

Regional tourism: Exploring themes for Transnational Routes

Oyunchimeg Luvsandavaajav¹ , Enkhjargal Dalaibaatar¹ , Gantuya Narantuya^{1*} 

¹ Department of Geography, National University of Mongolia; Ikh Surguuliin Street 1, Ulaanbaatar 14201, Mongolia

oyunchimeg_l@num.edu.mn (O.L.); enkhee_jal@num.edu.mn (E.D.); n.gantuya@num.edu.mn (G.N.)

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the potential for developing a thematic tourism corridor linking China, Mongolia, and Russia, drawing on theoretical insights from core-periphery theory, new regionalism, and place branding. Situated between two dominant regional powers, Mongolia faces challenges stemming from its peripheral status - such as limited accessibility and infrastructure deficits - yet these same conditions present unique opportunities for cross-border tourism development. Based on qualitative interviews with tourism experts, the research identifies six potential themes - four cultural and two natural - that could underpin a cross-border corridor model rooted in shared heritage and ecological assets. Employing qualitative research methods, specifically in-depth interviews with tourism experts, this study identifies two natural themes and four cultural themes deemed suitable for the development of cross-border tourism. The findings reveal both opportunities and constraints in advancing tourism collaboration within the China-Mongolia-Russia transboundary context. The study contributes to the regional tourism discourse by proposing context-sensitive strategies that align natural and cultural resources with market-oriented products, fostering inclusive growth, regional integration, and sustainable tourism practices. Based on empirical insights, the study proposes strategic directions to align natural and cultural resources with market-oriented tourism products, thereby enhancing visitor flows and promoting long-term, sustainable growth in the region.

KEYWORDS: thematic routes, tourism, regional integration, economic development, transnational tourism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Economic corridors refer to integrated infrastructure networks - comprising roads, railways, ports, and telecommunications - that facilitate the movement of goods, people, capital, and services across borders (Judge, 2018; Manzoor & Wei, 2018). Designed to connect cities and regions via efficient transport routes (Brunner, 2014; Nagy, 2012; Oyunchimeg, 2022), economic corridors have emerged as a critical framework for regional development since the post-Soviet transition (Bender, 2001). In parallel, regional tourism has gained prominence as a vehicle for economic integration, cultural exchange, and sustainable development. Themed transnational routes - such as the Silk Road, Viking Trail, and Danube River Trail - illustrate how shared heritage and ecological assets can foster regional cooperation and attract international travelers (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009; Shishmanova, 2015). However, while the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor has been widely discussed in terms of trade and infrastructure, scholarly attention to its tourism dimension remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining opportunities for thematic tourism development that can unify destinations and strengthen regional identity. While heritage narratives such as the “Tea Road” have been discussed in past literature (Egshig, 2016), this research offers a more comprehensive thematic framework, grounded in empirical insights and tailored to contemporary tourism development goals. The study also situates Mongolia not merely as

* Corresponding author: n.gantuya@num.edu.mn; Tel.: +976-99 036 113

a transit country but as a distinctive destination, leveraging its geographic remoteness, nomadic heritage, and ecological richness to differentiate itself within the region.

Mongolia's landlocked geography and relatively small population place it in a peripheral position within the Northeast Asian geopolitical landscape. This status has constrained its integration into global tourism flows, due to limited international air access, underdeveloped infrastructure, and low international visibility (UNWTO, 2018). Paradoxically, these very factors have increased its appeal among travelers seeking authentic, immersive, and less-commercialized experiences. Mongolia's vast steppe, preserved nomadic culture, and historical role as a conduit of intercontinental exchange offer substantial value for thematic tourism. Viewed through the lens of economic corridor development, tourism can be strategically aligned with infrastructure and mobility policies. When supported by efficient transport systems and harmonized border procedures, corridors can enhance tourist flows and support broader development goals, including rural revitalization, SME growth, and the preservation of cultural heritage (Hall & Page, 2014; Lopez-Guzman et al., 2014). For Mongolia, effective corridor-based tourism development requires a distinctive thematic positioning that draws on its comparative advantages. Unlike China and Russia, which command large, diversified tourism markets, Mongolia must capitalize on its unique identity as a guardian of nomadic traditions, ecological integrity, and transcontinental heritage. This study explores how cross-border thematic narratives - co-developed with neighboring countries - can serve as a catalyst for sustainable and inclusive tourism growth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Transnational tourism routes and regionalism

Transnational tourism routes are increasingly recognized as instruments of regionalism and cross-border cooperation. Emerging within the paradigm of "new regionalism," these routes reflect a shift toward soft economic ties, cultural diplomacy, and non-state actor engagement (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). Tourism serves as a form of "soft connectivity," enabling the flow of people, ideas, and cultural narratives across borders (Alampay & Rieder, 2008). Successful examples include the revitalization of the Silk Road and the Viking Routes project, which leverage shared heritage to create coherent, symbolic tourism experiences (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009; Swarbrooke et al., 2003). These initiatives demonstrate how thematic tourism can reinforce regional identity and contribute to integration objectives, especially when aligned with broader strategies such as transport connectivity and visa facilitation (ADB, 2020). However, scholars emphasize that thematic cohesion alone is insufficient. Effective governance, equitable resource distribution, and coordinated planning are essential for long-term sustainability (Bock et al., 2021; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Transnational tourism routes thus represent both cultural bridges and policy tools - capable of promoting sustainable regional development when supported by inclusive, multi-level collaboration.

2.2. Tourism and the corridor development

While traditionally focused on trade and infrastructure, economic corridors increasingly intersect with tourism as a tool for regional integration and diversification (Ramirez et al., 2017; Athukorala & Narayanan, 2017; World Bank Group, 2018). In South and Southeast Asia, corridors such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway have stimulated tourism through enhanced mobility and visibility, though gaps remain in tourism-specific infrastructure and branding (Athukorala & Narayanan, 2017; Ramirez et al., 2017). For landlocked and infrastructure-challenged countries like Mongolia, economic corridors - particularly the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC) - present an opportunity to reposition geographic peripherality as strategic connectivity (Oyunchimeg, 2022). Integration into regional corridor frameworks, when accompanied by tourism policy alignment, destination branding, and digital facilitation, can significantly enhance tourism flows and rural development. Regional case studies, such as the Greater Mekong Subregion and East Africa's Northern Corridor, underscore the need for spatial coordination and thematic coherence. However, in the absence of inclusive governance, careful consideration of socio-environmental impacts, and active community participation, such initiatives risk

exacerbating existing inequalities and contributing to the commodification of local cultures (Chen et al., 2021; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Economic corridors can serve as catalysts for tourism development, but their success depends on the intentional inclusion of tourism in corridor governance, strategic destination planning, and infrastructure alignment. For Mongolia, the opportunity lies in leveraging its cultural distinctiveness and geographic position through integrated policy frameworks that embed tourism within broader regional development agendas.

