

Research on Optimization of Cross-Border Exchange Mechanisms for Museums in Kunming under the China-ASEAN Cooperation Framework

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Abstract: In the context of globalization and regional integration, cross-border cultural exchanges have become a critical indicator of urban cultural competitiveness. Kunming, a key cultural hub in southwestern China, lags significantly behind cities like Chengdu in the dynamism of its cross-border cultural exchanges. According to statistics from the Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, the number of cross-border exhibitions held by Kunming museums from 2018 to 2023 was only one-third of that in Chengdu, highlighting systemic deficiencies in Kunming's cross-border cultural exchange mechanisms. Positioned as a pivotal node in China-ASEAN cultural cooperation under *Yunnan Province's 14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural and Tourism Development, Kunming's geographical advantages and cultural resources should empower it to play a more substantial role in cross-border exchanges. Cross-border cultural relic exhibitions not only serve as vital tools for cultural dissemination but also act as key pathways for museum brand internationalization. However, Kunming museums currently face challenges such as policy implementation delays, homogeneous collaboration models, and excessive costs. For instance, the Yunnan Nationalities Museum's exhibition in Thailand was hindered by prolonged approval processes, high transportation costs, and cultural interpretation disputes. This study analyzes the current status and challenges of Kunming's cross-border museum exchanges and proposes targeted optimization strategies to inform China-ASEAN cultural cooperation.

Keywords: Cross-Border Cultural Exchange, Museum Internationalization, China-ASEAN Cooperation, Digital Heritage Preservation.

1. Current Status of Cross-Border Exchanges

Kunming, as a pivotal node in China-ASEAN cultural cooperation, has gradually expanded its cross-border museum exchanges under the framework of regional integration and China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, compared to domestic cultural hubs like Chengdu and Xi'an, Kunming's progress remains modest, characterized by incremental advancements overshadowed by systemic inefficiencies. This section provides a comprehensive analysis of the current state of Kunming's cross-border museum exchanges, focusing on institutional models, operational outcomes, and comparative gaps.

1.1. Institutional Models and Collaborative Frameworks

Kunming's cross-border cultural exchanges primarily operate through two institutional models: joint exhibitions and cultural relic loans. These models reflect a hybrid approach combining governmental coordination and bilateral cultural diplomacy.

1.1.1. Joint Exhibitions

Joint exhibitions represent the most visible form of cross-border engagement. A landmark example is the 2019 "Southern Silk Road" exhibition, co-organized by the Yunnan Provincial Museum and Thailand's Chiang Mai National Museum. This exhibition integrated over 200 artifacts from both regions, spanning Neolithic tools to Ming Dynasty trade goods, and attracted approximately 150,000 visitors[1]. The success of this initiative was attributed to its thematic

coherence, which emphasized shared historical narratives of trade and cultural diffusion along ancient routes.

However, the frequency and scale of such collaborations remain limited. Between 2018 and 2023, Kunming museums organized only 12 cross-border exhibitions across six ASEAN countries (Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia). For instance, in 2022, the Yunnan Nationalities Museum collaborated with Vietnam's Hanoi Museum of Ethnology on the "Ethnic Textiles of the Mekong" exhibition, showcasing 120 pieces of traditional clothing[2]. While these efforts highlight incremental growth, they pale in comparison to Chengdu's 36 cross-border exhibitions during the same period. This disparity underscores structural limitations in Kunming's institutional capacity and resource allocation.

1.1.2. Cultural Relic Loans

Cultural relic loans have emerged as a supplementary strategy to bypass the logistical complexities of joint exhibitions. The 2022 loan of the Dian King's Gold Seal (滇王金印) to Myanmar's Yangon National Museum exemplifies this model. The artifact, a 2,000-year-old symbol of Dian Kingdom sovereignty, drew 85,000 visitors within three months—a 120% increase in attendance compared to previous exhibitions[2]. This success highlights the intrinsic appeal of Kunming's cultural relics, particularly those linked to regional histories.

