



การกำหนดแบรนด์สถานที่และการพัฒนาการท่องเที่ยวที่ยั่งยืนในดอยแม่สลอง: การวิเคราะห์ผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียหลายฝ่าย

Destination Branding and Sustainable Tourism Development in Doi Mae Salong:
A Multi-Stakeholder Analysis

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้สำรวจมิติหลายรูปแบบของการกำหนดแบรนด์สถานที่สำหรับดอยแม่สลองที่เป็นสถานที่ที่มีความสำคัญทางประวัติศาสตร์และทางวัฒนธรรมในประเทศไทย โดยใช้วิธีผสมผสานในการทางราชการ การวิจัยนำเสนอมุมมองของนักท่องเที่ยว มุมมองของผู้ส่งเสริมทางภาคท้องถิ่นและลักษณะเฉพาะของพื้นที่เพื่อสร้างกลยุทธ์การกำหนดแบรนด์อย่างเป็นรายละเอียด การศึกษาพบว่า จุดไปรษณีย์ในการแข่งขันของดอยแม่สลองอยู่ในความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรม ประวัติศาสตร์ และความมั่งคั่งของธรรมชาติ แต่ก็ระบู่ถึงความท้าทายเช่นผลกระทบจากการระบาดของโรคโควิด-19 และความต้องการในการจัดการอย่างมีระบบในอุตสาหกรรมบริการด้านโรงแรมและอุตสาหกรรมชาในพื้นที่ซึ่งมีความสำคัญ ระบุว่านักท่องเที่ยวรักดอยแม่สลองอย่างแท้จริงเนื่องจากสิ่งท่องเที่ยวหลากหลาย ความต้องการร่วมกันของผู้ส่งเสริมทางภาคท้องถิ่นในการเพิ่มความเข้มข้นของสถานที่นี้พร้อมรักษามรดกทางวัฒนธรรมและธรรมชาติ และข้อขาดสิ่งของการจัดการในด้านการบริการที่ควรมีองค์การที่เกี่ยวข้องชาอยู่ในอุตสาหกรรม เรื่องสรุปของการศึกษานี้มอบแนะนำกลยุทธ์สำหรับการกำหนดแบรนด์ การกำหนดตำแหน่ง และการมีส่วนร่วมของผู้ส่งเสริมทางภาค เสนอแผนการตรวจสอบสำหรับการพัฒนาการท่องเที่ยวที่ยั่งยืน

คำสำคัญ: การสร้างแบรนด์จุดหมายปลายทาง, ทรัพยากรการท่องเที่ยว, ผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสีย, การมีส่วนร่วมของชุมชน, ดอยแม่สลอง

Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted dimensions of destination branding for Doi Mae Salong, a culturally rich and historically significant locale in Thailand. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research delves into tourists' perspectives, local stakeholders' viewpoints, and the area's unique attributes to formulate a comprehensive branding strategy. The study reveals that Doi Mae Salong's competitive advantage lies in its cultural diversity, historical background, and natural beauty. However, it also identifies challenges such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for more structured management in the hospitality and tea industries. Key findings indicate that, tourists' genuine affection for Doi Mae Salong due to its diverse attractions; a collective desire among stakeholders to enhance the destination's competitiveness while preserving its cultural and natural heritage; and the gaps in hospitality management require industry-specific associations. The study concludes with strategic recommendations for branding, positioning, and stakeholder engagement, offering a blueprint for sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Tourism Resources, Stakeholders, Community Engagement, Doi Mae Salong

Introduction

Cultural tourism is a growing global phenomenon, fueled by travelers seeking genuine local experiences. As highlighted by Mousavi et al. (2016), cultural destination branding plays a crucial role in tourism development by creating unique identities for destinations. Located in Chiang Rai, Northern Thailand, Doi Mae Salong has gained prominence as a key cultural tourism destination. Surrounded by stunning mountains, the village of Santikhiri offers a compelling mix of rich history, distinct culture, and natural beauty, as noted by Dania et al. (2022).

