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Original Research Article

China–Thailand Mutual Visa Exemption as a Driver of Inbound Tourism: A Multi-segment Socioeconomic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the structural and experiential barriers that Chinese tourists faced prior to the implementation of the China–Thailand Mutual Visa Exemption policy in March 2024. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates quantitative data from 830 structured survey responses with qualitative insights from 15 in-depth interviews across five purpose-based tourist subgroups: general tourists, students, business travelers, job seekers, and retirees. The central research question investigates the types and extent of obstacles that impeded Chinese tourists from choosing Thailand as a travel destination before the visa policy was enacted. Results identify four dominant categories of pre-policy challenges: (1) visa processing complexity, including document burdens and unclear categories; (2) language and cultural barriers, which created anxiety and confusion during border entry and local interaction; (3) policy inconsistency and procedural unpredictability, particularly during the COVID-19 era; and (4) trust erosion due to the increasing visibility of grey capital activities in tourism, real estate, and education sectors. These issues were especially pronounced among independent travelers, older tourists, and first-time visitors. The study applies Push–Pull Theory as its main analytical framework, supported by Plog’s psychographic segmentation, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, and Doxey’s Irridex model. Findings confirm that administrative rigidity, service fragmentation, and symbolic discomfort discouraged travel even before formal restrictions were lifted. The implications highlight the importance of pre-emptive infrastructure reform, cultural mediation mechanisms, and segmented service systems to ensure policy effectiveness beyond its symbolic enactment. This research provides empirical and theoretical contributions to the study of mobility governance, tourism psychology, and cross-border visitor management.



Introduction

Tourism has long served as a critical driver of economic growth in Southeast Asia, with Thailand emerging as one of the region's most prominent destinations. Among its international markets, China has consistently represented the largest source of inbound tourists. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand welcomed more than 10 million Chinese visitors annually, accounting for nearly one-third of total international arrivals. This substantial influx contributed significantly to national revenue, particularly within the hospitality, retail, transportation, and service sectors, thereby reinforcing tourism's strategic importance to the Thai economy.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 precipitated an unprecedented crisis in global mobility and tourism. International travel restrictions, border closures, and public health concerns led to a dramatic contraction in cross-border movements. Thailand experienced a sharp decline in foreign arrivals, with Chinese tourist numbers in 2022 representing only a marginal proportion of pre-pandemic levels. The prolonged absence of this key market exposed structural vulnerabilities within Thailand's tourism-dependent economy and underscored the urgency of sustainable recovery strategies.

In response to the downturn, the governments of Thailand and China implemented a Mutual Visa Exemption policy in March 2024, permitting visa-free stays of up to 60 days. This bilateral initiative was intended to stimulate travel demand, rebuild market confidence, and accelerate tourism recovery. While the policy carries strong symbolic and diplomatic significance, its practical effectiveness remains contingent upon broader structural and perceptual factors. Notably, several pre-existing challenges—such as concerns related to safety, service quality, pricing transparency, and destination image—had already begun to influence Chinese outbound travel decisions prior to the pandemic.

Despite the policy's strategic intent, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to assessing whether visa liberalization alone is sufficient to revitalize Chinese tourist arrivals to Thailand in the post-pandemic context. Existing research often emphasizes macroeconomic recovery trends or general tourism resilience, while comparatively fewer studies examine the interaction between policy measures and traveler perceptions within this specific bilateral framework.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of the 2024 Mutual Visa Exemption policy in restoring Chinese tourism to Thailand, while also examining the underlying structural and perceptual factors that may facilitate or constrain its impact. By doing so, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of post-pandemic tourism recovery and policy-driven mobility in the Southeast Asian context.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Push–Pull Theory and Pre-Travel Barriers

Push–Pull Theory is central to understanding tourism motivations (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977). Push factors drive individuals to travel due to internal motivations, such as dissatisfaction or curiosity, while pull factors refer to the attractiveness of the destination—like affordability, safety, or climate. In China–Thailand travel, push factors include urban pressure and social competition, while pull factors include low costs and perceived friendliness. This study expands the theory's application to barriers that suppress push intentions. Administrative



rigidity, trust concerns, and cultural mismatches obstruct push factors, while inconsistent services dilute pull factors. For example, visa rules or language barriers may discourage travel, even when Thailand is viewed positively.