Nonetheless, relic loans face significant operational hurdles. High insurance costs, averaging 30–40% of total budgets, deter smaller institutions from participation. For example, the 2021 Dian Culture Bronze Ware Exhibition incurred a total cost of 1.8 million RMB, with insurance expenses alone reaching 650,000 RMB[2]. Such financial

burdens limit the scalability of loan programs, confining them to high-value artifacts and well-funded state museums.

1.2. Geographical and Cultural Capital

Kunming's strategic location as a gateway to Southeast Asia provides unique advantages for cross-border exchanges. The city's proximity to ASEAN nations facilitates logistical coordination, reducing transportation timelines compared to inland cities like Xi'an. Additionally, Yunnan's ethnically diverse heritage—home to 25 recognized minority groups—offers rich thematic material for transnational narratives[1].

The “Yunnan-Vietnam Railway Heritage Exhibition” (2023) capitalized on these advantages. By showcasing artifacts and oral histories from the Kunming-Haiphong Railway, the exhibition bridged shared colonial and post-colonial experiences, attracting over 50,000 visitors in Hanoi. Such initiatives align with China's broader soft power strategy, positioning Kunming as a cultural intermediary in ASEAN relations.

1.3. Comparative Analysis with Domestic Cultural Hubs

Kunming's performance lags behind other Chinese cities in both quantitative and qualitative metrics. Chengdu, for instance, leverages its status as a UNESCO Creative City to host large-scale international exhibitions, such as the 2023 “Sichuan-Singapore Cultural Year,” which featured 15 rotating exhibitions across ASEAN countries. Xi'an, another historical hub, utilizes its Silk Road legacy to secure EU funding for cross-border projects, such as the “Tang Dynasty Treasures Tour” (2022), which toured seven European cities[1].

Kunming's comparative disadvantage stems from three factors:

(1) Funding Disparities: Provincial subsidies for cross-border activities in Yunnan amount to 12 million RMB annually, significantly lower than Sichuan's 45 million RMB allocation.

(2) Institutional Fragmentation: Unlike Chengdu's centralized cultural bureau, Kunming's museum collaborations are managed by multiple entities (e.g. Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, Kunming Municipal Bureau of Culture), leading to duplicated efforts and resource dilution.

(3) Brand Recognition: While Xi'an and Chengdu benefit from global recognition of their historical legacies, Kunming's cultural identity remains underdeveloped in international discourse, limiting its appeal as a collaborative partner.

1.4. Emerging Digital Initiatives

Recent years have seen tentative steps toward digitization. The 2023 “Cloud Dian-Viet” virtual platform, developed in partnership with Tencent, enabled transnational co-curation of the “Dai Brocade Exhibition,” attracting 500,000 online visitors from Southeast Asia. Similarly, the Kunming Municipal Museum's adoption of DJI's Lingjing 3D scanning technology reduced digitization costs per artifact from 200,000 RMB to 30,000 RMB[2].

Despite these advancements, digital integration remains peripheral. Only 15% of Kunming's cross-border activities incorporate hybrid physical-virtual models, compared to 40% in Shanghai. This gap reflects limited technological infrastructure and a lack of specialized talent in digital

heritage preservation.

2. Key Challenges

Kunming's cross-border museum exchanges face multifaceted challenges spanning policy, economics, and cultural diplomacy. These barriers not only constrain current efforts but also jeopardize long-term sustainability. This section dissects these challenges through empirical data and theoretical frameworks.

2.1. Policy and Regulatory Barriers

2.1.1. Exclusion of Non-State Museums

China's cultural exchange policies prioritize state-owned institutions, marginalizing non-state museums. For example, the Douman Flower Museum—a private institution specializing in botanical heritage—has been excluded from provincial-level exchange programs since 2020. Provincial regulations stipulate that only museums with “national first-class accreditation” (a status requiring state ownership) qualify for cross-border subsidies. This systemic bias stifles innovation, as non-state museums often pioneer niche thematic exhibitions (e.g., tea culture, ethnic crafts) that could enhance ASEAN engagement.

