Original Research Article

Facilitating Mobility or Fueling Complexity?
A Segment-Based Assessment of the Thailand–China Visa Waiver Agreement

Zhang Xin[1*]

ARTICLE INFO

**Name of Author &
Corresponding Author: ***

1. Zhang Xin*
College of Leadership and Social
Innovation, Rangsit University,
Thailand.
Email: xiner_0821@yeah.net

How to Cite:
Xin, Z. (2025). Facilitating Mobility or
Fueling Complexity? A Segment-Based
Assessment of the Thailand–China Visa
Waiver Agreement. *Journal Dhamma for
Life,* 31(4), 823-835.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the segmented impacts of the Thailand–China Mutual Visa Exemption policy implemented in March 2024. While the agreement has facilitated cross-border travel and revitalized Thailand's inbound tourism, it has also introduced legal ambiguity, administrative strain, and symbolic friction especially among long-stay or purpose-driven travelers such as students, retirees, and job seekers. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research combines 830 survey responses with 15 in-depth interviews across five traveler groups. Findings reveal a shift in travel motivations from traditional push–pull factors to policy-enabled flexibility. While tourists benefit from ease of entry, other groups face regulatory uncertainties around visa extension, residency classification, and social legitimacy. These tensions are exacerbated by infrastructural constraints and inconsistent institutional communication. The study contributes to mobility governance theory by proposing a modified Push Pull framework incorporating trust, segmentation, and post-access frictions. Policy implications suggest the need for differentiated onboarding, traveler profiling, and real-time monitoring systems. A segment-sensitive governance model is recommended to ensure that simplification does not lead to systemic vulnerability.

This research offers empirical and theoretical insights into the unintended complexities of visa liberalization and provides a roadmap for countries aiming to align accessibility with long-term sustainability.

Introduction

International mobility policies have undergone significant recalibration in the post-pandemic period as governments seek to revive tourism, stimulate investment, and restore confidence in cross-border movement (Hall et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2021). In March 2024, Thailand and China implemented a Mutual Visa Exemption Agreement allowing visa-free entry for up to 60 days. Designed as a catalyst for economic recovery, the policy aimed to re-energize Thailand's largest pre-pandemic source market Chinese travelers and signal the country's broader commitment to openness (Ministry of Tourism and Sports Thailand, 2024). Visa liberalization is often presented as an unequivocal public good: reducing procedural barriers, enhancing accessibility, and facilitating short-term mobility (Neumayer, 2006; Guild, 2020). Yet such reforms rarely affect all traveler types uniformly. While leisure tourists primarily benefit from simplified entry procedures, other segments such as students, retirees, business visitors, and job seekers interact more extensively with host-country institutions, including legal systems, housing markets, education providers, and healthcare services. For these groups, liberalization can introduce administrative ambiguities and vulnerabilities stemming from unclear rules, uneven enforcement, or incomplete information (Hamenstädt, 2022; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Recent developments in Thailand illustrate these challenges. The visa-free regime has attracted an increasingly heterogeneous mix of Chinese visitors, including those pursuing long-stay aspirations, exploratory educational mobility, or cyclical migration strategies (Liu-Farrer, 2020). However, post-entry governance has not kept pace with this diversification. Processes related to visa extensions, access to services, and status transitions remain inconsistently communicated or applied (Chantavanich & Middleton, 2023). At the same time, some travelers report feeling symbolically misclassified framed in public discourse as part of "grey capital" or speculative migration flows despite legitimate intentions—illustrating tensions between state branding, local perceptions, and the symbolic ordering of mobile subjects (Bourdieu, 1986; Yeoh & Lin, 2013). Despite the growing salience of these issues, existing scholarship continues to prioritize macroeconomic indicators such as arrival volumes, spending levels, and aggregate recovery (UNWTO, 2023). Such approaches frequently treat "tourists" as a homogeneous category, overlooking how visa policies are interpreted, negotiated, and experienced differently by diverse traveler segments (Cohen & Cohen, 2019). This analytical gap limits understanding of both the unintended governance consequences of liberalization and the symbolic frictions that can arise from uneven policy implementation.

In response, this study investigates two research questions: How has the visa exemption policy influenced motivations, mobility strategies, and behavioral adaptations across different traveler types? And What governance strategies can sustain the policy's economic benefits while mitigating segment-specific risks?

