

Tourism Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative: BRI and Tourism Opportunities in Phayao Province, Thailand

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Article History: Received: 10 January 2021; Revised: 12 February 2021; Accepted: 27 March 2021; Published online: 20 April 2021

Abstract: The objectives of this research are 1. to study the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) fundamental concepts in comparison with other multilateral tourism cooperative frameworks in Phayao Province, 2. to analyze the importance, benefits, and limitations of the BRI initiative, including problems, obstacles and tourism opportunities in Phayao Province according to the the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperative framework, 3. to give recommendations on policies and measures for tourism promotion of Phayao Province under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperative framework. The research tool was used PESTEL analysis, SWOT analysis and TOWS analysis method. The population and sample group in this research work were selected by purposive sampling and consist of two main groups, which are the group including the government sectors and the private sectors of Thailand that includes Phayao Province and areas in the Lao PDR consisting of Sainyabuli province, Luang Namtha province, and areas in the China Mainland comprising of Kunming city and Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. The results of the study indicated that Phayao Province has potential due to the borderline with the Lao PDR in Ban Huak, where the government has approved and promoted the temporarily permitted area at Ban Huak to be a permanent border crossing in 2018. When both countries border checkpoints had been promoted, it causes an expansion in terms of trade and investment, including more tourism. It is a gateway that connects the economic corridors of the North of Lao PDR and northern Thailand. This border-crossing route is an interconnection between Thailand via Phayao Province to Luang Prabang, where the China-Laos railway station is located. The Ban Huak border checkpoint journey to Luang Prabang is only 297 kilometers and can connect to southern China by the China-Laos railway. The service will be available in December 2021. This route will provide an opportunity to connect Phayao province to the New Silk Road of the 21st Century or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It will enable cooperation in the field of trade, investment, and tourism between the three countries.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative: BRI, Tourism opportunities, Phayao Province

1. Introduction

Over the past 10 years, Thailand has given great importance to the implementation of economic corridors, especially the development of land and water transport routes along the economic corridors as goods distribution and tourism routes in the region under the concept of developing international connectivity in ASEAN transportations and logistics including the establishment of the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). It is a strategic plan under Thailand 4.0 and announced the Eastern Special Development Zone Act in the Government Gazette on 14 May 2018. The Thai government expects that the development of the Eastern Economic Corridor will be linked to the New Silk Road or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to foster expansion in agriculture, industry, trade, service, tourism, modern technology, eco-friendly advanced innovation, and traditional agriculture, which results in employment, income generation, and quality of life as well as the increase of capacity and increase of competitiveness of the country in the world trade arena.

Nowadays, connective tourism is widely spoken. For example, R3A (Road 3 Asia), which is the connectivity between China - Lao PDR - Thailand, is part of the route along the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC) under the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) framework. It is a land transport route connecting Kunming in Yunnan Province of the People's Republic of China, with Bangkok in Thailand. In Chinese, it is called "昆曼公路". This route has a length of more than 1,800 km. The ease of travel has resulted in a steady increase in the number of tourists. After the Covid-19 epidemic crisis in 2020, more tourists are expected to travel through this route.

Phayao Province is one of the provinces with great potential due to its borderline with the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) from Ban Huak, Village No. 3, Phu Sang Sub-district, Phu Sang District to Ban Ton Phueng, Village No. 16, Rom Yen Sub-district, Chiang Kham District with the distance of about 36 kilometers. Moreover, Kiew Hok Route (PB 502763), located at Village No. 12, Phu Sang Sub-District, Phu Sang District, Phayao Province, is the route of connection between Ban Huak, Village No. 12, Phu Sang Sub-district, Phu Sang District, Phayao Province, and Ban Pang Mon, Khop District, Sainyabuli Province, Lao PDR. Thai Government has approved to promote Ban Huak temporarily permitted area in Phu Sang District to be a permanent border crossing on 28 September 2018 and opened as a checkpoint on 18 December 2018. When both countries' border checkpoints were promoted, it causes an expansion in terms of trade and investment, including more tourism. It is a gateway