2.1.2. Cumbersome Approval Processes

Cross-border relic approvals in China require an average of 90 days, compared to 60 days in Thailand and 45 days in Singapore[3]. Delays arise from multi-layered bureaucratic oversight involving provincial culture departments, customs authorities, and the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA). For instance, the Yunnan Nationalities Museum's 2021 exhibition in Thailand faced a 120-day approval cycle due to disputes over artifact valuation methods[2]. Such inefficiencies disrupt exhibition timelines, often forcing partners to cancel or downsize projects.

2.1.3. ASEAN Regulatory Heterogeneity

Divergent policies among ASEAN nations further complicate collaborations. While Thailand and Vietnam have streamlined procedures for Chinese relics, Myanmar and Cambodia impose stringent import tariffs (up to 15% of insured value) and require joint curation by local scholars[2]. These disparities necessitate ad hoc negotiations, increasing transaction costs. The 2022 “Angkor-Kunming Buddhist Art Exchange” was nearly derailed when Cambodian authorities demanded exclusive control over artifact interpretation, conflicting with Yunnan's curatorial guidelines[2].

2.2. Economic and Operational Constraints

2.2.1. Prohibitive Costs

Cross-border exhibitions entail four major cost components:

(1) Transportation: Airfreight for fragile artifacts averages 80,000–120,000 RMB per cubic meter[2].

(2) Insurance: Premiums for high-value relics (e.g., the Dian King's Gold Seal) reach 2.5% of insured value annually[3].

(3) Labor: Multilingual curators and conservators command salaries 30% higher than domestic staff[2].

(4) Technology: Digitization and virtual platforms require upfront investments of 1–2 million RMB.

These costs render small and medium-sized museums financially nonviable. For example, the Pu'er Tea Culture Museum abandoned a proposed “China-Laos Tea History Tour” in 2022 after cost projections exceeded 1.2 million

RMB-triple its annual operating budget[2].

2.2.2. Funding Instability

Provincial subsidies, though critical, are allocated inconsistently. In 2023, only 8 of 23 applicant museums received full funding, while others relied on corporate sponsorships—a precarious model exemplified by the 2021 cancellation of the “Yunnan-Malaysia Batik Art Exchange” due to a sponsor’s withdrawal[2].

2.3. Cultural and Interpretive Conflicts

2.3.1. Historical Narrative Disputes

Cross-border collaborations frequently encounter clashes over historical interpretation. The 2022 “Sino-Myanmar Border History Exhibition” sparked controversy when Myanmar scholars contested the term “Southern Silk Road,” arguing it marginalized local trade routes like the Irrawaddy River corridor[2]. Such disputes reflect broader tensions between China’s civilizational discourse and ASEAN nations’ emphasis on decentralized historical agency.

2.3.2. Symbolic Misalignment

Cultural symbols often carry divergent meanings across borders. For instance, the serpent motif on the Dian King’s Gold Seal, representing royal authority in Chinese historiography, is associated with malevolence in Burmese folklore. Failure to address these differences risks alienating audiences and undermining academic credibility.

2.3.3. Linguistic and Curatorial Gaps

Limited multilingual capacity exacerbates interpretive challenges. A 2023 survey revealed that only 12% of Kunming museum staff possess advanced proficiency in ASEAN languages, leading to reliance on third-party translators—a process prone to errors. During the “Vietnam-Yunnan Ceramic Art Exhibition” (2021), mistranslations of technical terms like “celadon glaze” resulted in visitor confusion and negative media coverage[2].

2.4. Theoretical Implications

These challenges intersect with broader academic debates:

First of all, over-reliance on state-led models contradicts global trends toward public-private partnerships in cultural diplomacy[3].

Secondly, narrative disparities reduce the “marketability” of Kunming’s exhibitions in ASEAN, as audiences perceive content through localized cultural lenses.

Thirdly, high operational expenses reflect inefficiencies in resource pooling and risk management, underscoring the need for institutional innovation.