2.3. Cultural and natural themes in regional tourism

Thematic frameworks play a pivotal role in shaping coherent, marketable, and culturally meaningful cross-border tourism experiences. Whether based on cultural heritage, natural landscapes, or a hybrid of both, thematic tourism enables destinations to differentiate themselves while contributing to broader regional narratives and identity formation (Richards & Wilson, 2006; Timothy, 2011). These frameworks serve as strategic marketing tools while also acting as mechanisms for fostering cultural diplomacy and regional cohesion.

Natural themes in regional tourism similarly capitalize on shared ecological assets, including mountain ranges, river basins, deserts, and transboundary wildlife habitats. Initiatives such as the Alpine Convention, spanning eight European countries, and the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration in East Africa demonstrate how environmental connectivity and joint governance can support both conservation and ecotourism (UNWTO, 2018). These models offer nature-based experiences such as trekking, birdwatching, and wildlife safaris while reinforcing sustainable management of shared ecosystems.

Cultural tourism themes often draw upon shared historical legacies such as religious networks, ancient trade routes, and patterns of human migration. Well-established examples - such as the Camino de Santiago in Europe and the Silk Road across Asia - illustrate how heritage-based narratives can transcend political boundaries to create compelling transnational tourism products (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). These routes promote cultural immersion, experiential learning, and cross-border collaboration in heritage preservation (UNESCO, 2013). Their success is largely attributed to their emotional resonance, perceived authenticity, and narrative continuity across diverse local contexts (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

A critical factor in the success of both cultural and natural thematic tourism is the construction of narratives that resonate with local communities and appeal to international visitors. Themes must strike a balance between regional coherence and local distinctiveness (Richards & Wilson, 2006). Storytelling serves as a vital tool in this process, linking places, people, and experiences into cohesive transnational journeys that can be effectively marketed (Månsson, 2011). When themes reflect the lived experiences, values, and aspirations of local populations, they are more likely to gain community support and contribute to inclusive, sustainable tourism development (Salazar, 2012). Effective thematic development in cross-border contexts requires coordination among multiple governance levels - including national tourism authorities, local governments, heritage organizations, and private sectors. As Timothy (2011) notes, such efforts are inherently political, involving negotiations over authenticity, representation, and interpretation. Failure to address these dynamics can result in fragmented visitor experiences, contested narratives, or the commodification of sensitive cultural traditions (MacCannell, 1999). Cultural and natural themes provide a foundation for regional tourism strategies that promote transnational cooperation, strengthen regional identity, and enhance destination competitiveness. Their success depends on participatory planning, narrative authenticity, and governance structures that transcend national borders while respecting local uniqueness.

2.4. Core-periphery theory, regionalism, and place branding

Core-periphery theory explains spatial inequality in development, wherein "core" regions accumulate economic and infrastructural advantages while peripheral areas face systemic disadvantages (Krugman, 1992). Mongolia's geographical position between two dominant regional powers - China and Russia - reflects a classic peripheral condition. Its landlocked nature, low population density, and limited

transport infrastructure pose structural challenges for tourism development, resulting in restricted accessibility and reduced visibility in global tourism circuits (Oyunchimeg, 2022).

Paradoxically, the peripheral status of Mongolia also presents strategic advantages in the context of thematic tourism development. As stated by Hall and Page (2006), peripheral destinations often appeal to international travelers seeking authenticity, remoteness, and unique cultural or ecological experiences. Mongolia's vast steppe landscapes, nomadic traditions, and transboundary heritage provide fertile ground for the development of distinct thematic tourism products. By strategically aligning with its neighboring core economies through cooperative frameworks, Mongolia can reposition its peripheral status into a connective advantage, acting as a cultural and geographic bridge between China and Russia.

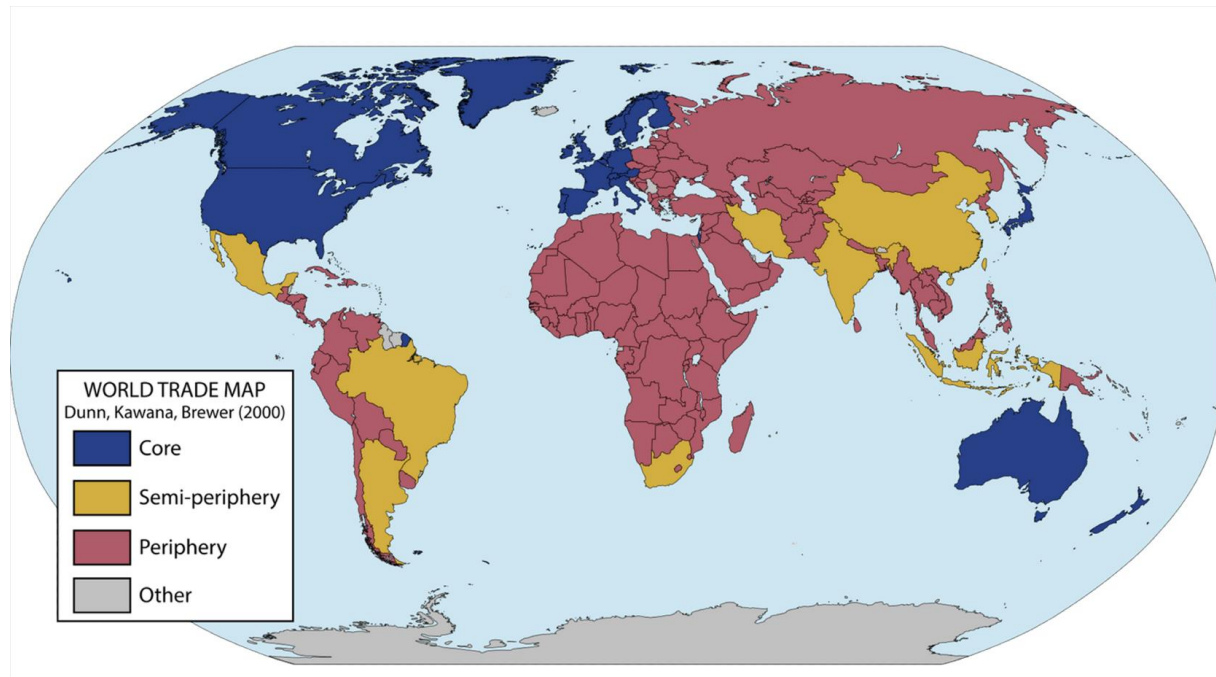


Figure 1. World Trade Map.