To address these questions, the research employs a mixed-methods design integrating 830 post-policy surveys and 15 in-depth interviews across five traveler categories: tourists, students, business visitors, job seekers, and retirees. The analysis applies an integrated conceptual framework combining Push–Pull Theory (Dann, 1977), mobility governance (Geiger & Pécoud, 2020), and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), enabling a multidimensional examination of both material and interpretive factors shaping mobility.

This study makes three contributions. First, it provides empirical insight into how travelers with diverse profiles experience a seemingly uniform visa policy. Second, it contributes theoretically by extending motivation and legitimacy models to the context of

post-pandemic mobility governance. Third, it offers policy-relevant guidance for designing trust-based, segment-aware mobility systems that enhance the long-term sustainability of visa liberalization. The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature. Section 3 outlines research objectives and hypotheses. Section 4 describes the methodology. Section 5 presents empirical results. Section 6 discusses findings. Section 7 concludes. Section 8 offers policy recommendations.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Visa liberalization has long been understood as a mechanism that facilitates cross-border mobility by reducing administrative barriers and improving destination attractiveness (Neumayer, 2006; UNWTO, 2022). Yet emerging research suggests that its impacts are neither uniform across traveler categories nor limited to the point of entry. Instead, liberalization interacts with travelers' differentiated needs, policy signaling, and evolving governance regimes in ways that can generate uneven benefits and new regulatory frictions. This section synthesizes insights from segmented tourism analysis, mobility motivation theory, and post-entry governance literature, and incorporates sociological perspectives on symbolic capital to build the study's conceptual foundation.

Segmented Tourism

Conventional tourism scholarship frequently aggregates visitors into a single analytical category, overlooking the heterogeneity of travel purposes and regulatory requirements (Song et al., 2012). More recent work, however, emphasizes that travelers are segmented across multiple dimensions such as leisure, education, business, medical stays, and retirement migration each involving distinct expectations, risk profiles, and administrative needs (Zhang & Pine, 2020). For instance, retirees often require predictable long-stay access, healthcare eligibility, and stable housing arrangements, while international students depend on visa continuity, institutional accreditation, and the ability to transition into subsequent stay categories. Treating these groups as interchangeable obscures how policy incentives and constraints affect them differently. Without acknowledging this heterogeneity, visa policies may produce uneven outcomes, enabling smooth mobility for some categories while unintentionally creating regulatory blind spots or administrative burdens for others.

Visa Policy as a Pull Factor

Push Pull Theory provides a foundational explanation for mobility decisions, positing that travel is shaped by internal motivations (push factors) and external destination features (pull factors) (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979). Under regimes of visa liberalization, the visa itself becomes a salient pull factor by signaling openness, flexibility, and administrative friendliness. However, simplified entry procedures do not necessarily translate into ease after arrival. Scholars increasingly note that visa-driven motivation may coexist with post-access frictions such as unclear extension rules, limited rights to services, or uncertainty regarding long-stay conversion pathways. Consequently, visa liberalization must be analyzed not merely as a facilitator of initial mobility but as part of a broader continuum of regulatory experience in which early signals of openness may be undermined by subsequent administrative complexity.

Governance After Entry

Mobility governance theory argues that the border is only the first point in an extended chain of regulatory interactions that structure migrant and traveler experiences (Sheller, 2018; Salazar, 2020). Post-entry governance including residence registration, visa extensions, status conversions, and access to local services often becomes more consequential than the initial entry decision. In Thailand, for example, visa liberalization policies have streamlined arrival procedures while leaving long-stay governance fragmented across agencies and visa categories. The absence of coherent pathways for shifting from short-term to long-term residence has led to inconsistent enforcement practices, reliance on intermediaries, and the emergence of informal workarounds. These gaps can erode institutional trust, diminish travelers' sense of security, and ultimately undermine the intended policy benefits of liberalization.