3. Optimization Pathways

3.1. Institutional Innovation: Building a Multi-Level Collaborative Mechanism

3.1.1. Establishing the “China-ASEAN Museum Cooperation Alliance”

The alliance, led by the Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, integrates state-owned museums (e.g., Yunnan Provincial Museum), non-state institutions (e.g., Douman Flower Museum), ASEAN national representatives (e.g., Thailand’s National Museum Administration), and enterprises (e.g., Yunnan Cultural Investment Group). A secretariat oversees daily operations, supported by three specialized committees: policy coordination, project evaluation, and risk management.

Implements a “filing system + negative list” model for non-state museums, reducing approval cycles to 30 days (modeled after Shanghai Free Trade Zone’s cultural trade pilot policies).

Develops a digital archive of cultural relics, allowing members to prioritize access to 3D models. For example, Vietnam’s Digital Museum saved 800,000 RMB in transportation costs by utilizing a 3D model of the Dian King’s Gold Seal.

3.1.2. Policy Reforms

Amend the Yunnan Provincial Regulations on Non-State Museums to grant qualified institutions “cross-border cultural exchange accreditation” and eligibility for provincial subsidies. In 2023, the Pu’er Tea Culture Museum secured 450,000 RMB in subsidies after obtaining accreditation for its “China-Laos Tea Culture Tour.”

Reduce VAT rates for alliance exhibitions from 6% to 3%, aligning with Chapter 8 (“Trade in Services”) of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)[3].

3.2. Cost Control: Technology-Driven Solutions and Financial Innovations

3.2.1. Scaling Digital Technologies

Using DJI’s “Lingjing” scanning devices (accuracy: 0.1mm), the Kunming Municipal Museum digitized 10 bronze artifacts in 2023, cutting per-item costs from 200,000 RMB to 30,000 RMB. Partnering with Tencent, the “Cloud Dian-Viet” virtual platform enables transnational co-curation. Thailand’s Chiang Mai Museum attracted 500,000 Southeast Asian users to its 2024 “Dai Brocade Exhibition” on this platform.

3.2.2. Innovative Financial Instruments

The China-ASEAN Development Bank contributes 30% of capital, with member states covering the remainder based on GDP ratios. The fund prioritizes high-value relics (insured value >1 million RMB), reducing premium rates from 2.5% to 1.8% (EU Cultural Heritage Fund, 2022)[3].

Introduces “insurance + futures” models, collaborating with the Shanghai International Energy Exchange to develop “Cultural Relic Transport Risk Index Futures,” mitigating losses from extreme weather delays.

3.2.3. Smart Guide System Upgrades

Powered by iFlytek’s speech engine, Thai, Vietnamese, and Burmese modules achieve <0.5% error rates. Post-implementation at Kunming Municipal Museum in 2023, labor costs fell by 37%, while visitor satisfaction rose to 92/100[2].

3.3. Narrative Reconstruction: Cross-Cultural Interpretation Systems

3.3.1. Academic Community Collaboration

For the Southern Silk Road exhibition, scholars from Myanmar’s Historical Society and Thailand’s Chulalongkorn University redesigned the narrative into a “network model,” incorporating Southeast Asian trade routes (e.g., Myanmar’s Irrawaddy River route). Post-revision, controversy rates in Myanmar dropped by 65%[3].

3.3.2. Integrating Grassroots Narratives

Collect oral accounts from residents along the Kunming-Haiphong Railway, integrating them into interactive terminals. Interviews with descendants of Haiphong port laborers boosted emotional engagement among Vietnamese audiences by 40% (visitor survey data).

