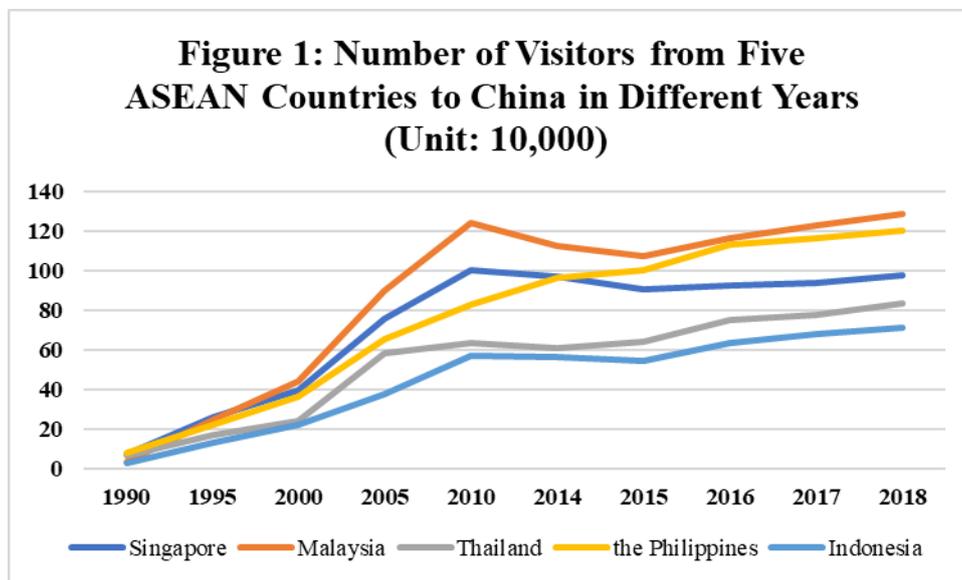


Figure 1. Number of Visitors from Five ASEAN Countries to China in Different Years (Unit: 10,000)

3. Analysis of Factors Contributing to the Stable Southeast Asian Travel Market in China

Tourism is a multifaceted activity significantly influenced by various factors, including society, economy, and culture. The stable development of Southeast Asia’s travel market to China can be

attributed to several key factors, such as the geographical environment, cultural exchanges, population migration, economic ties, and trade interactions between China and Southeast Asia. These elements foster a conducive environment for tourism growth and mutual travel

opportunities.

As official detailed statistics on the number of people traveling to China, the motivation behind their travel, and the mode of travel in Southeast Asia from 2018 and beyond have yet to be released. This paper primarily analyzes the official data of the five ASEAN countries' tourist markets from 2008 to 2017. By leveraging this data, the paper aims to gain insights into the reasons behind Southeast Asia's status as a stable tourist source for China.

3.1 Proximity and Convenient Transportation in China

Southeast Asia's strategic geographical location, situated in the southeastern part of Asia and close to the southern coastal areas of China, plays a crucial role in its tourism ties with China. As a central maritime and air transportation hub, Southeast Asia has well-developed transportation links with various parts of the world. China's adjacent position and continually improving transportation infrastructure provide a strong foundation for establishing multiple travel routes between the two regions.

The proximity between Southeast Asia and China significantly benefits both parties. For Southeast Asian tourists, flying to China takes only about 2-3 hours, considerably quicker than traveling to distant destinations like Europe or America. This convenience and short travel time make China appealing to Southeast Asian tourists seeking a quick and enjoyable holiday abroad. As a result, China holds significant advantages in attracting tourists from Southeast Asia, thanks to its proximity and efficient transportation connections.

3.2 China's Rich and Attractive Tourism Resources

Southeast Asia, situated within the tropical

region, boasts an array of natural tourism resources primarily comprising pristine jungles and idyllic tropical beaches. The region's countries share similarities in their natural scenery, owing to their geographical proximity. Conversely, China's vast expanse traverses varying latitudes, giving rise to dissimilar landscapes even within the same month between its northern and southern regions. Furthermore, diverse and captivating natural vistas can be observed throughout the year in different cities across China. For instance, while the northeast region experiences snowfall in April, the provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang witness the splendid bloom of flowers. This climatic variation within a single country adds to the allure of China as a multifaceted tourist destination. Moreover, China's cultural heritage is deeply rooted and steeped in history, endowing it with a wealth of humanistic tourism resources, each with its unique character.