Symbolic Capital and Social Perception

Beyond formal regulations, mobility is shaped by how travelers are socially perceived within the host society. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) notion of symbolic capital, legitimacy and recognition become forms of social currency that affect everyday interactions and emotional well-being. In contexts of heightened sensitivity around foreign real-estate investment, demographic changes, or educational institutions, travelers may be symbolically classified in ways that diverge from their actual purpose of stay. Retirees and students in the present study reported being mistaken for "grey capital" actors because of linguistic markers, rental arrangements, or their affiliation with certain schools. Such misrecognitions can generate discomfort, reduce trust, and weaken revisit intention or positive referral behavior, despite travelers' full legal compliance. Symbolic capital therefore becomes a key dimension of the post-entry experience, linking social perception to mobility sustainability.
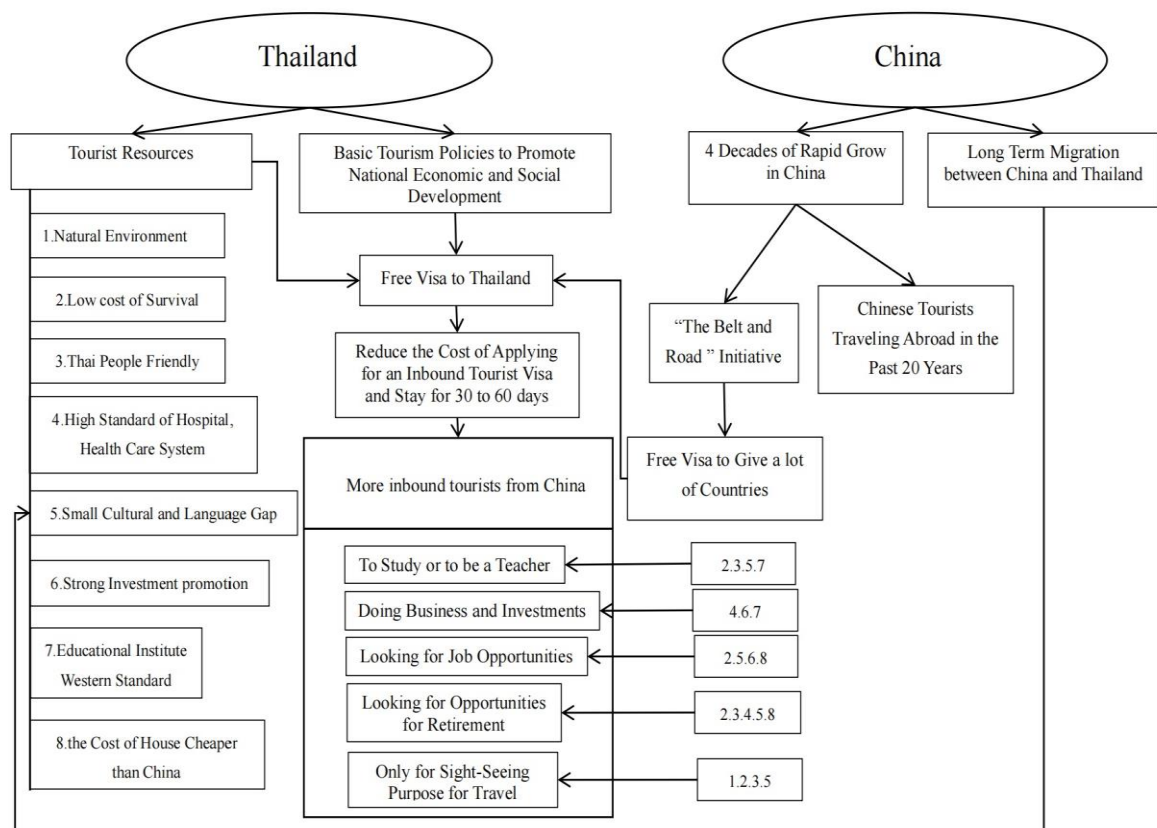
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

Objectives

1. Examine how visa liberalization shifts travel motivations by segment.
2. Assess travelers' trust in legal clarity, service access, and visa processes.
3. Identify post-entry frictions and symbolic misclassification risks.
4. Recommend segment-sensitive policy solutions grounded in empirical evidence.

Hypotheses

Based on Push Pull Theory, mobility governance, and symbolic capital, the study tests four hypotheses:

1. Visa convenience has become a key pull factor, especially for long-stay groups.
2. Legal clarity and trust vary significantly across traveler segments.
3. Cultural capital (e.g., prior travel, education, language skills) correlates with higher trust and return intention.
4. Perceived association with grey capital negatively affects institutional trust, particularly for retirees and students.