Source: Chase-Dunn et al., 2000.

The concept of new regionalism - distinct from earlier state-centric models emphasizes the growing importance of regional cooperation driven by non-state actors, market forces, and shared cultural or environmental interests (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Keating, 2000). Within this context, cross-border tourism corridors emerge not merely as infrastructural projects but as platforms for deepening regional integration, enhancing mobility, and promoting shared narratives across national borders (Timothy, 2011). The China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC), established under the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), provides a structural basis for such integration. However, to move beyond trade facilitation and extractive infrastructure, tourism must be explicitly integrated into regional policy frameworks through shared visa regimes, simplified border controls, joint product development, and thematic branding (ADB, 2020; Athukorala & Narayanan, 2017). Thematic tourism, particularly when based on cultural and natural heritage, can foster mutual understanding and economic inclusivity while reinforcing the region's collective identity. Furthermore, regional tourism initiatives can contribute to rural revitalization, environmental stewardship, and the diversification of Mongolia's economy - outcomes aligned with the goals of sustainable development and soft regionalism (Schulz et al., 2001).

2.5. Place branding and narrative coherence

Place branding plays a central role in thematic tourism corridor development, offering cohesive narratives that link cross-border destinations while highlighting their uniqueness (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Anholt, 2007). Initiatives like "Six Countries, One Destination" in the Greater Mekong and the "Baltic Identity" campaign illustrate how joint branding enhances regional visibility and facilitates

international marketing (ADB, 2020; Clarke, 2018). Effective place branding goes beyond logos and slogans. It involves coordinated governance, local stakeholder participation, and narratives rooted in cultural and ecological authenticity. For Mongolia, developing a corridor with China and Russia offers a strategic opportunity to construct a compelling brand centered on nomadic heritage, transboundary landscapes, and cross-cultural dialogue - elements that can position the region as a meaningful and experiential destination in Northeast Asia. Yet, place branding in cross-border contexts also poses risks, including the commodification of culture, politicization of heritage, and inequitable benefit distribution (MacCannell, 1999; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). These challenges necessitate participatory branding processes that involve local communities, ensure authenticity, and avoid imposing homogenized narratives. For Mongolia, developing branding strategies that resonate locally while appealing globally is essential to avoid marginalization within the tri-national corridor initiative.

By integrating insights from core-periphery theory, regionalism, and place branding, this research conceptualizes the China-Mongolia-Russia tourism corridor as both a functional transport route and a spatially and symbolically constructed region. Mongolia's peripheral status becomes an asset when reimagined through regional tourism cooperation and narrative cohesion. However, realizing this potential requires intentional policies, infrastructure alignment, and thematic development that reflect both shared regional visions and local authenticity.

2.6. Regional tourism market potentials

Chinese market - China continues to hold a dominant position as one of the world's leading outbound tourism markets, driven by rising household incomes, progressive liberalization of outbound travel policies, and increased international accessibility. According to the China Outbound Tourism Research Institute (COTRI, 2024), Chinese households made approximately 101 million cross-border trips in 2023, though this figure represents only 36.3% of pre-pandemic levels, primarily due to lingering COVID-19 measures, inflationary pressures, and growing interest in domestic tourism alternatives. Historically, outbound travel has been concentrated in affluent southeastern provinces, with Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan among the most frequented destinations. However, the Chinese tourism market has evolved to reflect more diversified preferences, with a rise in family-based travel, technology-assisted planning, and increased demand for cultural, culinary, and scenic experiences, coupled with a strong emphasis on safety and value for money (COTRI, 2024; Sysoeva & Rudneva, 2021). Notably, countries that have adopted visa facilitation policies have experienced significant growth in Chinese arrivals. For example, Singapore recorded a 45% monthly increase and a 388% year-on-year increase in Chinese tourist arrivals following the introduction of a visa waiver during the 2024 Chinese New Year holiday (COTRI, 2024). Mongolia, owing to its geographic proximity and cultural-historical ties, has increasingly attracted Chinese tourists, particularly those interested in heritage and cultural tourism rather than adventure travel (Oyunchimeg & Gantuya, 2021; Zhao et al., 2018). However, complex visa procedures and limited transport infrastructure remain significant barriers to unlocking the full potential of this market segment. If Mongolia were to introduce simplified visa regimes, improve border infrastructure, and offer well-branded thematic tourism products, it could capitalize on China's growing middle class and regional outbound travel flows.

Mongolian market - Mongolia's outbound tourism sector, though relatively young, has grown significantly over the past decade, reflecting the country's socioeconomic transformation. The emergence of a young, urbanizing middle class, combined with increased disposable income - largely fueled by mining-led economic growth has contributed to greater international mobility among Mongolian citizens (Oyunchimeg & Gantuya, 2021). According to the National Statistical Office of Mongolia (2024), over 2 million outbound departures were recorded in 2023, with travel for leisure, personal, and medical purposes comprising a growing share. Popular outbound destinations include China, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, and, more recently, Vietnam. Regional travel remains particularly significant within the tri-national tourism network formed by Mongolia, China, and Russia, with more than 5 million cross-border visits reported annually before the COVID-19 pandemic (Oyunchimeg & Gantuya, 2021). For example, in 2018, over 1.9 million Mongolian travelers visited China, while a substantial volume of

tourism flows was also recorded in the reverse direction (NSO, 2024). Developing a thematic tourism corridor among China, Mongolia, and Russia, based on shared cultural narratives and transboundary natural assets, represents a strategic opportunity to promote economic integration, strengthen regional connectivity, and advance people-to-people exchanges. While earlier initiatives such as the Tea Road Corridor garnered governmental attention, their momentum was disrupted by the pandemic and shifting geopolitical conditions. Revitalizing such projects is now seen as essential for promoting regional cooperation, employment generation, and the diversification of Mongolia's tourism offerings.