The captivating landscapes and rich cultural heritage of China have sparked considerable interest among residents of Southeast Asia, prompting them to embark on journeys to explore this enchanting country. According to data extracted from The Yearbook of China Tourism Statistics spanning from 2009 to 2018 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2009-2018), it is evident that the primary purpose of travel for most tourists from Southeast Asia to China is sightseeing and leisure. Over the past decade, these sightseers and leisure seekers have constituted a significant portion of the total number of tourists visiting China from the five member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as depicted in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Proportion of Sightseeing and Leisure Tourists from Five ASEAN Countries Visiting China from 2008 to 2017

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Singapore	46.2%	38.8%	39.3%	38.6%	36.8%	33.2%	30.5%	27.1%	26.2%	26.3%
Malaysia	67.6%	68.9%	73.7%	76.2%	77.1%	74.6%	66.6%	59.7%	59.4%	61.3%
Thailand	80.1%	80.5%	78.7%	76.0%	72.9%	64.6%	59.1%	55.0%	56.7%	56.4%
The Philippines	31.2%	29.0%	28.1%	26.0%	24.9%	22.3%	20.7%	19.3%	17.6%	18.0%
Indonesia	73.7%	74.6%	76.8%	77.2%	74.3%	69.9%	65.8%	57.4%	51.2%	49.2%

3.3 Strong Economic Strength and Deep Ancestral Concept of Southeast Asian Chinese

A substantial portion of Southeast Asian tourists visiting China comprises overseas Chinese. This

can be attributed to the fact that many overseas Chinese residing in Southeast Asia belong to the affluent class, granting them the economic means and financial capacity to undertake travel to China.

The population of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia constitutes a significant proportion, amounting to approximately two-thirds of the total overseas Chinese community. Throughout the early 20th century, a considerable number of Chinese individuals migrated to Southeast Asia seeking better livelihood opportunities. Settling

in the region, they accumulated substantial wealth and assets, playing a pivotal role in fostering economic growth and facilitating trade between China and Southeast Asia. As a result of this historical and economic connection, business travel has emerged as one of the primary purposes for residents of Southeast Asia to visit China, particularly in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and others with a relatively concentrated Chinese diaspora and developed economies (as shown in Table 3 below).

Table 3. Number of Business Tourists from Five ASEAN Countries in China from 2008 to 2017 (Unit: 10,000)

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Singapore	12.46	14.00	17.09	19.01	18.26	18.68	20.13	20.33	21.04	21.52
Malaysia	20.41	19.68	17.89	13.89	11.92	11.26	13.01	15.82	16.79	16.75
Thailand	2.58	2.40	2.93	2.91	3.79	4.34	3.99	4.21	4.67	4.78
the Philippines	4.53	2.93	3.34	3.14	3.35	2.85	3.00	3.22	3.22	3.62
Indonesia	1.98	1.83	2.43	2.52	3.33	2.87	2.43	2.91	3.14	3.56
total	41.96	40.84	43.68	41.47	40.65	40.00	42.56	46.49	48.86	50.23

Many overseas Chinese maintain strong blood ties with China, even though they have resided in Southeast Asia for extended periods. Despite their prolonged absence from their ancestral homeland, many overseas Chinese continue to uphold the traditional living customs and thought patterns prevalent among the Chinese populace. The bonds of kinship, cultural heritage, and psychological connection with China run deep within them, making it challenging for them to sever these ties. The profound concept of ancestors holds a special place in their hearts, emphasizing the reverence and respect they have for their ancestral roots. As a result, it is typical for overseas Chinese settled in Southeast Asia to return to their hometowns during holidays, mainly to worship their ancestors.

The presence of overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia has significantly reinforced Southeast Asia's status as a reliable and stable source of inbound tourism for China. As the population of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia continues to grow, so does the number of individuals visiting China to reconnect with relatives and friends. Based on data extracted from The Yearbook of China Tourism Statistics spanning from 2009 to 2018 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2009-2018), it is evident that the number of tourists from the five ASEAN countries visiting China to visit relatives and friends has been steadily increasing. Notably, since 2014, the total number of such visitors has surpassed 60,000, as depicted in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Number of Tourists from Five ASEAN Countries Visiting Relatives and Friends in China from 2008 to 2017 (Unit: 10,000)

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Singapore	2.21	3.13	3.65	3.84	3.66	3.86	4.58	5.23	6.18	7.08
Malaysia	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.13	0.13	0.27	0.89	1.39	1.66	1.60
Thailand	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.09	0.22	0.27	0.33	0.28

the Philippines	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.11	0.23	0.27	0.29	0.30
Indonesia	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.06	0.11	0.27	0.37	0.38	0.41
total	2.39	3.32	3.83	4.13	3.97	4.44	6.19	7.53	8.84	9.67