that connects the economic corridors of the North of Lao PDR and northern Thailand. This border-crossing route is also an interconnection between Thailand via Phayao Province to the World Heritage city, Luang Prabang. The Ban Huak border checkpoint journey to Luang Prabang is only 297 kilometers and can connect to southern China by the China-Laos railway. The service will be available in December 2021. This route will provide an opportunity to connect Phayao province to the New Silk Road or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It will enable cooperation in the field of trade, investment, and tourism between the three countries. However, in the connective tourism development, it focuses on developing utilities and facilities along the way rather than creating stories and tying up similar marketing attractions. In the past, connective tourism had been developed through various routes, such as the R3A route (connecting China, Lao PDR, and Thailand). Still, the story of various attractions has not been linked together to add value and make it more attractive to tourists (Tourism Market Research Division of Thailand, 2015). The government's policy to develop and promote tourism in Thailand to become a tourist destination connected with neighboring countries, especially China and Lao PDR, through the New Silk Road or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), will lead to the creation of a national tourism network in the Mekong region including increasing the potential for economic competitiveness through planning promotion. It will turn the route into a route that can meet a broad and diverse traveler's needs. It improves the quality of products and services, increases tourism value, increases the employment rate, continuously distributes income to local people, and ensures tourists' safety.

From the above context, to drive the 2nd National Tourism Development Plan (2017-2021) to achieve concrete results, it is imperative that the study of tourism cooperation projects under the New Silk Road or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) concept has to be carried out with tourism opportunities in Phayao Province. Promoting and supporting the connective tourism policy of Thailand, Lao PDR, and China in order to formulate a clear guideline for the connective development of tourist attractions and increasing tourism opportunities in Phayao Province will lead to the development of tourism routes suitable for the context of the environment and the potential of the people in the area. It is also the way to maintain the identity of tourism routes forever.

2. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are 1. to study the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) fundamental concepts in comparison with other multilateral tourism cooperative frameworks in Phayao Province, 2. to analyze the importance, benefits, and limitations of the BRI initiative, including problems, obstacles and tourism opportunities in Phayao Province according to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperative framework, 3. to give recommendations on policies and measures for tourism promotion of Phayao Province under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperative framework

3. Research Methods

3.1 Population and Sample Selection

This research work aimed to conduct a study in Thailand that includes Phayao Province and areas in the Lao PDR consisting of Sainyabuli province, Luang Namtha province, and areas in the China Mainland comprising of Yunnan Province in Kunming city and Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. This area has the territories that are in contact with the border area, which provides a connecting route for commerce with China's country. The route passes through the Lao PDR and enters into Thailand, which is the area that is expected to receive the impacts in terms of PESTEL Analysis; P: Political, E: Economies, S: Social, T: Technology, E: Environment and L: Legal, with both positive and negative effects resulting from the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative: BRI. The population and sample group in this research work were selected by purposive sampling and consist of two main groups, which are the group including the government sectors and the private sectors of Thailand, Lao PDR and China Mainland comprising of the Immigration Department, the Customs Department, the Office of Tourism and Sports, the Chamber of Commerce, the Department of Commerce, the Thai–Laos Business Council, Thai–Chinese Business Council, the International Freight Forwarders Association of Laos, the Association of Tourism Businesses and Tourism Operators of the Lao P.D.R., Royal Thai Consulate-General Kunming, Tourism Authority of Thailand Kunming Office and others.

Once the data of tourist site is obtained, combined with data from in-depth interviews, brainstorming, and PESTEL analysis, the next step was analyzed using the SWOT Analysis method, that analysed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to see the true potential of tourism development connecting Phayao Province with BRI Silk Road to Lao PDR and the People's Republic of China.

The last step was an analysis using the TOWS Analysis method to find policy recommendations for tourism development and promotion connecting Phayao Province with Lao PDR and the People's Republic of China.

4. Research Results

The results of the study of the potential of Phayao Province are to connect to the BRI route and to provide an opportunity to build an international tourism route to Lao PDR, and China are as follows:

1. Strengths of Phayao Province towards BRI route tourism
 - There are many tourist attractions and a variety of attractions.
 - Infrastructure is almost 100% complete.
2. Weaknesses of Phayao Province towards BRI route tourism
 - Working in various sectors does not harmonize with tourism promotion to be in the same direction.
 - The agency responsible for tourism has not received sufficient information about the BRI route, making it impossible to understand future connections.
 - Tourism-related agencies do not yet understand the actual needs of tourists (insight).
3. Opportunities of Phayao Province towards BRI route tourism
 - The government has the policy to establish the Eastern Lanna Special Economic Zone. As a result, Phayao Province has an opportunity to connect with neighboring countries through the Ban Huak border checkpoint.
 - The government has the policy to construct a double-track railway, Denchai - Chiang Khong. It will provide an opportunity to expand trade and transport in the upper northern region.
 - The government has the policy to study the feasibility of Phayao Airport's construction to create air transport connecting domestically and abroad.
 - The opening of the Ban Huak checkpoint as a permanent border checkpoint connecting the Sainyabuli Province of the Lao PDR will be an opportunity for Phayao Province to connect with the Lao PDR and China.
4. Threats of Phayao Province towards BRI route tourism
 - Thai-China high-speed rail route will not pass through northern Thailand, causing Phayao Province to lose connection.

5. Goal of Phayao Province

- The researcher would like to position Phayao Province as the source or destination of travel on the New Silk Road of the 21st Century, mostly tourists from the third country. The benefit of being the source or destination (gateway) of the connective tourism to Lao PDR and southern China is that there will be tourists from third countries (mostly Europe, America, Japan, and Korea) coming from far-off countries outside the region and has a form of tourism that takes longer time to travel, they may also spend time in Phayao Province longer. Therefore, in order to achieve the goal, it is necessary to develop tourism to meet the quality and standards so that it will be able to attract more tourists from the third countries traveling via the BRI route, in line with Kobsak Phutrakul (2017), who found that Thailand has a location near the route that the main feature laying down to the south is the location of the journey to the surrounding countries which takes time just over an hour. Moreover, it can link various tourism and distribution routes; therefore, the development of infrastructure will increase population income. Also, Thailand is a country that is important to China because some Thai people have ancestors from China. The key opportunity for Thailand in the BRI initiative is that Thailand must be a gateway to Western China because it is difficult for Western China to get to the sea. At the same time, it can connect Thailand to the south, and the EEC will allow various products heading to Western China on this route.

6. Development guidelines for Phayao Province

- Develop tourist routes – almost all tourists do not want to travel to and from the same route. They want to travel in a unique circle, both domestic and abroad. Also, they want to travel using different modes of travel (Multimodal Transportation) such as traveling by caravan driving and renting a car from one location and returning the car another location and returning home by plane. They can also travel by road and return home with a cruise on the Mekong River. The critical routes are Kwan Phayao - Aun Phu Sang Waterfall - Ban Huak Border Checkpoint - Muang Khop (Lao PDR) - Pak Kop (Lao PDR) - Chiang Hon (Lao PDR) - Mueang Ngoen (Lao PDR) - Hongsa (Lao PDR) - Luang Prabang (Lao PDR) - Oudomxay (Lao PDR) - Luang Namtha (Lao PDR) - Mohan (China) - Xishuangbanna (China) - Kunming (China)

- Develop tourist destinations – many tourist attractions in Phayao Province has not been developed as expected yet.
- Develop a standardized interpretation system because it is an international travel route; it is necessary to have a communication system of international language, Laos language, and Chinese language.
- Develop border travel facilities – it requires a lot of cooperation and coordination of government agencies. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports shall take the lead in coordinating cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Finance, and the Security Department to assure tourists that they will pass this route safely and to create a One-Stop Service along the route.
- Promote Demand Driven Tourism Plan, which requires in-depth research in order to know the actual demand (insight) of target tourists, an extensive group of tourists with high purchasing power from China.
- There must be brainstorming and building an international travel network throughout the supply chain to achieve sustainable tourism development on the BRI route.