Russian Market - Russian outbound tourism has been shaped by a combination of political dynamics, visa regimes, and regional transport infrastructure, particularly in relation to neighboring countries like Mongolia and China. The 2014 visa-free agreement between Russia and Mongolia significantly boosted bilateral mobility, resulting in 229,105 Russian tourist arrivals in Mongolia in 2023 - a marked increase from previous years (National Statistical Office, 2024). However, Russia's outbound and inbound tourism landscape has undergone profound changes since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022. Inbound arrivals dropped dramatically, with only 200,100 international visitors entering Russia in 2022 - representing a 96.1% decrease from pre-pandemic levels (Pivot to Asia, 2024). Chinese arrivals, which once made up close to 30% of Russia's 5.1 million tourists, declined to fewer than 850 visitors in the same period. Meanwhile, outbound Russian travel to Europe and North America has been severely restricted due to sanctions and diplomatic tensions, resulting in a reorientation toward Asia-Pacific destinations such as Thailand, India, Vietnam, and the Philippines, where tourism campaigns and visa facilitation have played a key role in attracting Russian visitors (Pivot to Asia, 2024). Against this backdrop, there is growing momentum for Russia to strengthen tourism partnerships with Asian neighbors, including Mongolia, where geographic proximity and longstanding cultural ties support collaborative development. The expansion of regional tourism initiatives - especially those focused on shared themes such as Buddhist heritage, nomadic traditions, and Soviet-era legacies - could contribute to Russia's efforts to diversify its outbound tourism flows and reposition its role in the Asian tourism landscape.

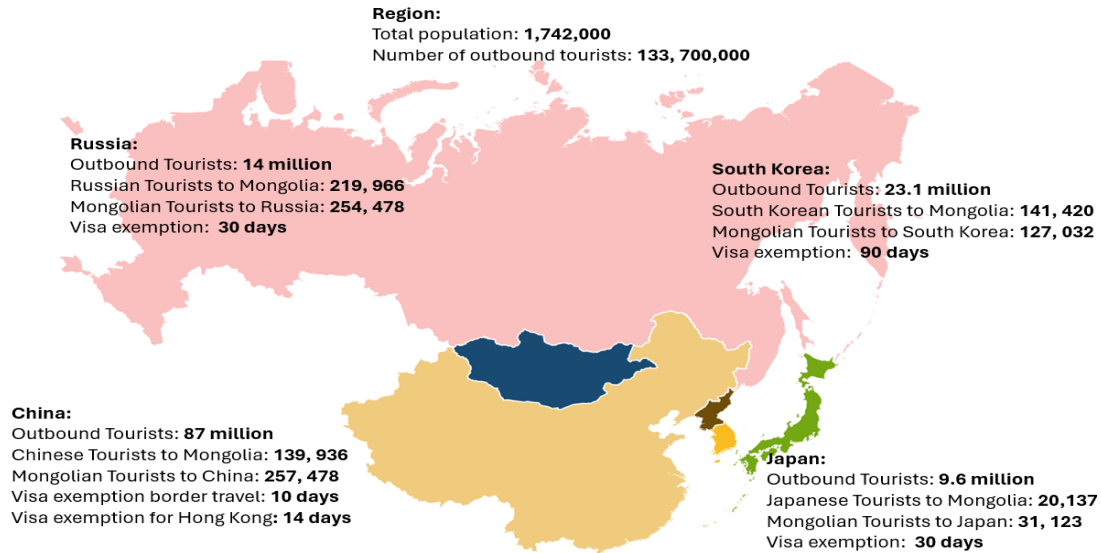


Figure 2. Regional tourism market potentials.
Source: Authors' own construct and UNWTO, 2023.

Other markets - In addition to China, Mongolia, and Russia, other East Asian countries - particularly South Korea, Japan, and emerging outbound markets such as Taiwan and Hong Kong - represent promising source markets for a future thematic tourism corridor. These countries are characterized by high outbound tourism volumes, strong purchasing power, and increasing interest in cultural and nature-based tourism experiences. For instance, South Korea ranked as the fifth largest outbound tourism market globally prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with 28.7 million international departures recorded in 2019 (ADB, 2020). In 2023, over 20 million South Korean outbound trips were reported, driven largely by

demand for unique and safe travel experiences (ADB, 2020). Similarly, Japan registered 20.1 million outbound tourists in 2023, indicating a significant rebound from pandemic lows and reflecting strong interest in international cultural exchange (UNWTO, 2023). Notably, both Korean and Japanese travelers have demonstrated growing interest in authentic cultural encounters, heritage trails, and eco-tourism - areas in which Mongolia and its neighboring corridor partners possess a comparative advantage (UNWTO, 2023). These travelers are also responsive to improved accessibility, streamlined visa procedures, and digital travel facilitation - factors that could be integrated into corridor development strategies. For example, the introduction of e-visas or multilateral visa waivers for thematic corridor packages would likely increase appeal among time-sensitive and digitally connected East Asian travelers. Furthermore, existing aviation links between Seoul, Tokyo, and Ulaanbaatar provide a logistical foundation for integrating East Asian markets into the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor. Given the increasing diplomatic and cultural exchanges between these countries, the inclusion of East Asian source markets not only diversifies inbound tourism but also strengthens regional tourism diplomacy and economic resilience.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