3.4 Long-Standing History of Cultural Exchanges Between China and Southeast Asia

The cultural exchange between China and Southeast Asia has a deep-rooted history, dating back to the early 15th century when Zheng He's voyages to the Western Ocean marked a significant milestone in fostering interactions between the two regions. This exploration initiated a new era of cultural exchange that reached its pinnacle and endured for over two centuries. During this period, China's rich cultural heritage, including its literature, Confucianism, laws, customs, and traditions, diffused into Southeast Asia, leaving a lasting impact and giving rise to what came to be known as the "Chinese cultural circle." The cultural similarities shared between China and Southeast Asia created a profound affinity among the people of the region, paving the way for enduring cultural bonds. As a result, Southeast Asian tourists have developed a particular fondness and attraction towards China, drawn to its rich history and cultural heritage. Furthermore, China's traditional culture possesses an enduring allure that captivates and resonates with Southeast Asian tourists, who have been influenced by Chinese culture for an extended period.

4. Recommendations for Sustaining and Advancing the Southeast Asian Travel Market in China

4.1 Enhancing Infrastructure Construction

China's geographical location and well-established transportation links play pivotal roles in attracting tourists from Southeast Asia to visit the country. In 2017, the total number of tourists from the five ASEAN countries reached an impressive 4,802,700, with a significant majority of 3,980,500 entering China through various means such as planes, ships, and trains, constituting 82.88% of the total (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2009-2018). Given this substantial influx of tourists, it becomes imperative for major tourist cities in China to capitalize on their geographical advantages and foster robust transportation connections with key cities in Southeast Asia. By actively

maintaining, opening, or expanding air, sea, and rail routes, these cities can leverage their close proximity and efficient transportation networks to provide seamless and convenient passages for tourists from Southeast Asia.

4.2 Enhancing Tourism Service Personnel Training

High service quality enhances tourists' desire to visit specific destinations. While there are cultural connections between China and Southeast Asian countries, it is essential to acknowledge and appreciate the uniqueness of each region's folk customs and traditions. In receiving Southeast Asian tourists, cultural respect and sensitivity are of utmost importance. Respecting each other's religious beliefs, being knowledgeable about one another's languages, and adhering to appropriate etiquette is essential to creating a welcoming and comfortable tourist environment. Continuous efforts to improve relevant staff etiquette and service skills can significantly contribute to making Southeast Asian tourists feel at home during their visit. By prioritizing cultural understanding and providing excellent service, tourists' satisfaction levels are likely to rise, leading to positive word-of-mouth, repeat visits, and ultimately, long-term friendly relations between China and Southeast Asia.

4.3 Enhancing Tourism Publicity Efforts

In the digital era, the competition among tourist destinations has intensified, underscoring the significance of effective tourism publicity. As travel restrictions gradually ease and the outbound travel market in Southeast Asia shows signs of recovery, it is crucial for relevant travel agencies to capitalize on this opportunity. To attract Southeast Asian tourists to China, collaboration with local travel agents in Southeast Asia is essential. Strengthening partnerships and cooperation can expand the reach and sales of China's tourism products in the region, increasing their appeal to potential travelers. Leveraging new scientific and technological means, such as online social platforms, allows travel agencies to regularly update and release high-quality promotional content, including films and copywriting. By embracing the power of technology and

strategic collaborations, travel agencies can successfully boost the visibility and appeal of China's tourism offerings in Southeast Asia, positively impacting tourist numbers and fostering stronger cultural ties between the two regions.

5. Conclusion

Southeast Asia stands as one of China's earliest and steadfast tourist destinations, consistently maintaining a regular flow of travelers visiting the country. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between China and Southeast Asia, along with official statistics, this paper presents insights into the factors contributing to Southeast Asia's status as a reliable and constant source of tourists to China. Geographical location, well-developed infrastructure, diverse tourism resources, historical overseas Chinese migration, robust economic and trade ties, and vibrant cultural exchange serve as pivotal influencing elements. Based on these considerations, the continuous enhancement and reinforcement of tourism facilities, services, and promotional efforts are imperative to sustain the stability of the Southeast Asian tourism market in China and foster further development. By prioritizing the refinement of travel experiences, providing exceptional services, and leveraging contemporary communication platforms for effective promotion, China can strengthen its allure as a desirable destination for Southeast Asian tourists. Such sustained efforts will solidify the position of Southeast Asia as a consistent and valuable source of tourists for China, cultivating enduring and mutually beneficial relations between the two regions.

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