These hypotheses structure the survey design, statistical testing, and interview analysis that follow in later chapters.

Methodology

This study uses a convergent mixed-methods approach to examine how Thailand's visa exemption policy impacts segmented Chinese travelers. Quantitative data provide breadth across traveler groups, while qualitative interviews reveal nuanced governance experiences.

Research Design

A mixed-methods strategy was chosen to capture both measurable trends and experiential insights. The research focuses on five traveler types tourists, students, job seekers, business travelers, and retirees who engage with the policy differently.

Survey Component

A structured questionnaire was distributed in Mandarin and English at four major travel zones: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, and Pattaya. Data were collected from March to November 2024.
1. Total responses: 830 valid
2. Structure:
    1) Demographics (e.g., age, gender, travel purpose)
    2) Motivational items (10 Likert-scale questions)
    3) Regulatory Confidence Index (5 items)
    4) Open-ended responses on long-stay and legitimacy concerns
3. Reliability:
    1) Motivation scale: $\alpha = 0.871$
    2) Trust scale: $\alpha = 0.804$

Interview Component

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom or WeChat, with three respondents per segment. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes, exploring:
1. Motivations for choosing Thailand
2. Experiences with visa extension and service navigation
3. Perceptions of legality and symbolic misclassification
All interviews were transcribed, translated, and analyzed using NVivo.

Analysis Strategy

1. Quantitative analysis included:
    1) Descriptive statistics
    2) ANOVA for inter-group comparisons
    3) Regression modeling to test predictors of trust
    4) Cluster analysis to group behavioral profiles
2. Quantitative analysis included:
    1) Motivational shift
    2) Legal and service friction

3) Symbolic perception
4) Grey mobility narratives
Triangulation ensured alignment between survey patterns and interview insights.

Ethical Compliance

The research received approval from [University Name] ethics board. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Transcripts were pseudonymized, and all translations verified by bilingual coders.

Results

This chapter presents findings from 830 surveys and 15 interviews, grouped under four themes: motivational shifts, segmental differences, governance perceptions, and symbolic friction.

Motivational Shifts

Survey results show that visa convenience emerged as the most important pull factor (M = 4.38), surpassing affordability (M = 4.21) and long-stay interest (M = 3.94). These changes were most pronounced among students, job seekers, and retirees, signaling a shift from short-term leisure to strategic, longer-term travel planning. Traditional push factors such as "escape from routine" and "climate" remained relevant, but were no longer dominant for long-stay groups.

Table 1 Mean Scores of Travel Motivation Items by Segment (N = 830)

Item Code	Motivation Factor	Mean Score	Dominant Segments
Q1	Escape from daily routine	3.85	Tourists
Q2	Affordability vs. other destinations	4.21	Tourists, Retirees
Q3	Climate and environmental appeal	3.97	Tourists, Retirees
Q6	Visa convenience and entry flexibility	4.38	All segments
Q8	Long-stay or repeat-visit intention	3.94	Students, Retirees, Seekers

Note. Items adapted from Push–Pull constructs. Scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale. Highest scores observed among long-stay–oriented groups.

Segmental Differences

ANOVA confirmed significant variation across segments (p < 0.01):
1) Tourists valued spontaneity but were dissatisfied with cash-based systems.
2) Students prioritized visa continuity but found extension procedures unclear.
3) Job Seekers cited informal work exploration but feared legal scrutiny.

     4) Business Travelers needed repeat access but noted confusion around tax and registration.

     5) Retirees appreciated lifestyle ease but experienced symbolic mistrust.

Cluster analysis identified three traveler types:

     1) Tactical Mobilizers (38%) – multi-purpose travelers

     2) Comfort Tourists (32%) – Entry-driven, low-friction seekers

     3) Structure Seekers (30%) – Legal-clarity dependent travelers

Governance Confidence

The Regulatory Confidence Index (RCI) averaged 3.21/5. Only 42% agreed that visa conversion or extension rules were clear.

     Regression results showed:

     1) Legal clarity ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < .001$) was the strongest predictor of trust

     2) Prior travel ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .01$) and service satisfaction ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .01$) also mattered

     RCI was lowest among students (2.83) and retirees (2.74)—groups requiring stable legal pathways but facing inconsistent experiences.