Influenced by migration from Yunnan, China, Doi Mae Salong is celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, attracting visitors with its traditional Chinese architecture and aromatic tea plantations. The local lifestyle adds to the destination's appeal. Specifically, Doi Mae Salong is situated in the Mae Fa Luang District of Chiang Rai Province, as figure 1.1 illustrated,

Figure 1.1 The Location of Doi Mae Salong in Chiang Rai Map



and serves as a hidden Chinatown near the famous Golden Triangle. It is approximately 72 kilometers from Chiang Rai International Airport and 850 kilometers from Bangkok. The area is home to a lively Chinese community, where the Chinese language, customs, entertainment, and festivals are prevalent. Often referred to as the “Yunnan Village” or “Little China” of Thailand, the area reflects its strong Chinese influence. According to Chaoprayoon and Panyadee (2014), Doi Mae Salong has multiple villages, including Bann Lor Cha, Bann Santikhiri, and Bann Japusri. The Santikhiri Village is the primary village for Doi Mae Salong, known for its vibrant Thai-Chinese culture. It is governed by the Mae Salong Nok Subdistrict Administrative Organization.

It has been highlighted by (Eiamroengporn et al., 2023) that, Doi Mae Salong exhibits a greater diversity of ethnic groupings. The region is inhabited by many ethnic groups, including the Han Chinese, Akha, Tai, Lahu, and Lisu populations. In terms of communal existence, the demographic composition of the region indicates an approximate ethnic populace of 15,000 individuals, with the Han Chinese constituting the biggest national group, or around 40% of the total population. Importantly, most of these ethnic groups have Chinese roots, owing to historical migration to mountainous regions in countries such as Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Doi Mae Salong is well recognized as a prominent tourist attraction due to its picturesque landscapes, tea plantations, and distinctive cultural legacy, mentioned by (Eiamroengporn et al., 2023).

However, the residents of Doi Mae Salong did not possess land ownership rights due to historical circumstances, according to (Cui, 2022); following the successful intervention of the 93rd Army in assisting the Thai military in combatting the Thai Communist Party, the local villagers were granted the opportunity to undergo a conversion process to obtain Thai citizenship. Additionally, they were granted a 40-year tenure to utilize the property. However, it is evident that the designated time frame has lapsed, and it is apparent that the proportion of legally operating hotels, with valid certifications, does not exceed 30%. (Duangjai et al., 2015) has mentioned that, the majority of villages engaged in the tourism industry operate alone, without engaging in collaborative efforts with one another; there exists a dearth of comprehension regarding the perception and branding of this destination among its various stakeholders, encompassing local inhabitants, enterprises, and tourists. Hence, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the destination branding of Doi Mae Salong, focusing on the perspectives of stakeholders. The study also intends to offer suggestions for enhancing brand development and management strategies.

This research is pivotal for shaping cultural destination branding in Doi Mae Salong, a unique locale blending Chinese and Thai cultures. It examines stakeholder views on place identity and destination attributes, identifies branding gaps, and suggests ways to boost cultural tourism. The insights are valuable for local authorities, the tourism sector, and other stakeholders, and also contribute to academic discussions on cultural destination branding.

Research Objectives

1. To conduct an evaluation of the tourism assets and the prevailing tourism landscape in the Doi Mae Salong region.
2. To gain insights into the aspirations and goals of stakeholders with regards to enhancing the brand identity of Doi Mae Salong.
3. To provide strategic recommendations for branding enhancement, informed by an analysis of available resources and the valuable input from stakeholders.

Literature Reviews

1. History, Tourism industry, and Tourist Attractions in Doi Mae Salong

1.1 Historical Origins and Doi Mae Salong uniqueness

Located in Thailand's Chiang Rai Province, Doi Mae Salong was once a dense forest that transformed significantly over the past century (Eiamroengporn et al., 2023). Following the Kuomintang's defeat in 1949, remnants of Li Guohui's 23rd Division and Tan Zhong troops took refuge in the Golden Triangle. They established the "93rd Division of the Revival of the Republic of China" in 1950, with support from Chiang Kai-shek and local opium trade (Duangjai, Schmidt & Shrestha, 2015). Doi Mae Salong, shaped by the Chinese Nationalist diaspora, reflects the Golden Triangle's complex history and its impact on modern cultural tourism (Cui, 2022). Key attractions include Santikhiri Village, which blends Thai and Yunnanese cultures; Yunnanese traditions and festivals; The Martyr's Memorial Hall; tea and coffee plantations that highlight cultural heritage; and scenic landscapes and hiking trails (Eiamroengporn et al., 2023).

