

# Tourism Development and Promotion Strategies of Ancient Towns in Chongqing from the Perspective of Thai Tourists

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**Abstract:** With the deepening of globalization, China's inbound tourism market has shown a strong recovery momentum. Especially driven by the China-Thailand visa-free policy, Thai tourists' enthusiasm for traveling to China is expected to rise further. As the economic and cultural center in southwest China, Chongqing has become a popular destination for Thai tourists with its unique mountain-city features and rich historical relics. This study uses word cloud analysis to examine package tour data from Thai travel agencies to China, and combines word cloud analysis with grounded theory to analyze travel vlogs about China posted by Thai travel bloggers on YouTube, so as to identify the tourism preferences of Thai tourists visiting China. The combination of the two methods provides a comprehensive analytical perspective with both breadth and depth. The results show that ancient towns in Chongqing have significant appeal to Thai tourists due to their simple architectural styles and profound cultural deposits. However, the development of ancient-town tourism presents a polarization: well-known ancient towns suffer from overcrowding, while lesser-known ones lack visitor arrivals. In addition, ancient-town tourism is confronted with challenges such as over-commercialization, inadequate supporting facilities and management, and homogeneous operation. From the perspective of Thai tourists, this study analyzes their tourism preferences and proposes further development strategies for ancient-town tourism in Chongqing targeting Thai tourists.

**Keywords:** Thai tourists, ancient towns in Chongqing, tourism preferences.

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## 1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of globalization, the international tourism market is undergoing unprecedented changes. As one of the world's major tourist destinations, China's inbound tourism market has demonstrated a sound recovery trend and huge development potential in recent years despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors. At the 2024 Conference on High-Quality Development of Inbound Tourism held in Hefei, the China Tourism Academy released the Report on High-Quality Development of China's Inbound Tourism. The report indicates that the recovery and growth of China's inbound tourism sector remain robust. According to the latest data from the National Immigration Administration, in the first half of 2024, border inspection agencies across China handled entry-exit crossings by residents of Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and foreigners at 92% of the same period in 2019, with 14 million foreign nationals entering China. At present, China has achieved full mutual visa exemption for ordinary passports with 24 countries, granted unilateral visa-free entry to 16 countries, and provided 72-hour or 144-hour transit visa exemption to 54 countries.

Against this background, Thailand, as a friendly neighbor of China, contributes considerably to China's tourism market. The arrival of Thai tourists has enriched cultural exchanges between China and Thailand and injected new vitality into China's economic development. To further promote friendly exchanges between the two peoples, the Chinese government introduced the China-Thailand mutual visa exemption policy, which took effect in March 2024. This policy is expected to further stimulate Thai tourists' enthusiasm for traveling to China and play an important role in boosting the recovery of China's inbound tourism market.

Statistics show that Thailand is one of China's major tourist source markets, with a large number of Thai tourists visiting China every year. They show strong interest in China's natural scenery, history and culture, cuisine, and modern urban landscapes. Among Chinese cities, Chongqing, as the economic and cultural center in southwest China, has become a popular destination for Thai tourists with its unique mountain-city landscape, abundant historical sites, and modern urban scenery. As a national famous historical and cultural city (second batch), Chongqing boasts rich ancient-town tourism resources. These ancient towns not only carry profound historical and cultural deposits but also feature distinctive natural landscapes and architectural styles. Ancient towns in Chongqing, such as Ciqikou Ancient Town and Gongtan Ancient Town, have attracted numerous Thai tourists with their primitive architectural styles and profound cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the development of ancient-town tourism in Chongqing shows obvious polarization: famous ancient towns are overcrowded, resulting in poor visitor experiences, while lesser-known ones receive few visitors and barely make profits. The development of ancient towns also faces problems such as over-commercialization, insufficient supporting facilities and management, and homogeneous operation.

From the perspective of Thai tourists, this study analyzes their tourism preferences and puts forward targeted strategies for the further development of ancient-town tourism in Chongqing for Thai tourists. It not only helps enrich the perspectives and content of ancient-town tourism research but also provides practical guidance for the international development of tourism in Chongqing and even China. Meanwhile, the findings offer reference for other countries and regions to better attract and serve foreign tourists in tourism market development.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Ancient-Town Tourism

Ancient-town tourism refers to tourism activities taking place in ancient towns. As an important part of cultural tourism, ancient-town tourism has received extensive attention in recent years. Foreign research on ancient-town tourism has a long history with rich achievements covering a wide range of fields, mainly focusing on stakeholders of ancient-town tourism, evolution and transformation of ancient-town destinations, interactions between tourism and cultural-economic factors of ancient towns, and community participation in ancient-town tourism (Zhang, Qiu, 2011).