Table2 Regulatory Confidence Index (RCI) by Traveler Segment

Segment	RCI Mean	Std. Dev.	Confidence Interpretation
Tourists	3.45	0.66	Moderate–High trust
Students	2.83	0.71	Low trust, high need for clarity
Job Seekers	3.02	0.68	Mixed perceptions
Business Travelers	3.18	0.70	Functional but infrastructure-limited
Retirees	2.74	0.74	Lowest trust, symbolic uncertainty

Note. Index composed of 5 items measuring perceived visa clarity, service ease, and institutional trust.

Symbolic Misclassification

Interviews revealed symbolic discomfort, particularly among long-stay visitors mistaken for grey capital participants:

"I took language classes, rented legally, but people think I'm laundering money." Retiree, 56

"I'm told I'm still a tourist, but I live here for two months and study. It's confusing." Student, 28

This misclassification undermined emotional legitimacy, even when legal compliance was intact.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how Thailand's visa exemption policy affects different traveler categories and to evaluate whether the policy's intended mobility gains align with the lived realities of those entering under the scheme. Overall, the findings demonstrate that although the policy successfully lowers formal entry barriers, its impacts are unevenly distributed across traveler types. The results underscore persistent governance gaps, symbolic tensions, and the limitations of undifferentiated mobility frameworks. The following subsections interpret these findings in alignment with the research objectives and existing literature.

Policy as a Motivational Force

Consistent with Push–Pull Theory, travel decisions emerge from an interaction between internal motivations and external destination attributes (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979). The present study extends this framework by showing that visa policy itself has evolved into a significant pull factor, particularly for long-stay travelers such as students, retirees, and job seekers. For these groups, simplified entry processes provide an initial sense of accessibility, reinforcing Thailand's overall destination appeal. However, the findings also reveal an important nuance: visa simplicity does not translate into experiential simplicity. Although the exemption eases the decision to travel, it does not provide the structural clarity necessary for a secure stay. Respondents described uncertainty about permissible activities, pathways for visa conversion, and obligations after entry. This echoes recent research arguing that mobility regimes increasingly function as layered systems in which front-end liberalization contrasts with complex back-end controls (Hall, 2022; Xiang, 2021). Thus, while policy acts as a powerful motivational trigger, its effectiveness depends on what travelers encounter after crossing the border. A visa exemption can generate initial enthusiasm, but without supportive post-entry infrastructure, it may also produce frustration, ambivalence, or a weakened sense of trust in institutions.

Post-Access Governance Gaps

The second objective concerned the quality of post-entry governance. Findings show that even as entry is liberalized, internal systems remain fragmented, under-coordinated, and unevenly enforced. Participants reported unclear rules for visa conversion, inconsistent requirements across immigration offices, and administrative gaps affecting housing contracts, university registration, and employment verification. These issues disproportionately affect travelers staying beyond the initial 30 days, whose needs are more complex than those of short-term tourists. These patterns align with Novy's (2022) assertion that governance voids often emerge when policy liberalization is not matched by institutional coherence. Thailand's case illustrates this dynamic: the absence of integrated visa tracking, standardized documentation procedures, and inter-agency data systems creates institutional ambiguity, pushing responsibility onto travelers to interpret rules that are neither transparent nor consistently communicated. Consequently, the benefits of visa exemption are blunted by post-access uncertainty, particularly for semi-residential or transitional groups such as students, job seekers, and retirees.

Symbolic Capital and Social Perception

The third objective explored how travelers experience social perception and legitimacy within Thailand. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) framework of symbolic capital, this study finds a clear disjuncture between legal status and social legitimacy. Even participants who fully complied with visa regulations reported being stereotyped or scrutinized linked, often unfairly, to concerns about illicit finance, overstaying, or "grey capital" mobility. This finding resonates with research on the moralization of mobility, which shows that states and societies increasingly distinguish between "desirable" and "suspicious" movers regardless of legal status (Kunz, 2020; Salter, 2021). For retirees and students, such perceptions created emotional discomfort, social distance, and reduced willingness to re-engage with long-term mobility in Thailand. As visa regimes expand, symbolic capital becomes a critical yet frequently overlooked dimension of policy success. Legality alone is insufficient; travelers must also be socially recognized as legitimate participants in the host society.