1.2 Tourism Industry of Doi Mae Salong

Tourist arrival data in Doi Mae Salong is limited for researchers. However, Doi Mae Salong saw increased tourism in the late 20th century (Trupp, 2014). According to Chaoprayoon and Panyadee (2014), many tourists from Chiangrai city visit the mountainous Mae Fa Luang district to experience the Thai-Chinese cultural blend in Santikhiri Village. Tourism activities would include tea leaf picking and the option to stay in private Home Stay accommodations during the January holidays. Tourists can also partake in festivals like the Cherry Blossom Festival and the Tea, Sakura, and Tribal Food event in Doi Mae Salong for a 3-day, 2-night duration. The Ministry of Tourism and Sport reported a 33% increase in tourist arrivals in Chiang Rai in 2017, reaching a total of 4 million visitors compared to the previous year's 3 million. Indigenous groups reliant on the environment must safeguard its biodiversity due to the significant role tourism plays in their economic sustenance (Cadena et al., 2015).

2. Role of Stakeholders in Community-based Tourism Industry

According to (Asker et al., 2010), in the mid-1990s, "community-based tourism" (CBT) emerged. CBT is best for rural and regional areas and involves local interactions between tourists and the host community. Most agree CBT is governed and controlled by the community for the community. This style of "local" tourism emphasizes employing local merchants and service providers and understanding and sharing local culture. Local governments, NGOs, and communities have sought and supported it.

Latin America uses CBT and rural tourism for comparable tasks. Several Asian countries employ CBT for ecotourism. Ecotourism, rural tourism, sustainable tourism, and community-based tourism share aims. Tourism planning may benefit a place's natural assets, cultural heritage, and local economies. Eco-tourism, rural tourism, and community-based tourism are both market niches and guiding concepts. Regardless of nomenclature, there are a few key methods and practices that may ensure CBT is appropriately considered, planned, and managed for individuals and environment. The CBT enterprise may directly or indirectly affect stakeholders. Identify and include stakeholders in the review process. The community's vision, aims, and objectives, along with external collaborators and partners, must be assessed to establish their "fit" with tourism. Figure 1.2 illustrates the diverse participants in regional and rural CBT and sustainable tourism.

Figure 1.2 Stakeholders in Tourism Industry



The majority of the time, CBT in rural regions depends on natural resource-based tourist goods. As a result, more organizations (such as government departments of agriculture, parks, forestry, fisheries, and mining) may need to be included in the CBT assessment and planning phases. It is crucial to establish positive relationships with these sorts of stakeholders right away because they may have difficult bureaucratic processes to overcome.

3. Destination Branding Concept

Destination branding sets a location apart from rivals by effectively showcasing its unique features through attractions, accessibility, and additional services (Buhalis, 2000). The strategy is rooted in shaping tourists' perceptions of the area. Aligning the destination brand with tourist needs is crucial for mutual benefit, as noted by Vengesai (2003). This approach is key for differentiation, competitive edge, and market positioning. However, Urošević (2012) points out that existing research often overlooks challenges in regional branding, such as stakeholder cooperation, negotiation complexities, and alignment with government goals. This study adopts and adapts from Vengesai's Model of Tourism Destination Competitiveness and Attractiveness (2003) and uses it as a study framework (See Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3 The Model of Tourism Destination Competitiveness and Attractiveness



As Figure 1.3 has illustrated that, destination competitiveness and attractiveness focus on a location's ability to draw travelers, influenced by factors like attractions, infrastructure, marketing, and reputation. These elements are crucial for long-term success and sustainability in the competitive travel market (Hassan, 2000). While attractiveness sparks initial interest, competitiveness sustains that appeal. Balancing these aspects enables destinations like Doi Mae Salong to consistently attract tourists and maintain a competitive edge. This research explores stakeholder perspectives on Doi Mae Salong's destination branding, using the TDCA model as a framework. Table 1.1 links research objectives to this model:

Table 1.1 Explanation of Research Objectives and TDCA Model

<p>To Understand Doi Mae Salong's Tourism Landscape</p>	<p><i>This objective involves the evaluation of natural, cultural, and historical resources, along with the assessment of characteristics such as climate and tourist demographics. Additionally, it examines auxiliary services such as lodging and transportation, as well as contemporary marketing tactics.</i></p>
<p>To Identify Stakeholder Goals</p>	<p><i>This objective centers around the perspectives of stakeholders about natural, cultural, and historical resources, tourist satisfaction, facility improvements, and promotional tactics.</i></p>
<p>To Provide Branding Recommendations</p>	<p><i>The objective is to enhance the brand of Doi Mae Salong by utilizing its distinctive characteristics and inputs from stakeholders in order to enhance its competitive advantage and attractiveness.</i></p>
<p><i>After exploring Doi Mae Salong's intrinsic destination resources, experience environment, tourism supporting services and Communication and promotion, researcher will analyse them based on the concept of Competitiveness and Attractiveness.</i></p>	

The incorporation of the "stakeholder's performance" part in this study is based on the original concept. In the present study, the researcher has identified a correlation between stakeholder performance and stakeholder objectives, with a particular emphasis on the achievement of stakeholders' goals in relation to the brand Doi Mae Salong. After analyzing these aspects, the research aims to optimize Doi Mae Salong's attractiveness and competitive advantage in the tourism sector.

4. Destination Branding

Destination branding research often focuses on identifying various components, which can be grouped into two main categories: (1) Tangible/Visual/Functional and (2) Intangible/Symbolic. Balakrishnan et al. (2011) outline five components within each category. Table 1.2, adapted from Balakrishnan (2009), provides a detailed breakdown of these Destination Brand Components (DBC)

Table 1.2 Components of destination branding

DBC	Tangible/Visual/Functional	Intangible/Symbolic
Physiological	<p>Intrinsic Benefits: service delivery process, adjectives, ingredient/associated brands, sponsorships, events</p> <p>Features: adjectives; physical justifications, business tourism facilities, Commercial Criteria, Events, Activities, Shopping, Things to do, Functionality, Facilities, Amenities</p> <p>Sight: Name, Logo, Trademark, graphics, symbols, slogans, colors, servicescape</p> <p>Other 4 senses: smell, taste, touch, sound (if distinctive to place for identification)</p> <p>Tangibles: Souvenirs, shopping items, Postcards, pictures, movies, ads – images; information; Buildings architecture, facilities, places of interest, scenery;</p>	<p>Interpretations and seeding of 5 senses and realistic portrayal of expectations.</p>
Security/Safety	<p>Safety: physical, mental, emotional, perceived, and visual reinforcement Organic Images – familiarity an ability to identify visual evidence</p> <p>Convenience: access, facilities & amenities, infrastructure, communication, currency.</p> <p>Service: government, tourism, information, hospitality etc.</p>	<p>Intrinsic benefits: relevance and representation of the Personality of place as per perception (culture, heritage, ambience). Features: perception of ability to satisfy intrinsic needs</p> <p>Value / expense perceptions, Safety perception</p> <p>Convenience: perception Service satisfaction</p> <p>Conform to social values/WOM</p>
Social	<p>People as a symbol: leaders, dress, outward local customs, rituals and ability to adopt.</p> <p>Social segregation when required and ability to deliver as per perceptions.</p>	<p>Traveler-Residents Relationship & bond, familiarity, interaction and empathy. Traveler-Traveler familiarity, interaction and congruence</p> <p>Traveler-Social Circle: conversation topic image/roles of People associated with service delivery or destination</p>
Esteem	<p>ingredient/associated: brands, sponsorships, events</p>	<p>perception or others perception (WOM, public relations, Publicity; International reputation) – how its adds value to self esteem</p> <p>Halo effect Association with other "brands", image perceptions and how this adds value to esteem</p>
Self Actualization	<p>Personal visual transformation from experience (self, gifts and house/habit adoption)</p>	<p>Self-image congruence; personal values, self-personality; lifestyle, self-expression. Event/ritual association</p> <p>ambience: Experience that creates an Emotions/ Mood/ association with certain Senses Internalisation and familiarity of legends of heroes/heroine (living, dead and fictitious)</p> <p>Ability to help traveler walk away with personal growth, discovery and fulfillment</p>

Building on the components of destination branding outlined in Table 1.2, this section offers a brief overview of 10 key studies. Each study employs various methods and focal points, ranging from cultural identity and marketing strategies to sustainability and community involvement. Henderson's study (2007) uses qualitative methods to explore Singapore's branding, focusing on visual identity and cultural elements. Similarly, J.J. Zhang's 2010 research on Kinmen Island employs semi-structured interviews to emphasize cultural identity and unique selling propositions. Suprakarn (2013) uses mixed-methods in his study in Thailand to examine heritage tourism, covering aspects like history and culinary experiences. Nare et al.'s research (2017) in Botswana highlights sustainability and social responsibility. Medaric et al. (2021) explores Lake Balaton's accessibility, emphasizing marketing and natural assets. Guiry et al. (2015) investigates South Korea's medical tourism, focusing on cultural identity and marketing strategies.