A secondary data approach was employed through content analysis of documents published by the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment, and Tourism (MNET), with particular emphasis on annual reports and records of trilateral initiatives involving China, Mongolia, and Russia. Supplementary materials, such as conference proceedings, were also reviewed to assess the scope and evolution of regional tourism cooperation. To complement the secondary data, qualitative data were collected through focus group interviews. Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 16 participants, comprising tourism experts, local government officials, managers, and guides from travel companies serving the Chinese and Russian markets, as well as members of professional tourism associations. Each group included 4 participants. The sessions were held in Ulaanbaatar between June and July 2023, with each lasting between 35 minutes and 1.5 hours. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in Mongolia's tourism sector and their direct experience with tourists from China and Russia. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed for in-depth exploration of participant perspectives and ensured flexibility in responses, consistent with qualitative research methodology (Veal, 2017; Bryman, 2016). The interview guide included six types of open-ended questions (Hillman & Radel, 2018), focusing on: (1) travel experiences and behaviors, (2) sensory perceptions, (3) opinions and values, (4) knowledge, (5) emotions, and (6) demographics. Transcripts from the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, concepts, and language used by participants. Special attention was paid to insights from managers overseeing Russian and Chinese market operations, which provided information on travel itineraries, tourist preferences, and emerging market trends. A comparative analysis was conducted to explore potential themes for developing trilateral tourism corridors, focusing on cultural heritage, ecological assets, and historical trade routes. In parallel, content analysis was applied to policy documents and tourism cooperation frameworks among the three countries to contextualize findings and assess the feasibility of corridor development. All interview responses were anonymized, and participant profiles are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant profile.

Participant	Department	Organization	Experience in tourism	Experience in the organization	Place
P1	CEO	Tour operator	22	15	Ulaanbaatar
P2	Marketing manager	Tour operator	15	5	Ulaanbaatar
P3	Product manager	Tour operator	10	8	Ulaanbaatar
P4	Executive director	Tour operator	20	18	Ulaanbaatar
P5	Managing partner	Tour operator	16	5	Ulaanbaatar
P6	General Manager	Tourism Association	11	4	Ulaanbaatar
P7	Founder, CEO	Tour operator	20	11	Ulaanbaatar
P8	Vice director	Tour operator	19	7	Ulaanbaatar
P9	Manager	Tourism Association	12	4	Ulaanbaatar
P10	Asian market manager	Tour operator	15	9	Ulaanbaatar

P11	Regional manager	Tour operator	17	13	Ulaanbaatar
P12	Government official	Tour operator	10	3	Ulaanbaatar
P13	Event official	Government	7	2	Ulaanbaatar
P14	Head of Department	Government	4	4	Ulaanbaatar
P15	Officer	Government	3	2	Ulaanbaatar
P16	Tourism specialist	Government	3	7	Ulaanbaatar

This study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed of the research objectives and purpose, and informed consent was obtained in accordance with ethical protocols. A total of 20 tourism professionals were invited to participate, of whom 16 provided consent and were included in the study. The qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo software, selected for its capacity to facilitate advanced textual analysis, including automated searches for key terms, phrases, and co-occurring themes. NVivo was deemed more accurate and efficient than traditional manual methods of sorting and coding, as supported by previous literature (Hillman & Radel, 2018).

Thematic analysis was adopted as the primary analytical framework. Interview transcripts were initially subjected to open coding, allowing for the identification of recurrent patterns, concepts, and similarities within the data. Emergent codes were grouped into broader themes, which were then categorized into main themes and subcategories. These themes were systematically compared with existing literature to enhance the validity and contextual interpretation of findings. The data were coded, labeled, and consolidated based on procedures derived from prior qualitative research (Hillman & Radel, 2018). Through an iterative review process, dominant themes were refined and subsequently quantified to facilitate presentation and analysis (Table 2). To ensure analytical rigor and minimize potential researcher bias, two independent collaborators conducted a secondary round of coding to verify consistency in theme identification. This cross-validation process strengthened the reliability and credibility of the thematic structure. The methodological approach is consistent with those employed in qualitative studies by Hillman and Radel (2018), Kaushal and Srivastava (2021), and Shukla et al. (2022). As a result of the content analysis, two sub-themes were identified, which were subsequently refined into six overarching themes. These findings are presented in Table 3 and illustrated in Figure 3.

4. RESULTS

The findings of this study present the proposed thematic framework for a prospective tourism corridor connecting China, Mongolia, and Russia, as identified through the qualitative analysis. The identified themes encapsulate recurring ideas, concepts, and priorities emphasized by the participants, offering valuable insights into the perspectives and preferences of key stakeholders engaged in the corridor's development. Participants consistently identified several core themes relevant to the establishment of a transnational tourism corridor. A notable outcome of the interviews was the unanimous reference to the *Tea Road Initiative*, a concept that has been under discussion since 2016. This initiative was viewed as a central theme for the development of the tourism corridor, reflecting its perceived importance and relevance to regional integration. Although the momentum of the initiative was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a period of stagnation, participants emphasized the need to revive and prioritize the Tea Road theme as a cornerstone for future tourism development. The proposed routes encompass a variety of themes derived from cultural and historical resources, while only a limited number of themes. These thematic routes can be broadly classified into two categories: natural routes and cultural routes. Table 2 provides a summary of the thematic concepts proposed for the development of a tourism corridor connecting China, Mongolia, and Russia from the respondents.

The *natural routes* category features two distinct itineraries that cross the varied landscapes of the three countries. These routes are designed to offer tourist experiences in ecological diversity and natural wilderness, combining outdoor recreational activities with opportunities for cultural engagement. The emphasis is on highlighting the environmental richness of the region while fostering appreciation for the interconnection between nature and local traditions.

Table 2. Emergent themes for transnational routes.