Cultural Capital and Symbolic Comfort (Bourdieu)

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital explains how familiarity with a host country's norms affects tourist confidence. Tourists with higher cultural fluency—such as language ability or experience with Thai systems—reported fewer difficulties and a higher willingness to return. Others, unfamiliar with basic customs or immigration behavior, experienced anxiety and disorientation. This symbolic discomfort often discouraged return visits, reinforcing the role of cultural fluency in travel behavior.

Psychographic Segmentation and Barrier Tolerance (Plog)

Plog (1974) segmented tourists as psychocentric or allocentric. Psychocentric travelers seek routine and safety; allocentric one's welcome novelty. In this study, retirees and job seekers aligned more with the former—showing higher sensitivity to complexity and uncertainty—while students and professionals were more flexible but still frustrated. These behavioral traits affect barrier tolerance. What seems minor to one traveler may be significant to another. Policy responses should reflect these psychological differences.

Tourist Gaze and Expectation Friction (Urry)

Urry's "tourist gaze" suggests that media shapes expectations before a trip. In China, platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin present Thailand as seamless and welcoming. However, many travelers encountered a gap between these images and on-the-ground realities—such as limited payment systems or weak signage—which led to disappointment. This gap creates a subtle but powerful barrier: not from actual service absence, but from misaligned expectations.

Doxey's Irridex and Host Responses

Doxey's Irridex model tracks host attitudes from euphoria to antagonism. In Thailand, unease about unregulated Chinese investments—especially in real estate or education—has shifted local sentiment. Tourists reported discomfort from this perceived tension, particularly when they were wrongly grouped with speculative actors. Even law-abiding travelers sensed distrust, revealing that social atmosphere itself can become a barrier.

Framework Summary and Application

This study integrates these theories into a barrier framework: Push–Pull Theory explains structural friction; Bourdieu adds symbolic capital; Plog distinguishes behavior patterns; Urry reveals expectation formation; and Doxey captures local reaction. Together, they show that travel barriers are not just physical or procedural—but psychological, emotional, and social.