Domestic research on ancient-town tourism has focused on different topics at different stages. Early studies starting from 1992 centered on resource exploration aimed at promoting the development of ancient-town tourism, tentatively discussing development models and directions (Tang, Zhang, 2020). Most Chinese scholars emphasize that culture and characteristics are the keys to the development of ancient-town tourism. For example, Dong (2020) argues that ancient-town tourism development should highlight urban individuality, cultural context, and atmospheric creation, taking culture as the foundation and balancing protective construction of ancient-town landscapes with expression of cultural atmosphere. Tian (2022) holds that ancient-town tourism development requires clear destination features, theme positioning based on local characteristics, complementary core and secondary tourist attractions, and restrictive development of ancient-town resources with proper preservation.

Early blind development of ancient towns in China caused certain damage. Xiong et al. (2022) elaborated contradictions between tourism development and ancient-town protection, including environmental and atmospheric damage caused by overloaded tourist capacity, over-commercialization for profit, loss of traditional features due to tourism development affecting residents' lives, and unsustainable development caused by neglect of heritage protection. Jiang et al. (2021) explored the landscape image space of ancient water towns in the Yangtze River Delta through questionnaire surveys and cognitive mapping, aiming to provide a basis for rational tourism development based on destination image.

The development of ancient-town tourism in China has long been plagued by repeated themes, severe commercialization, and inadequate protection of tourism resources. Based on existing scholarly research, the development and construction of ancient-town tourism in China should clarify resource characteristics, develop in a targeted and reserved manner around core features, highlight destination uniqueness, and attach importance to the inheritance of historical culture. In addition, research on international tourists' preferences for ancient-town tourism remains insufficient, and the scope of visiting themes can be expanded in the development of ancient-town tourism.

### 2.2. Tourism Preferences

Tourism preference refers to tourists' psychological tendency toward tourism products or destinations, reflecting their liking and degree of affection. It is an external manifestation of tourists' demands and a basis for their product choices, exerting a profound impact on tourism market demand. Foreign research on tourism preferences started earlier, while domestic scholars began to conduct

relevant studies in the mid-1990s. As China's tourism industry entered a stage of rapid development, understanding tourism market demand and behavior became increasingly important, leading to a surge in domestic research on tourism preferences after 2001.

Many scholars have examined influencing factors of tourism preferences from tourists' perspectives. For instance, Li (2023) explored residents' tourism preferences for suburban leisure travel from the perspective of demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and education level. Zhang (2021) found that individual income, educational background, and lifestyle significantly affect tourism choices. In addition to objective demographic factors, tourists' psychological needs such as relaxation, stimulation, and socialization also influence tourism preferences (Crouch, Ritchie, 2021). Most domestic studies on tourism preferences adopt questionnaire surveys, statistical charts, and mathematical statistics, with questionnaire surveys being the most common method. For example, Xie (2016) used questionnaire surveys to identify differences in tourism preferences for ancient-town culture between tourists and administrators in Lizhuang Ancient Town. You (2017) conducted a questionnaire survey on parent-child tourism preferences to obtain findings on travel timing, information acquisition channels, and expenditure. Chen et al. (2009) used mathematical statistics based on questionnaires of Beijing tourists to reveal a negative correlation between tourism preferences and risk perception. In the era of big data, research on tourism preferences based on online data has opened up new ideas. Tang (2018) took travel photos from Mafengwo and Flickr as data sources and used content analysis to classify landscapes and analyze tourists' landscape preferences for forest parks from multiple dimensions. Pan (2021) collected travel photos from social media platforms (Mafengwo, Flickr, Tripadvisor) and applied picture content analysis to examine tourists' preferences for travel seasons, time periods, and photography techniques.

Individuals from different cultural backgrounds differ significantly in tourism activities and destination choices. East Asian tourists may prefer historical and cultural sites, while Western tourists incline toward natural scenery and leisure vacations (Lee, Allen, 2021). German tourists tend to pursue cultural and physical experiences, whereas British tourists favor pleasure and adventure (Kozak, Metin, 2002). Major preferred destinations for Chinese outbound tourists are in Southeast Asia and East Asia, while those for American outbound tourists are in North America, Europe, and East Asia (Bao, 2022). However, research on outbound tourism preferences of Thai tourists, especially their preferences for traveling to China, is scarce, leaving a research gap.

Although existing studies have explored ancient-town tourism and tourism preferences, research targeting ancient towns in Chongqing and tourism preferences of Thai tourists is limited, and studies on Thai tourists' preferences for ancient-town tourism are almost absent. Furthermore, most existing studies focus on general characteristics and behaviors of tourists, with insufficient in-depth analysis on how to enhance the attractiveness of specific destinations to Thai tourists, especially in combination with unique resources and culture of ancient towns in Chongqing.