		Highlight	China	Mongolia	Russia	Tour activity
Natural	Steppe Tundra Route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Stunning landscape •Ecological diversity •Vast open space •Different natural settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Desert landscape of Inner Mongolia •Exploring sand dunes •Exploring canyons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Vast grassland, steppe •Green valleys •Mountains •Natural parks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Explore Siberia •Explore Taiga •Tundra •Freshwater Lake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ecotourism •Trekking •Wildlife spotting •Birdwatching •National parks
	Wilderness Route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Exploration •Remoteness •Natural beauty •Escapism •Serenity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Tian Shan Mountain •Exploring valleys •Remote China •Rich biodiversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rugged terrain •Rare wildlife •Wild horses & camels •Rare birds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mount Belukha •Russian Altai •Rare animals •Freshwater Lake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Wildlife •Trekking, hiking •Sustainable adventure •Camping & stargazing
Cultural	Nomadic Route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Nomadic culture •Traditional ger •Resilience of nomadic people •Horse culture •Cultural exchange 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inner Mongolia •Expansive grassland •Nomadic family visit •Buryats, barga, uzemchin ethnics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Staying in ger •Experiencing nomadic life •Visiting reindeer family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Indigenous culture •Buryats & Evenki culture •Siberian village 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Workshops for offering nomadic skills •Ger stays •Horse riding •Camel riding •Reindeer riding
	Ancient Empire Route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Journey through dynasty •Grandeur of civilization •Historical sites •Imperial sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Imperial China •Beijing •Forbidden city •Temple of Heaven •Great Wall 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mongol Empire •Ulaanbaatar •Kharkhorin •Erdenezuu •Dadal birthplace of Chinggis Khaan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Tsarist Russia •Irkutsk •Russian Orthodox architecture •Moscow •Red square •Kremlin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Palace & temple visits •Museum visits •Guided tours to historical sites •Architectural heritage •Understanding of power & influence
	Fur & Cashmere Route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Journey through trade network •Fur trade •Sustainable cashmere •Cashmere goat •Textile heritage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Beijing •Bustling market •Historical trade sites •Hohhot, Inner Mongolia •Cashmere factories •Manchuria centre for fur production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Traditional way of cashmere production •Cashmere goat •Combing & counting fibers •Local markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Irkutsk center of fur trade •Russian fur production •Russian fur culture •Fur outlets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Guided tour on fur trade •Cashmere tour •Goat herding family •Cashmere production workshop •Cashmere factory visits
	Sacred Route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Religious heritage •Spirituality •Buddhism •Shamanism •Orthodox Christianity •Daoism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Buddhist temples •Tibetan influence •Beijing •Wutai Mount •Lingfeng temple •Daoist temple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ulaanbaatar •Gandan monastery •Erdenezuu monastery •Amarbayasgalant monastery •Shaman rituals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Russian Orthodox church •Irkutsk •Buryat shamans •Saint Basil Cathedral •Moscow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Religious tour •Spiritual tour •Shaman tour •Temple visit •Church visit

Source: Author's own construct.

The Steppe and Tundra Route offers a comprehensive ecotourism experience that crosses a diverse range of ecological zones - from the arid Gobi Desert in Inner Mongolia, China, through the vast steppe grasslands of Mongolia, to the tundra and taiga regions of Siberia, Russia. This transboundary route underscores the ecological heterogeneity and cultural uniqueness characteristic of each region. In Inner

Mongolia, desert ecosystems illustrate biodiversity adapted to hyper-arid conditions, including unique oasis systems. Mongolia's steppe zone, encompassing protected areas such as Gorkhi-Terelj National Park and the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape, integrates natural scenery with nomadic cultural heritage and provides critical habitats for endangered species. The Russian segment of the route features the taiga-tundra interface and Lake Baikal - the deepest and one of the oldest freshwater lakes globally - renowned for its ecological significance and endemic species. Through nature-based activities such as trekking, birdwatching, and wildlife observation, the Steppe and Tundra Route promotes sustainable tourism while fostering deeper engagement with the ecological and cultural wealth of Central and Northeast Asia.

The Wilderness Route will offer a transboundary ecotourism corridor that crosses some of the most remote landscapes of China, Mongolia, and Russia. This route encompasses a variety of ecosystems, ranging from the arid expanses of the Gobi Desert and the rugged elevations of the Altai and Tian Shan Mountain ranges to the glacial lakes and alpine meadows of Central Asia, as well as the biodiverse regions surrounding Lake Baikal and the Amur River basin. Notable ecological assets along the route include Mongolia's sand dunes, the endemic species of Lake Baikal in Russia, the rare and fragile habitats of the Altai Mountains, and the glacial and high-altitude ecosystems of the Tian Shan range in western China. The route supports environmentally responsible tourism through activities such as eco-trekking, wildlife observation, and cultural tourism experiences with local communities. By prioritizing both biodiversity conservation and community engagement, the route fosters an integrated understanding of the interdependence between cultural heritage and environmental sustainability, thereby contributing to the long-term development of sustainable tourism across the region.

Based on participant responses, four thematic cultural routes were identified within the framework of the China-Mongolia-Russia tourism corridor. These routes offer a platform for exploring the region's diverse and multilayered cultural heritage, while highlighting the historical interconnections among the three nations. Beyond the presentation of historical narratives and traditional customs, the routes are structured to facilitate experiential engagements, enabling travelers to interact with cultures and contemporary heritage. This approach fosters a dynamic understanding of diverse culture and transformation within the broader context of transnational tourism development.

The Nomad's Route provides an in-depth exploration of the nomadic cultural heritage spanning Inner Mongolia (China), Mongolia, and Siberia (Russia), with a focus on the traditions, resilience, and relationship with the natural environment that define these communities. In Inner Mongolia, visitors engage with the region's nomadic heritage through experiences on the steppe. In Mongolia, cultural experience is enhanced through traditional gers and involvement in practices such as wrestling, archery, and horse racing. The route extends into Siberia, where travelers encounter the Buryat and Evenki people, whose subsistence practices remain close to nature, particularly in the Lake Baikal. The route promotes intercultural exchange through interactive workshops on nomadic skills, participation in local festivals featuring music, dance, and opportunities for daily life engagement. Collectively, these experiences contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the living traditions and evolving identities of nomadic cultures along the transnational corridor.

The Ancient Empire Route explores the legacies of the empires and dynasties that have profoundly shaped the political, cultural, and architectural landscapes of China, Mongolia, and Russia. This transnational route highlights the imperial assets of Chinese civilization, the influence of the Mongol Empire, and the historical imprint of Russia's Tsarist era. In China, heritage sites such as the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and the Great Wall presents the administrative and architectural complexity of dynasties. In Mongolia, the route emphasizes the historical significance of Ulaanbaatar and Karakorum - the capital of the Mongol Empire - featuring cultural landmarks such as the Amarbayasgalant and Erdene Zuu Monastery. In Russia, destinations including Irkutsk and Moscow offer the legacy of Orthodox Christianity and Tsarist governance, with architectural features such as the Kremlin and Red Square symbolizing the imperial past. The Ancient Empire Route fosters an understanding of these former empires continuing to shape regional identities and collective memory.