7. Conclusion

From the data analysis, it was found that Phayao Province has the potential for border trade. There is a permanent border crossing at Ban Huak, Phu Sang Sub-district, Phu Sang District, a connecting point to Lao PDR. It can be developed to be a gateway to the BRI Silk Road to support the border trade economy. The connectivity of natural tourism routes (Eco-Tourism) and cultural tourism can connect to the Mekong countries or GMS and China. It also brings the recommendations for developing and promoting sustainable tourism of Phayao Province to the BRI route. The recommendations are divided into several sections. The first section is the presentation of the tourist destination development plan and the tourism route connecting between countries to position Phayao Province as the source or destination of the BRI route tourism, especially to attract tourists from China and Lao PDR by focusing on tourists to stay longer in Phayao Province, expend more, and give the most benefit to local people. The examples presented are divided into 3 sub-sections: 1. Sawasdee Kwan Phayao Tourism Route (Thailand) - Sabaidee Luang Prabang (Laos) - Nihao Kunming (China), 2. The Green Peafowl Route – because Phayao Province is the last stronghold of green peafowl, and there still be a forest connecting Phayao Province with Lao PDR and Southern China. The green peafowl is also a symbol of the Tai ethnic group living in Thailand, Laos, southern China, and 3. Tai Lue Cultural Tourism Route – Phayao Province has the largest Tai Lue community in Thailand. Tai Lue moved down from Xishuangbanna, China, and evacuate to northern Laos and northern Thailand. The BRI Silk Road will provide an opportunity for Tai Lue people to travel across the three countries more easily, in line with van der Leer and Yau (2016), who researched the topic of China's New Silk Route - The Long and Winding Road. It was the study about the BRI policy that the BRI is not only used for economic benefits, but this route is also used to promote commercial interests, cultural exchange, tourism, and social integration. In addition, Hongjian (2016) noted that the People's Republic of China is ready to use the BRI to enhance the role of the existing Asian multilateral cooperation framework to its full potentials, such as the ASEAN-China Framework or APEC and ASEM to strengthen the relationship with relevant countries and attract more countries and regions to join the BRI.

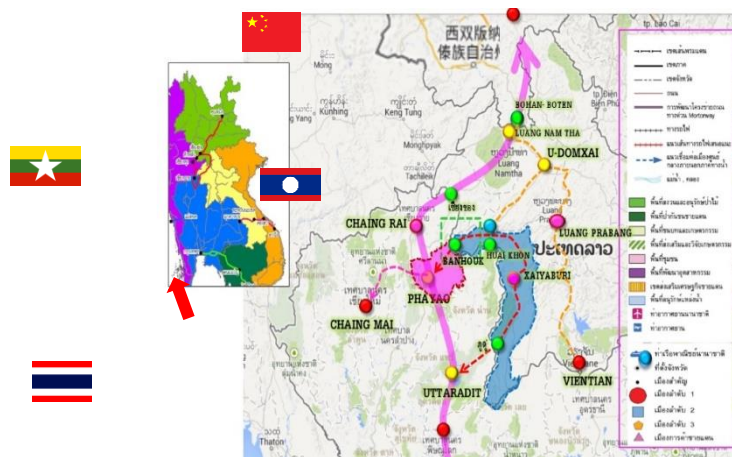


Fig.1 Ban Huak Checkpoint – Lao PDR connection

8. Policy Recommendations

From the vision of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and Phayao Province, it can be seen that policies have been formulated to promote new tourism routes and international route connectivity. Therefore, the researcher has recommendations as follows: 1. Defining the operating units' mission, duties, and responsibilities at the local level

to be unique. 2. Developing guidelines for promoting cooperation between the three countries: Thailand, Laos, and China. 3. Coordinating with various departments throughout the tourism supply chain. It is developing tourism routes connecting three countries to become more complex, and well-planning is necessary. It must be realized that the tourism promotion and development plan connects Phayao Province with the BRI route, it is necessary to take the sustainability into account that will arise from domestic and international cooperation, subjected to the conditions of the 6 sustainable tourism developments which are Safety, Accessible, Positive Sum, Volume, Travel with Theme, Be Prepared, and 4. Creating a standardized information presentation system – statistics from the Department of Tourism of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports show that the number of different types of tourists traveling in Phayao Province tends to increase after the Covid-19 epidemic, a statistical process is needed to predict the number of visitors entering the route. Besides, the China-Laos railway will open for service by 2021, so it will be an opportunity for Phayao Province to connect with this tourism route with Lao PDR and China. Therefore, Phayao Province must have standardized information and be able to access them more efficiently.

Also, both public and private agencies usually present information about tourism via social media, especially Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as it is easy and convenient. However, it is imperative to consider the accessibility of Chinese tourists who may not have access to these platforms, so it is necessary to provide information in English, Lao, and Chinese to distribute via available platforms in China, such as WeChat or Weibo. Thai operators may need to be prepared to support the electronic payment platform of Chinese tourists.

9. Acknowledgment

This research work received support from the School of Business and Communication Arts University of Phayao, Thailand under contract number MIS6302

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