Need for Segment-Sensitive Oversight

Mobility is often treated as a uniform experience, yet travelers move through governance systems in markedly different ways. As Salazar (2020) argues, mobility frameworks fail when they assume a generic traveler; the study's findings reinforce this, revealing distinct needs that emerge across traveler categories. Tourists value speed and digital convenience, seeking smooth applications rather than legal safeguards. Students depend on predictable visa continuity and strong institutional ties that anchor their long-term stay. Retirees need secure housing documentation and acknowledgment of their social contributions. Job seekers require legal "bridge" visas and clear, legitimate pathways into work. Business travelers rely on transparent tax rules and efficient, coordinated processing that keeps commercial timelines intact. These contrasting expectations show that uniform governance, though administratively tidy, is ultimately counterproductive. Instead, mobility systems benefit from graduated, segment-sensitive oversight—an approach that aligns regulatory support with the complexity of each traveler's purpose and vulnerability.

Conclusion

Thailand's recent visa-exemption policy for Chinese travelers has reshaped the rhythm of mobility across its borders, and the effects unfold differently depending on who is moving and why. On the surface, the policy creates an inviting landscape: airports operate with greater ease, queues shorten, and travelers enter with a sense of lightness, unburdened by the paperwork that once defined the first step of their journey. For many short-term tourists, Thailand now feels like a place that welcomes spontaneity. They arrive ready to explore beaches, markets, and city streets without the bureaucratic pause that a visa application once demanded. Their journeys are straightforward, and the system appears to function exactly as advertised simple, fast, and friendly. Yet beneath this smooth façade lies a more complicated terrain, one shaped not by the brief visitor but by the traveler who lingers. Long-stay and semi-residential visitors move through Thailand in ways that stretch beyond a holiday itinerary, and they often discover that the openness at the border does not extend seamlessly into the rest of their stay. For them, the visa exemption is only an initial doorway, and what follows is more

ambiguous. Rules about length of stay, extensions, and local reporting requirements can be unclear or inconsistently applied. These travelers find themselves navigating a patchwork of governance where expectations shift from office to office, or where official guidelines and on-the-ground practices do not always match. The challenges are not only procedural. They are also symbolic. As these longer-term visitors weave themselves into local neighborhoods, work in cafés, or form routines that resemble everyday life, their presence enters a space where social perceptions matter. Some are met with warmth and curiosity, while others encounter suspicion, unspoken boundaries, or uneven acceptance, depending on local narratives about foreign residents and their impact on communities. The uncertainty of their position welcomed as visitors, questioned as semi-residents adds an emotional texture to their mobility that short-term tourists rarely see. These layered experiences reveal a larger truth about visa liberalization: easing entry alone cannot ensure positive or stable mobility outcomes. Policies that accelerate arrival do not automatically guarantee comfort, clarity, or legitimacy once travelers settle into the country's social and administrative fabric. Mobility depends not only on crossing the border but on everything that happens afterward how institutions manage longer stays, how communities interpret foreign presence, and how consistently rules are enforced.

As Thailand continues expanding its visa regimes to attract diverse groups of travelers, the challenge lies in harmonizing these elements. Entry facilitation must be paired with coherent post-entry governance, and the laws that shape everyday mobility must align with the social environments in which travelers live. Only by considering the different needs of different traveler segments can Thailand transform increased access into genuinely equitable and sustainable mobility experiences. In this evolving landscape, thoughtful coordination becomes essential ensuring that the first welcome at the border resonates throughout the entire journey.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Public

1. Implement a Post-Entry Orientation System (PEOS) targeting students, retirees, and job seekers.
2. While maintaining visa-free status, authorities can assign non-binding tags at entry (e.g., T60-S for short-stay, T60-L for leaseholders). This allows for targeted communication without increasing entry friction or surveillance.
3. Multilingual Mobility Help Desks Deploy staffed help points at airports and major tourist hubs.
4. Integrate visa flow data, service requests, and risk signals across ministries.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Conduct longitudinal research on traveler adaptation and policy iteration.
2. Integrate host community perspectives to understand social tensions.
3. Compare segment-sensitive visa systems across other ASEAN states.
4. Investigate digital governance tools (e.g., visa dashboards, traveler onboarding apps) as post-access solutions**.**

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