The Fur and Cashmere Route examines both historical and contemporary trade networks connecting China, Mongolia, and Russia, with a particular focus on the role of the fur trade and cashmere production in shaping regional economies and facilitating cross-cultural exchange. In China, the route

begins in Beijing and extends to Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, where historic trading hubs coexist with modern cashmere manufacturing facilities that demonstrate the technological evolution of the textile industry. In Mongolia, travelers are introduced to the full cashmere value chain - from the herding of goats to fiber harvesting and processing - while also exploring the socio-economic dimensions of the industry through visits to local markets and cooperatives. In Russia, the city of Irkutsk, located near Lake Baikal, serves as a center of the fur trade, offering cultural experiences such as traditional samovar tea ceremonies that reflect the region's commercial heritage. Activities along the route include tea tastings, artisanal workshops, guided tours of cashmere and fur production sites, and visits to traditional marketplaces. A comprehensive perspective on how trade has historically influenced, and continues to shape, the cultural and economic landscapes of this transnational corridor is provided through these experiences.

The Sacred Route presents the diverse religious traditions that crosses the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, emphasizing the historical interconnections among Buddhism, Shamanism, and Orthodox Christianity. In Inner Mongolia, China, visitors encounter Buddhist temples and monasteries shaped by Tibetan influences, particularly in the spiritual hub of Hohhot. In Mongolia, the route offers access to both Buddhist and Shamanic traditions, with sites including the Gandan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar and sacred natural locations, where nature-based spiritual practices are integral to Shamanism. In Russia, the route incorporates Orthodox Christian landmarks in cities such as Irkutsk and Moscow, alongside opportunities to engage with the shamanic traditions of the Buryat people, whose spiritual practices remain closely tied to the nature. Through guided visits to temples and churches, participation in spiritual ceremonies, meditation, the Sacred Route provides an exploration of the region's multifaceted spiritual heritage. This approach reveals the relationship between religion, culture, and identity across diverse cultural and ecological settings. Figure 3 presents the spatial distribution and thematic development of these cultural routes within the broader China-Mongolia-Russia tourism corridor.

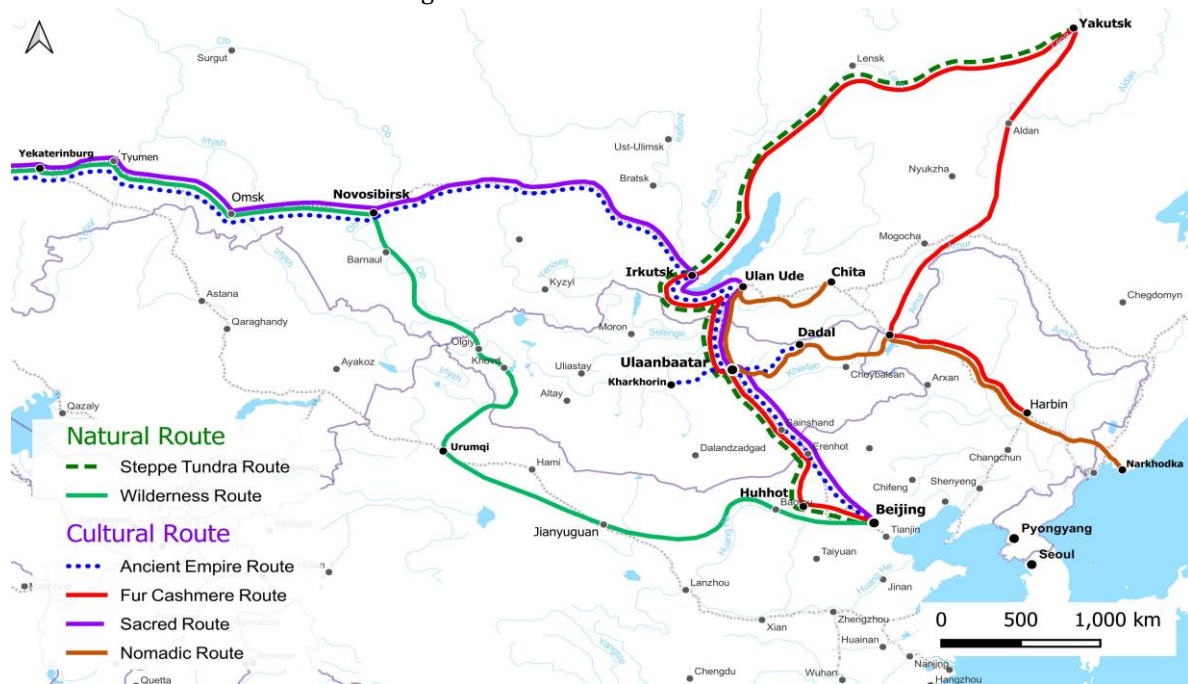


Figure 3. Proposed emergent theme routes.

Source: Author's own construct.

5. DISCUSSION

Regional collaboration plays a vital role in fostering mutual understanding among nations, driving economic development, and promoting sustainable growth. One effective approach to achieving these objectives is the establishment of economic corridors between countries. Numerous successful examples of such corridors exist worldwide (Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation, 2019;

Lopez-Guzman et al., 2014). In recent years, countries seeking to enhance their tourism industry have increasingly turned to the concept of tourism corridors as a means of cross-border cooperation. A critical element in the development of a tourism corridor is the identification of a unifying and relevant theme (Alampay & Rieder, 2008; Nagy, 2012). This theme must be carefully defined based on the shared cultural and natural resources of the participating countries, as well as the existing tourism infrastructure.

Establishing a thematic tourism corridor between China, Mongolia, and Russia faces significant challenges due to the need for extensive cross-border coordination and diplomacy. Although common cultural and historical ties are shared among these countries, cooperation can be complicated by political differences, varying governance structures, and divergent policy priorities (Gu et al., 2020; Clarke, 2018; Ye et al., 2024; Barahona et al., 2021). The flow of tourists may be impeded by issues such as visa policies, travel restrictions, and customs regulations. The standardization of travel policies and the facilitation of the movement of people, goods, and services must be supported through diplomatic negotiations. Furthermore, the existence of distinct tourism regulations in each country has resulted in inconsistencies in service standards, safety protocols, and environmental protections. To address these challenges, dialogue must be initiated by the governments of China, Mongolia, and Russia to develop common frameworks for visa issuance, environmental conservation, and the promotion of cross-border tourism.