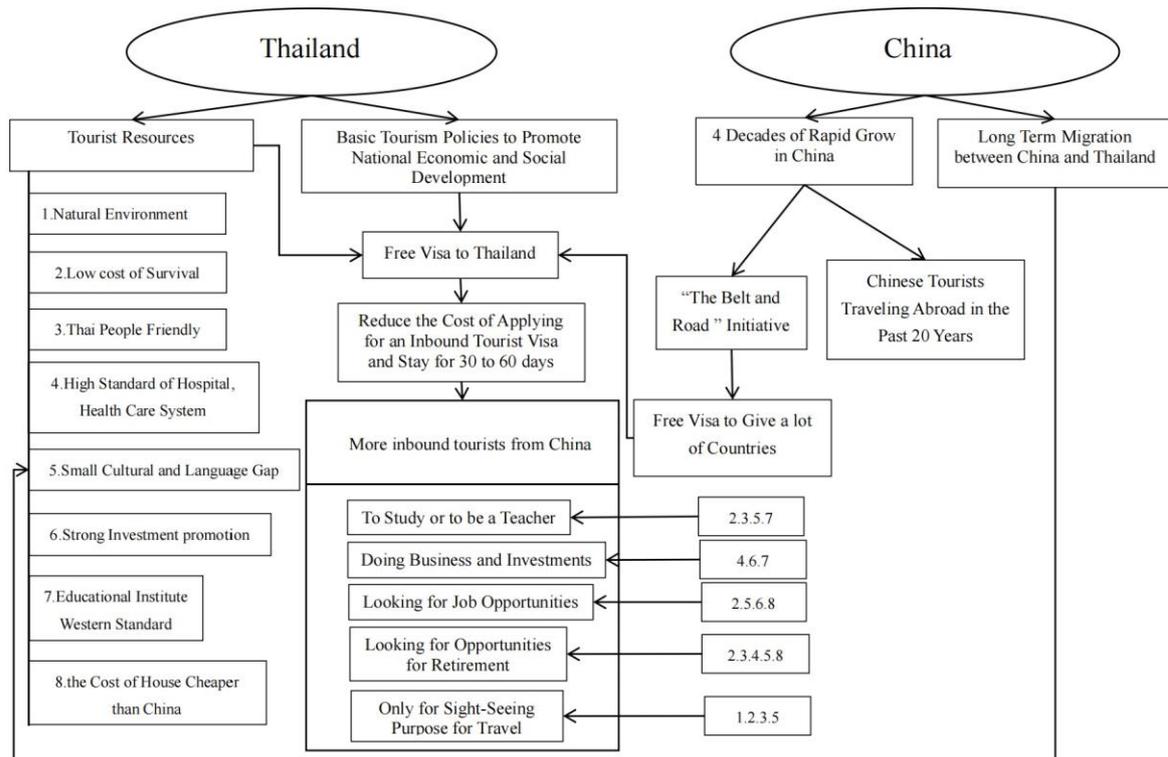


Figure 1 Integrated Theoretical Framework

Objectives

1. To identify the administrative, cultural, and emotional barriers that discouraged Chinese tourists before the policy.
2. To examine how these barriers varied across five tourist types: retirees, students, job seekers, business travelers, and general tourists.
3. To assess the relationship between cultural familiarity and revisit intention, highlighting how symbolic comfort affects travel behavior.

Hypotheses

The study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: Perceived visa complexity differs significantly across tourist types.

H2: Cultural familiarity (Q5) positively correlates with revisit intention (Q8).

H3: Tourists with lower education levels report more institutional stress.

H4: The gap between social media portrayals and real experiences reduces satisfaction and revisit intention.

These hypotheses guide the analysis and link traveler perceptions to broader theories such as Push–Pull, cultural capital, and expectation management.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a mixed-methods design, combining survey data with qualitative interviews. The goal is to capture both the scale and depth of pre-policy travel barriers experienced by Chinese tourists.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected purposively from five travel groups: general tourists, students, business travelers, job seekers, and retirees. Data was gathered between November 2023 and January 2024 in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, and Pattaya. Of 1,000 distributed questionnaires, 830 valid responses were retained. Additionally, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted (3 per group). Respondents had traveled before March 1, 2024, using tourist or non-immigrant visas.

Survey Structure

The survey included three parts:

- Demographics (age, gender, occupation, visa type, etc.)
- Eight Likert-scale items (Q1–Q8) capturing motivations and perceived challenges
- Two open-ended questions on service experience and suggestions

Reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's Alpha = 0.846. Experts reviewed the questionnaire using the Item–Objective Congruence method, and a 100-person pre-test ensured clarity.

Interviews and Coding

Interviews followed a guide focused on visa difficulties, service barriers, cultural mismatches, and the influence of grey capital. Responses were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo, highlighting four recurring themes: procedural complexity, language/cultural friction, institutional inconsistency, and social trust concerns.

Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics summarized frequency and group differences.
- ANOVA tested perception variation by travel purpose.
- Pearson correlation examined the link between cultural familiarity (Q5) and revisit intent (Q8).
- Thematic analysis categorized open-ended responses and interview insights.

Ethics

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Interviewees provided consent, and ethics approval was obtained from the host university.



Results

This section presents findings from 830 survey responses and 15 interviews, addressing the central research question: *What barriers did Chinese tourists face before the visa exemption policy?*

Table 1 Key Challenges (Descriptive Statistics)

Barrier Category	Specific Issue	Percentage (%)
Visa Complexity	Confusion over visa type and fee	92%
	Lengthy documentation requirements	88%
	Uncertainty in approval duration	86%
Language/Culture	Language difficulties at airport, hotels	84%
	Lack of Mandarin signage and guides	72%
	Unfamiliar tipping customs	71%
Entry Process	Inconsistent rules at different borders	43%
	COVID-era policy unpredictability	88%
Infrastructure	Poor public transport connectivity	38%
	No Chinese-compatible payment systems	34%

Table 1 – Summary of Pre-Policy Travel Barriers Source: Survey results, Q1–Q8, n = 830 These results confirm that administrative rigidity and cultural disconnect were widespread and shaped perceptions before travel began.

Table 2 Group Differences (ANOVA) ANOVA revealed statistically significant variation:

- Retirees ranked housing cost and visa stress highest.
- Students raised concerns about school legitimacy and housing scams.
- Job seekers felt scrutinized at immigration.
- Business travelers highlighted slow licensing processes.
- General tourists cited cultural misunderstandings and tech inaccessibility.

Group	Most Reported Barrier	Implication
Retirees	Visa complexity, housing cost	Need long-stay support + real estate clarity
Students	School credibility, housing scams	Institutional trust + student visa reform
Job Seekers	Immigration suspicion, employment legality	Legal work channels, avoid stigma



Business Travelers	Licensing delays, tax system confusion	Admin simplification + bilingual portals
General Tourists	Language inaccessibility, tech limitations	Need Mandarin signage + digital payment tools

Table 2 – Tourist Group Comparison of Top Barrier Sensitivities These differences validate the need for segment-specific solutions.