Hjalager (2011) delves into well-being tourism in Southern Denmark, emphasizing community involvement. Stephens Balakrishnan's (2008) explores strategic branding, including destination image and marketing partnerships in Dubai. Wheeler et al. (2011) research in Victoria, Australia, addresses community involvement and sustainability. Lastly, Wang et al.'s 2007 case study focuses on collaborative marketing and community involvement in Elkhart County, Indiana.

Research Methodology

The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques like semi-structured interviews, on-site observations, and a detailed questionnaire survey. The research tools were validated with an Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) score of 0.896. These tools are: 1) A visitor questionnaire totaling 35 questions, completed by 151 respondents (78.81% Thai and 21.19% non-Thai), covering demographics, destination resources, current tourism trends, and suggestions; 2) Interviews with nine local stakeholders, including community members and authorities, focusing on tourism resources and stakeholder views on destination branding; 3) On-site observations conducted from August 8 to September 8, 2023, offering a deep understanding of Doi Mae Salong's current tourism situations. The combination of these methods provides a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Research Findings and Analysis

1. Tourists' Perspectives on Tourism Resources and Current Situation in Doi Mae Salong

The researcher administered a questionnaire to gather data from visitors who visited Doi Mae Salong between August 8th and September 8th. The data was gathered from various establishments within the immediate area, including lodgings, restaurants, attractions, and coffee shops. The results will be provided using quantitative data, such as numerical values and percentages, as well as qualitative analysis. The sequence of presentation will be as follows: an examination of Tourism Resources from the perspective of tourists, an assessment of the Current Tourism Situation from the viewpoint of tourists, and an evaluation of Tourism Supporting Services.

1.1 Tourism Resources from Tourists' Viewpoint

The findings regarding Tourism Resources from Tourists' Viewpoint are: The majority of tourists (57.9%) believe that the natural landscape is the most important tourist resource in Doi Mae Salong. This is followed by coffee and tea products (38.4%) and Chinese culture (21.1%); A significant minority of tourists (15.23%) would not visit Doi Mae Salong if there were no coffee or tea products available. This suggests that coffee and tea products are a major draw for tourists to Doi Mae Salong; The majority of tourists (63.31%) agree that the natural views in Doi Mae Salong have made it differentiated from other tourism spots in Chiang Rai. This suggests that Doi Mae Salong has a unique and distinctive natural landscape that sets it apart from other tourist destinations in Chiang Rai; A significant minority of tourists (34.44%) believe that tourists are often drawn to the natural scenery and might overlook the cultural heritage of Doi Mae Salong. This suggests that the cultural heritage of Doi Mae Salong is not as well-known or promoted as its natural scenery.

Upon conducting an analysis of the findings in section 1.1, it has been determined that the following findings can be made: There exists a robust correlation between the appreciation of the natural landscape by tourists and their inclination to visit Doi Mae Salong for its coffee and tea offerings. This highlights the interconnectedness of both factors in attracting tourists to the destination. Tourists perceive the natural landscape as a significant distinguishing feature of Doi Mae Salong, surpassing the significance of the local Chinese culture as a resource for tourism. It is evident that tourists are more inclined to believe that the natural scenery overshadows the cultural heritage of Doi Mae Salong. This underscores the necessity of enhancing visitors' awareness regarding the cultural assets of the destination.

1.2 Current Tourism Situation from Tourists' Viewpoint

The current situation of Doi Mae Salong shows that the majority of people in Doi Mae Salong (92.73%) think that coffee and tea plantations can reflect the economic value of Doi Mae Salong. Only 3.31% strongly disagree with this statement, while 6.62% disagree and 2.65% are neutral. This suggests that coffee and tea plantations are an important part of the economy of Doi Mae Salong. Moreover, the table shows that 35.1% of people strongly agree that the natural landscape in Doi Mae Salong is influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, while 24.5% agree. Only 20.53% of people disagree with this statement, while 2.65% strongly disagree and 6.62% are neutral. This suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the natural landscape of Doi Mae Salong.