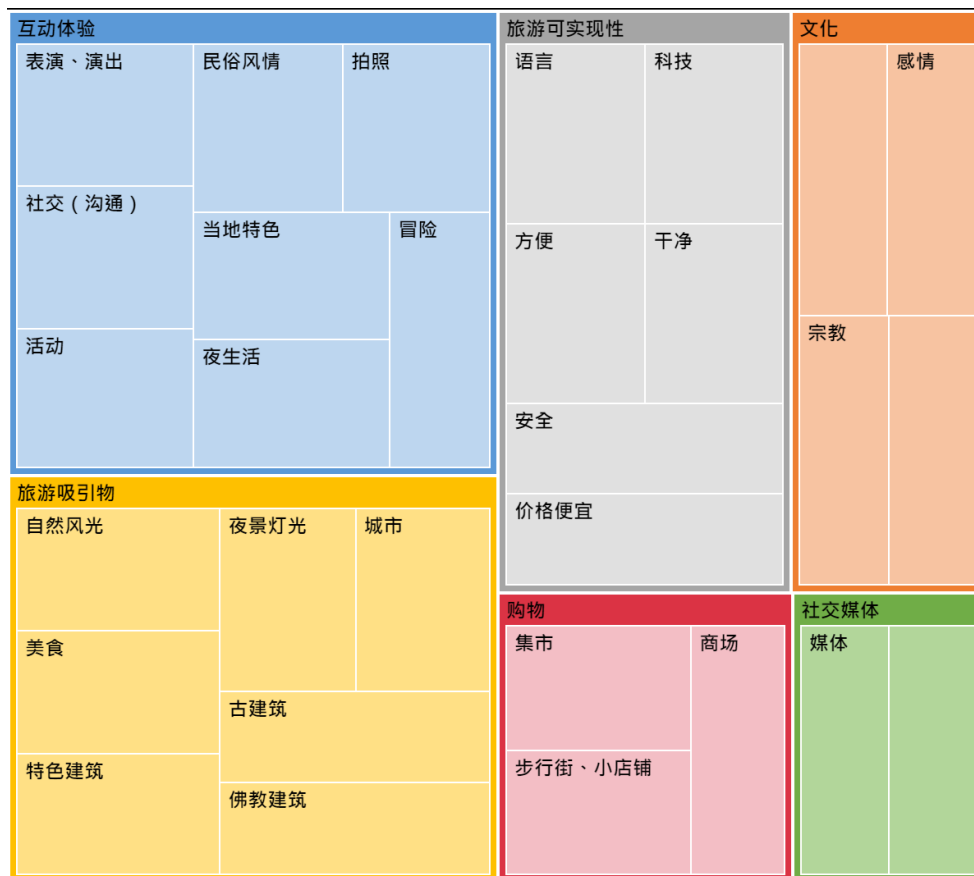


Figure 3. Hierarchical coding diagram

The coding analysis clearly shows that folk customs, architecture, natural scenery, night scenery and lighting, cuisine, photography, and small stalls have strong appeal to Thai tourists. Meanwhile, transportation, language, and environmental conditions affect the feasibility of Thai tourists' travels. Accordingly, ancient-town tourism is highly attractive to Thai tourists, but further development and adjustment are needed for some ancient towns to better serve Thai tourists.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

### 5.1. Optimize Facilities and Accessibility of Ancient Towns

Convenient transportation, clear signage, and a clean environment enhance Thai tourists' travel satisfaction. Most ancient towns are far from urban areas, with limited public transport and high taxi costs. It is suggested to improve transportation infrastructure by adding special tourist lines to enhance connectivity between ancient towns and urban areas or major transport hubs. Clear bilingual signs, rest areas, and public toilets should be added at entrances and inside ancient towns. Smart tourism systems (e.g., online navigation, electronic payment) can be introduced to improve convenience.

### 5.2. Preserve Local Characteristics and Retain Human Touch

Thai tourists particularly favor architectural landscapes. Ancient towns should prioritize protection over renovation, focusing on restoration and preservation of traditional buildings to maintain their original appearance. Photo-friendly spots can be set up to cater to Thai tourists' photography preferences. Regular traditional festivals and

folk performances can be held to enhance cultural experience and participation. To avoid over-commercialization and homogeneity, some local residents can be retained to allow tourists to experience authentic local life and the unique charm of Chongqing's culture. Cultural experience programs (e.g., handicraft making, traditional food production) can be developed to increase engagement, sense of achievement, and souvenir value.

### 5.3. Develop Recreational Activities to Enrich Tourism Experience

Simple sightseeing can be monotonous. Long-term performances (e.g., interactive shows, traditional talk shows) can be designed based on ancient towns' history, culture, and architecture to extend visitors' stay. Intangible cultural heritage experiences and traditional games can be added to improve participation. Night scenery and lighting impress Thai tourists greatly; lighting design should fit cultural background and highlight historical deposits. Night tours in ancient costumes can be organized to create a splendid visual experience.

### 5.4. Develop Cultural and Creative Products to Enhance Memory

Tourist souvenirs are crucial for leaving deep impressions. Specialized cultural and creative stores can be opened at entrances of ancient towns, developing products integrating ancient-town features and Chongqing culture for Thai tourists to take home. Stalls can be set up to support local craftsmen and artists to display and sell works, providing Thai tourists with unique shopping experiences and turning every cultural and creative product into a carrier of wonderful memories.

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