Correlation Analysis

- Cultural familiarity (Q5) ↔ Revisit intention (Q8): $r = 0.311$, $p < 0.01$
- Age ↔ Revisit intention: $r = 0.211$, $p < 0.05$

These show that symbolic comfort and life stage influence return behavior more than income or education.

Thematic Insights

Interview themes included:

- Visa anxiety: “Every trip felt like paperwork roulette.”
- Trust erosion: “I don’t want to be treated like a scammer.”
- Cultural disconnect: “No one spoke Mandarin at customs.”
- Unmet expectations: “They say it’s convenient, but I couldn’t even pay.”

These narratives add depth to the quantitative data, reinforcing that emotional friction was as impactful as logistical difficulty.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the pre-policy travel constraints experienced by Chinese tourists were not isolated administrative inconveniences, but rather components of a broader ecosystem of friction. These barriers operated simultaneously at structural, symbolic, emotional, and reputational levels. In line with the study’s objectives, this section discusses how these dimensions shaped travel decision-making, how they differed across tourist types, and how cultural familiarity influenced revisit intention.

Structural Barriers and Suppressed Travel Motivation

Consistent with Push–Pull Theory (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979), Chinese tourists expressed strong intrinsic motivations (push factors) such as relaxation, cultural exploration, and social status enhancement. However, these motivations were frequently constrained by external structural barriers (pull inhibitors), including complex visa procedures, inconsistent documentation requirements, language barriers, and limited inter-agency coordination. While Thailand has long been perceived as an attractive destination, institutional complexity appeared to interrupt the transformation of desire into actual travel behavior. This aligns with



the concept of “travel constraints” proposed by Crawford and Godbey (1987), who argue that structural barriers can suppress participation even when motivation is high. Particularly among first-time and risk-averse travelers, administrative uncertainty reduced perceived behavioral control, thereby weakening travel intention (Ajzen, 1991). Thus, prior to the policy reform, institutional friction functioned not merely as an inconvenience but as a psychological deterrent that blocked the motivational pathway before it matured into action.

Cultural Capital and Symbolic Comfort

The findings also reveal that cultural familiarity significantly influenced tourist confidence and emotional experience. Tourists with prior exposure to Thai culture—through media, food, language, or previous visits—demonstrated higher levels of symbolic comfort and lower anxiety. This supports Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital, whereby accumulated cultural knowledge enhances individuals’ ability to navigate unfamiliar social fields. Conversely, participants lacking such familiarity described experiences of “soft exclusion”—a state characterized not by overt discrimination but by uncertainty regarding etiquette, communication, and appropriate behavior. Such symbolic discomfort contributed to emotional strain and diminished revisit intention. These findings resonate with the notion of the “tourist gaze” (Urry & Larsen, 2011), which suggests that tourism is mediated by socially constructed expectations. When visitors lack interpretive frameworks to decode local norms, symbolic disorientation may occur. Moreover, emotional responses such as anxiety and perceived unwelcomeness have been shown to negatively affect destination loyalty (Chen & Chen, 2010). Therefore, symbolic comfort appears to play a mediating role between cultural familiarity and revisit intention.

Psychographic Sensitivity to Barriers

In addressing the second research objective, the study demonstrates that barriers were not experienced uniformly across tourist types. Drawing on Plog’s (1974, 2001) psychographic model, retirees and job seekers exhibited characteristics of psychocentric travelers—preferring familiarity, predictability, and institutional clarity. These groups were particularly sensitive to administrative ambiguity and reputational uncertainty, often abandoning travel plans at early stages. In contrast, students and business travelers displayed allocentric tendencies, showing greater tolerance for complexity and novelty. However, even among these groups, frustration emerged when institutional inefficiencies created unnecessary uncertainty. This suggests that allocentric orientation may buffer—but not eliminate—the negative impact of structural barriers. The findings therefore extend Plog’s framework by demonstrating that psychographic traits interact with institutional environments. Structural friction disproportionately affects risk-averse segments, potentially narrowing the diversity of inbound tourist profiles.