Overall, the table shows that coffee and tea plantations are an important part of the economy of Doi Mae Salong, and that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the natural landscape of Doi Mae Salong.

1.3 Tourism Supporting Services

The majority of respondents (55.63%) believe that more facilities and tourist spots should be built in Doi Mae Salong. However, a significant minority (41.09%) believe that the facilities in Doi Mae Salong are already well developed. The majority of respondents (71.86%) are satisfied with the tourism infrastructure in Doi Mae Salong. However, a minority (31.08%) believe that Doi Mae Salong is not easily accessible.

There is a large discrepancy between the percentage of respondents who believe that more facilities and tourist spots should be built (55.63%) and the percentage of respondents who believe that the facilities in Doi Mae Salong are already well developed (41.09%). This suggests that there is a need for more facilities and tourist spots in Doi Mae Salong, but that these facilities should be developed in a way that is sustainable and does not damage the natural environment. The majority of respondents are satisfied with the tourism infrastructure in Doi Mae Salong, but there is still room for improvement. This suggests that the government and tourism industry should continue to invest in the development of the tourism infrastructure in Doi Mae Salong in order to attract more visitors to the area.

2. Identifying Tourism Resources, Current Situation, and Fulfillment of Stakeholders Goals in Doi Mae Salong from Stakeholder Perspectives

During the semi-structured interviews held from August 8th to August 30th, 2023, the following individuals participated while maintaining anonymity: Mr. A (Mae Salong resident working in Bangkok), Mr. B (Owner of Shin Sane Guesthouse), Ms. C (Owner of Hill Top Home), Mr. D (Gravekeeper at General Tuan's Mausoleum), Mr. E (Retired Soldier of 93rd Division), Mr. F (Principal of Xinghua Middle School), Mr. G (Owner of 93rd Division Tea Shop), Mr. H (Mayor of Mae Salong Nok Subdistrict Administrative Organization), and Ms. J (Director of Ling Ping Tour Co., Ltd.). The findings of the semi-structured interview encompassed three main areas: Tourism Resources, Current Situation, and Stakeholders' Goals.

2.1 Tourism Resources in Stakeholders' Viewpoints

Interviews with Doi Mae Salong stakeholders highlight the area's natural beauty as a tourism attraction. Mr. B and Ms. J emphasize Thai tourists' milder climate and Western visitors' trekking, while the region's economic change from opium to tea and coffee growing is crucial.

- Interviews with key figures like Mr. B, owner of Shin Sane Guesthouse, and Ms. J, Director of Ling Ping Tour Co., Ltd., underscore the importance of natural resources in attracting tourists. Mr. B points out that Thai tourists are drawn to the area's cooler climate, while Western visitors are attracted by hiking and forest adventures. Ms. J echoes this, noting that outdoor activities like hiking are a natural fit for Doi Mae Salong. These perspectives highlight the area's natural beauty as a key asset in attracting a diverse range of tourists.

- Mr. F, the Principal of Xinghua Middle School, recounted a turning point in Doi Mae Salong's economic history. After the 93rd army, led by General Tuan, aided the Thai army's victory, King Rama 9 granted citizenship to local Chinese villagers on the condition that they stop opium farming. To pivot, General Tuan consulted Taiwanese experts to assess the region's soil for tea cultivation. This marked a transformative shift in the local economy.

- As the Chinese villagers transitioned to tea farming, the Aka community, who were also involved in opium cultivation, faced a livelihood change. Some returned to the mountains in Myanmar, while others took up coffee farming. Mr. H, Mayor of Mae Salong Nok, noted that the coffee grown by the Aka people is likely Arabica, a variety common in northern Thailand and known for its unique flavor influenced by local conditions. This shift diversified and stabilized the local economy, making tea and coffee its pillars.

2.2 Current Situation in Stakeholders' Viewpoints

In this section, it has explained that COVID-19 has hit Mae Salong's businesses hard. Ms. C's Hill Top Home and Mr. G's 93rd Division Tea Shop are grappling with challenges. Ms. C's homestay business has seen a sharp decline, and Mr. G stresses the need for a tea sellers' association for sustainable competition in the local tea industry.