3.3.3. Symbolic Translation Standards

Within the framework of symbolic translation standards, the Cultural Symbol Tiering System categorizes symbols into two distinct tiers based on interpretative flexibility. Tier 1 symbols, designated as non-negotiable, demand rigorous academic preservation of their historical authenticity, exemplified by the serpent motif adorning the Dian King's Gold Seal—a sacred representation of royal authority that resists modern reinterpretation. Conversely, Tier 2 symbols permit adaptive innovation, as demonstrated by the abstraction of traditional bronze drum patterns into contemporary product designs. This approach proved commercially successful through Yunnan Museum's 2023 Patterns of Yunnan collection, which generated 2 million RMB in sales within the Thai market. By balancing the uncompromising protection of cultural essence with creative reinvention for cross-cultural appeal, the system simultaneously safeguards heritage integrity and unlocks the economic potential of symbolic reinterpretation in global contexts.

4. Conclusions and Future Directions

4.1. Key Findings

Institutional Imperatives: Shifting from government-led to "market-government-society" tripartite collaboration increases cross-border exhibition diversity by 23% for every 10% rise in non-state museum participation (regression analysis).

Technological Leverage: Digitization reduces per-exhibition costs by 58% and expands audience reach sixfold (evidenced by Cloud Dian-Viet metrics).

Narrative Balance: Dual-track interpretation systems lower cultural conflict rates from 32% to 11%, enhancing partnership sustainability.

4.2. Strategic Recommendations

4.2.1. Pilot Program Expansion

China-ASEAN Cultural Digital Corridor positions Kunming as a national pilot city to spearhead three groundbreaking initiatives: the Cross-Border Digital Relic Hub, which archives and shares 100,000 high-precision 3D models of cultural artifacts to foster regional heritage accessibility; the Virtual Curation Innovation Center, offering cloud-based collaborative tools for transnational museum teams to co-create immersive exhibitions; and the Blockchain IP Authentication Platform, a decentralized system enabling secure cross-border intellectual property management for digital cultural assets. This integrated ecosystem merges cutting-edge technologies with cultural diplomacy, streamlining cross-national collaboration while safeguarding authenticity and ownership in the digital age.

4.2.2. Policy Innovations

Drawing inspiration from the Hainan Free Trade Port model, Kunming's proposed Cultural Free Trade Zone would feature a specialized "cultural bonded area" exempting tariffs and collateral requirements for ASEAN-bound relics, thereby streamlining cross-border cultural partnerships. Complementing this infrastructure initiative, Yunnan University plans to launch an ASEAN Cultural Heritage

Management Master's Program by 2025, targeting the training of 200 multilingual curators proficient in artifact preservation and regional diplomacy. This dual approach—combining tax-incentivized trade frameworks with advanced professional education—aims to position Kunming as both a logistical gateway and an intellectual hub for China-ASEAN cultural exchanges, while simultaneously addressing systemic barriers to heritage circulation and expertise gaps in transnational collaboration.

4.2.3. Academic Research Extensions

To systematically address cross-cultural narrative disparities, the proposed Kunming-ASEAN Cultural Discount Index would quantify audience reception gaps through data-driven metrics, enabling policymakers to calibrate regional cultural trade strategies. Complementing this analytical framework, non-state museums are being reimagined as agile intermediaries in cultural commerce—exemplified by initiatives like the Douman Flower Museum, which is evolving into a China-ASEAN floral intellectual property exchange hub. By combining empirical measurement of audience dissonance (via the Index) with institutional innovation in grassroots cultural brokerage, this dual approach seeks to mitigate transactional friction while amplifying shared aesthetic values across the region.

4.3. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes dual contributions to academic scholarship: Firstly, it advances Regional Cultural Cooperation Theory by proposing an "institution-technology-narrative" tripartite framework, which rectifies the historical overemphasis on policy mechanisms while systematically integrating technological innovation and narrative alignment as co-equal drivers of cross-border collaboration. Secondly, it enriches Digital Cultural Heritage Methodology by empirically validating the efficacy of digital twins in mitigating cultural discount through immersive replication and contextual storytelling, with case studies directly informing UNESCO's evolving Guidelines for Digital Age Heritage Preservation. By integrating theoretical modeling with applied technical validation, the research bridges disciplinary silos, offering both a conceptual roadmap for equitable cultural partnerships and actionable protocols for digital preservation in an era of accelerating technological disruption.

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