Expectation Friction and Grey Capital Effects

The concept of expectation–experience disconfirmation (Oliver, 1980) provides insight into the mismatch between mediated images and on-site realities. Through curated social media and promotional narratives, Thailand was often presented as seamless, digitally convenient, and culturally welcoming. However, participants reported encountering limited



digital payment compatibility, inconsistent language accessibility, and bureaucratic opacity. This discrepancy produced what may be termed “expectation friction,” wherein experiential reality falls short of the imagined tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Such friction weakened satisfaction and reduced emotional attachment to the destination. Additionally, the presence of grey capital—informal economic actors and visa irregularities—generated reputational tension. Some participants expressed concern about being stereotyped as speculative investors or visa abusers. Even when complying fully with regulations, they feared misrecognition or suspicion. Reputational vulnerability, therefore, functioned as an emotional constraint, reinforcing feelings of unwelcomeness and diminishing trust in institutional fairness. This finding aligns with research on destination image and trust, which suggests that perceived social climate and fairness significantly influence tourist loyalty (Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

Synthesis: A Multi-Layered Barrier Ecosystem

Overall, the study identifies four interconnected layers of pre-policy friction:

1. Structural barriers: complex visa procedures, inconsistent institutional coordination
2. Symbolic barriers: unfamiliar customs, limited cultural decoding capacity
3. Emotional barriers: anxiety, fear of mistakes, perceived unwelcomeness
4. Reputational barriers: association with illegality or speculative behavior

These layers did not operate independently; rather, they reinforced one another, forming a systemic ecosystem of friction. Administrative opacity intensified symbolic uncertainty; symbolic discomfort amplified emotional stress; reputational tension heightened sensitivity to institutional treatment. Therefore, tourism reform should extend beyond procedural simplification. While visa facilitation is necessary, it is insufficient. Policymakers must simultaneously enhance cultural accessibility, strengthen multilingual communication, promote inclusive narratives, and rebuild institutional trust. Addressing only structural constraints may increase arrivals in the short term; however, without improving symbolic comfort and emotional assurance, revisit intention and sustainable destination loyalty may remain limited. The findings thus highlight the importance of integrating administrative efficiency with cultural empathy in destination governance.

Conclusion

This study investigated the principal challenges encountered by Chinese tourists prior to the implementation of the China–Thailand Mutual Visa Exemption policy. Consistent with the study’s objectives, the findings demonstrate that travel barriers extended beyond procedural and logistical constraints to encompass symbolic, emotional, and perceptual dimensions.

Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the research revealed that difficulties such as visa-related uncertainty, language barriers, and limited access to reliable travel information significantly shaped pre-travel decision-making processes. More importantly, the findings indicate that these practical impediments were intertwined with broader socio-cultural dynamics. Cultural misunderstandings, communication gaps, and perceived stigma—particularly those associated with narratives of grey capital—contributed to heightened anxiety and diminished travel confidence among potential visitors.



By situating logistical challenges within a wider socio-symbolic framework, this study underscores the multidimensional nature of travel barriers in cross-border mobility contexts. The results highlight the importance of policy interventions that address not only administrative efficiency but also trust-building, cultural mediation, and image management. In doing so, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of outbound tourism constraints and offers meaningful implications for policymakers and destination stakeholders seeking to enhance bilateral tourism flows.

Recommendations

Practical Recommendations

1. The platform should prioritize usability, transparency, and trust-building functions rather than promotional content.
2. Segment-based governance enhances satisfaction, reduces regulatory friction, and minimizes spillover effects into informal markets.
3. Simplify and rename visa classifications to reduce confusion between tourism, education, employment, and long-stay permits. Clear taxonomy reduces compliance risks and mitigates inadvertent violations.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis relies solely on cross-sectional data from 2025, which limits the ability to capture the long-term effects of policy adjustments or technological change on the relationships among the six variables, potentially resulting in static estimation bias. Second, the research focuses on industrial colleges at or above the provincial level, which may overlook the distinctive characteristics of cooperation between local colleges and SMEs. Such forms of “embedded cooperation” may involve different trust-building paths and variable weight structures. Third, the study assumes linear relationships among variables and does not account for potential nonlinear effects or mediating mechanisms, which warrants further methodological verification.

Future Research Directions

1. Comparative studies between Thailand and other visa-exempt destinations could evaluate whether experiential accessibility consistently predicts traveler satisfaction.
2. Develop validated measurement scales for institutional trust in cross-border tourism contexts.
- 3 Empirically examine how financial irregularities influence tourism perception and diplomatic sentiment.
4. Investigate how social media ecosystems shape pre-arrival expectations and post-visit evaluations.



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