- Ms. C, owner of Hill Top Home in Mae Salong, returned from Taiwan to face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely affected her homestay business due to a sharp decline in customers. Similarly, Mr. G, owner of the 93rd Division Tea Shop, expressed concerns about the local tea industry. Despite the high quality of the tea, the lack of a structured system for managing sellers has led to price wars. Mr. G advocates for the creation of a tea sellers' association to ensure fair competition and long-term sustainability.

- Mr. H, the Mayor of Mae Salong Nok Subdistrict Administrative Organization, highlights the lack of formal regulations in the tea and hospitality industries. He advocates for locals to form associations, facilitating more effective communication and collaboration. Mr. G, owner of the 93rd Division Tea Shop, agrees, noting the current lack of cooperation among local businesses. Mr. H also breaks down Mae Salong's workforce: 20% are farmers, contributing to local agriculture; 60% are retirees or financially supported by family; and 10% work in tourism-related businesses, playing a key role in the area's tourism sector.

2.3 Stakeholders' Goals

In this section, local stakeholders in Mae Salong have distinct goals and perspectives when it comes to enhancing tourism in the region.

- Mr. B, owner of Shin Sane Guesthouse, aims to boost check-in rates from 20-30% to 50-60% in the off-season, and from 60-70% to 80-90% during peak times. He believes facility upgrades are key to achieving this.

- Mr. D, the Gravekeeper of General Duan's Mausoleum, doesn't have a specific goal but believes more visitors will improve community life. He aligns with the broader aim of maximizing tourism's economic benefits.

- Mr. F, the School Principal of Xinghua Middle School, wants to address tourists' concerns about high prices in Mae Salong to improve the area's value proposition.

3. Deeply Understanding the Current Tourism Situation From the Researcher's 1-month Duration Onsite Observation

This part presents an elucidation of the results obtained via the implementation of on-site observations pertaining to the prevailing state of tourism in Doi Mae Salong. During the duration of the researcher's month-long visit at Doi Mae Salong, a series of observations were made:

3.1 Accommodation Option

Accommodation options in the area significantly deviate from traditional hotels. Many of the establishments in Doi Mae Salong adopt a homestay-style approach rather than conforming to conventional hotel standards. The absence of standardized star ratings for hotels within the vicinity poses a considerable challenge for tourists when it comes to evaluating the quality of lodging options through widely-used mobile apps and booking platforms. This absence of standardization introduces an element of uncertainty for travelers during the process of selecting their accommodations.

3.2 Tourism Seasonality and Tourist Categories

In Doi Mae Salong, the tourism industry exhibits pronounced seasonal variations. The peak season materializes during the winter months, specifically from December to March, when tourists converge on the area to relish the refreshing, cool climate. Two primary categories of tourists frequent the region: Thai and non-Thai visitors. Thai tourists are enticed by the allure of the crisp mountain air and the opportunity to savor the local coffee. In contrast, non-Thai tourists, particularly those with Chinese backgrounds, display a greater inclination towards exploring the historical and culturally rich heritage of Doi Mae Salong.

3.3 The Changing Traveling Trends

A noteworthy trend within the tourism sector is the escalating preference among travelers for self-exploration, steering away from reliance on travel agents. Consequently, travel agencies operating in the area have observed a decline in customer numbers, as a growing number of tourists opt for independent travel experiences.

Discussion and Analysis

Based on stakeholder interviews, Doi Mae Salong lacks a clear brand identity but offers several elements for potential branding. These include its history as a “Secret Isolated Army,” its unique blend of Chinese and Thai cultures termed “A Hidden Chinatown,” and its peaceful transformation, making it “A Historical Destination.” Its cool climate sets it apart as a “Cool Weather Retreat,” while its serene environment suggests it as “A Chilling Place.” Lastly, its reputation for hospitality could be emphasized as a “Bastion of Hospitality,” highlighting the community’s welcoming nature.

Doi Mae Salong’s competitiveness stems from four key areas: 1) Cultural Diversity: Its unique blend of Chinese, Thai, Aka, and other cultures offers travelers an authentic, diverse experience. 2) Historical Depth: The area’s secluded military past adds intrigue, attracting tourists interested in history and cultural evolution. 3) Climate: Its cool climate is a unique draw, especially for those seeking a break from heat, and allows for seasonal tourism. 4) Culinary Uniqueness: Influenced by Yunnanese culture, the local cuisine offers a distinct gastronomic experience that also serves as a cultural exchange.

Doi Mae Salong’s attractiveness hinges on four factors: 1) Scenic Beauty: Its captivating landscapes and temperate climate create an inviting setting for tourists seeking aesthetic experiences. 2) Cultural Depth: The area offers immersive cultural encounters, particularly in Yunnanese culture, appealing to cultural enthusiasts. 3) Historical Appeal: Its unique military history adds an extra layer of interest for tourists keen on historical and cultural exploration. 4) Authentic Products: Local coffee and teas, rooted in regional authenticity, attract tourists looking for genuine, destination-specific goods.

Recommendations for Doi Mae Salong's Destination Branding

To preserve heritage and boost competitiveness, the vision focuses on offering an authentic destination rich in culture and natural beauty. For Thai tourists, the strategy leverages coffee experiences and cold-weather activities, while for Western tourists, it highlights natural adventures and eco-tourism. For tourists with Chinese ties, the focus is on cultural, historical, and culinary experiences. Differentiation centers on unique Yunnanese culture, military history, appealing climate, and diverse coffee and tea options. Communication involves event marketing, social media, celebrity endorsements, storytelling, partnerships, and multilingual promotion. Feedback strategies include monitoring slogans and licenses, market intelligence, brand protection, and integrating feedback. Implementation considers potential challenges and involves community collaboration, private sector engagement, and government support.

After thorough analysis of tourist feedback, on-site observations, and insights from semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders, a well-defined brand identity for Doi Mae Salong has become crystallized. Building on key elements derived from stakeholder perspectives, a cohesive theme or concept for the destination can be formulated: the unifying theme is “Mae Salong: A Hidden Historical Gem of Tranquility and Hospitality.” This theme encapsulates Mae Salong’s rich history, serene atmosphere, and warm hospitality, setting it apart from other Sino-Thai destinations in Thailand.

Figure 1.4 Positioning of Doi Mae Salong's branding Comparing with Pattaya



With a different branding strategy, the destinations will attract different group of people to visit. Figure 1.3 - The positioning of Doi Mae Salong revolves around its historical significance, refreshing climate, and tranquil ambiance, which are valued by tourists. Meanwhile, local stakeholders aim to spotlight its distinctive cultural heritage while safeguarding its unspoiled natural surroundings. This positioning suggests that Mae Salong offers both a highly authentic cultural experience and stunning natural beauty. It would imply that visitors can immerse themselves in the local culture while enjoying breathtaking natural surroundings.

While Pattaya's unnatural appearance and cultural artificiality are evident in its neon-lit nightlife, featuring vibrant streets, bars, and nightclubs. The iconic Walking Street, adorned with neon lights and adult entertainment venues, creates an artificial and lively nighttime atmosphere. The city also boasts artificial attractions like the Sanctuary of Truth and Mini Siam, with miniature replicas of global landmarks.

Conclusion

The study on Doi Mae Salong holds critical implications for Doi Mae Salong's development goals and branding potential. Through an in-depth literature review and on-the-ground observations, the research uncovers the destination's untapped assets, such as its rich cultural tapestry, historical significance, scenic beauty, and warm hospitality. Key takeaways include: 1) Findings emphasize tourists' strong affinity for Doi Mae Salong, fueled by its diverse attractions; 2) Local stakeholders share a unified goal of boosting competitiveness, with a focus on conserving natural landscapes, maintaining cultural integrity, and preserving historical landmarks as branding strategies; 3) However, gaps in hospitality management persist, and the formation of industry-specific associations is essential to tackle these challenges. These insights offer actionable recommendations for both local stakeholders and governmental agencies, laying the groundwork for a more vibrant future that honors Doi Mae Salong's distinct character and enriches the visitor experience.

Limitation

This study has some constraints that warrant acknowledgment. Firstly, the primary fieldwork was conducted in August, an off-peak tourism month for Doi Mae Salong, which may not fully capture seasonal variations in visitor trends. Second, the lack of external funding limited the scope and duration of data collection. Finally, the one-month onsite survey and the area's rural setting restricted the diversity of tourist perspectives, despite valuable insights from local stakeholders.

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