The success of a thematic tourism corridor between these three countries is contingent upon the development of adequate infrastructure to support tourist flows and logistics. Considerable challenges related to transportation and accessibility are posed by the region's vast and remote areas, including the Gobi Desert, Siberia, and the Altai Mountains. The improvement of transportation networks - such as roads, railways, and air routes - is regarded as essential; however, the construction of infrastructure in rugged terrains is associated with high costs and necessitates careful environmental planning. Furthermore, a lack of tourist facilities has been observed in many remote areas, particularly for those seeking eco-friendly cultural experiences. The expansion of accommodation options, including hotels, guesthouses, and eco-lodges equipped with essential amenities, is therefore considered vital for enhancing the tourist experience and ensuring the corridor's overall success.

The natural environments along the proposed tourism corridor - including the Mongolian steppe, the Gobi Desert, and Siberia's Lake Baikal - are recognized as ecologically sensitive areas that host unique and often endangered flora and fauna. As tourism development intensifies, increased risks of environmental degradation, including pollution, habitat destruction, and resource exploitation, are anticipated. To mitigate such impacts, the implementation of sustainable tourism practices is required, with an emphasis on eco-tourism that respects local ecosystems, supports biodiversity conservation, and provides economic benefits to local communities. The engagement of tourists in conservation activities, such as wildlife monitoring and habitat restoration, is recommended. Moreover, the adherence of tourism businesses to green standards and the minimization of environmental footprints are regarded as essential components for ensuring long-term sustainability.

While the thematic tourism corridor presents an opportunity for the celebration of the region's cultural heritage, concerns regarding cultural exploitation or misrepresentation have been raised (Bender, 2001; Baimoratova et al., 2023). The traditions, languages, and lifestyles of nomadic communities, indigenous peoples, and ethnic groups along the corridor must be respected and represented with authenticity. Risks associated with the commodification of local traditions for tourism purposes may lead to the erosion of cultural integrity. To mitigate such risks, the involvement of local communities in the planning and development of tourism experiences is deemed essential. Engagement with nomadic populations in the co-creation of tourism products is encouraged to ensure that cultural heritage is accurately portrayed and that economic benefits are equitably distributed. Cultural exchange is to be framed around principles of mutual respect and reciprocal learning, rather than fulfilling superficial or exoticized tourist expectations. Furthermore, the provision of cultural sensitivity training for tourism stakeholders is considered critical for fostering cultural respect and enhancing cross-cultural understanding.

The establishment of a thematic tourism corridor spanning China, Mongolia, and Russia is viewed as a unique opportunity for regional collaboration, particularly in the context of recent challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. The tourism sector, a vital component

of the economies of all three countries, has been significantly affected, with declines observed due to cross-border travel restrictions, geopolitical tensions, and evolving global travel trends. Through the development of a thematic tourism corridor that leverages the region's cultural, historical, and ecological resources, opportunities are expected to be created for accessing new and diverse tourist markets. In this way, the revitalization of national tourism industries may be supported, while long-term economic development and regional cooperation are promoted.

Since the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the flow of Western tourists traveling through Russia to Mongolia has significantly declined due to airspace closures, sanctions, and political tensions, creating a gap in tourism revenue. In response, Mongolia has an opportunity to adjust its tourism strategy by attracting European tourists through alternative routes, bypassing Russia. By developing a travel corridor through China and Mongolia, European travelers can avoid geopolitical risks while still experiencing Mongolia's cultural heritage, landscapes, and nomadic traditions. Mongolia can also create more appealing tourism packages, promoting these experiences as part of a broader multi-country journey that includes China, helping to rekindle European interest in Mongolia despite the uncertainties surrounding Russia's role in global tourism.

An opportunity for creating a thematic tourism corridor lies in targeting affluent Chinese tourists, particularly from economically prosperous southeastern regions like Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangdong. With rising disposable incomes and a growing middle and upper class, these tourists seek unique travel experiences. The proximity of Mongolia and Russia, with their distinct cultures and natural landscapes, presents the corridor an attractive option for affluent Chinese travelers. By positioning the corridor as a high-end route with luxury accommodations, private tours, cultural exchanges, and eco-friendly experiences, China, Mongolia, and Russia can cater to this market segment.

The thematic tourism corridor offers an opportunity for China, Mongolia, and Russia to strengthen regional cooperation and economic integration. As China and Russia diversify their economic partnerships due to sanctions, Mongolia stands to benefit from closer ties with its larger neighbors through enhanced cross-border tourism. This corridor can improve infrastructure, regional connectivity, and marketing efforts, fostering economic integration and creating new business opportunities. For Mongolia, it presents a chance to diversify its economy, traditionally reliant on mining and agriculture, by developing a tourism sector that can create jobs, generate foreign exchange, and stimulate local economies. In addition, the corridor could support broader regional development projects in areas such as sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and infrastructure, reinforcing cooperation among the three countries.

6. CONCLUSION

The development of a thematic tourism corridor linking China, Mongolia, and Russia presents a strategic opportunity for sustainable tourism and revitalizing the post-pandemic tourism sector at a regional level. By leveraging the cultural, historical, and ecological resources of these countries, the corridor could become a major attraction for travelers seeking diverse and quality experiences. This initiative is particularly relevant for countries such as Mongolia, which has experienced a decline in arrivals from traditional markets - especially Europe - due to evolving geopolitical conditions. Beyond its economic potential, the corridor offers a platform for fostering intercultural dialogue and enhancing trilateral cooperation among the participating nations.

The proposed corridor would comprise a series of thematic routes encompassing ecological exploration, cultural heritage, and spiritual traditions, thus offering an integrated travel experience. The research identified six core themes - two centered on natural resource-based tourism and four on cultural diversity. However, the study's scope was limited to the perspectives of Mongolian tourism experts and businesses. To obtain a more holistic understanding of the corridor's potential, further research involving stakeholders and experts from China and Russia is essential.

Thematic tourism, by its nature, promotes responsible travel that encourages authentic engagement with local communities while aiming to minimize environmental degradation. Through a focus on ecotourism, cultural preservation, and community-based tourism initiatives, the corridor can generate long-term economic benefits while safeguarding the region's distinctive cultural and ecological

heritage. Furthermore, it holds the potential to serve as a replicable model for other transnational tourism initiatives seeking to address global challenges such as climate change, political instability, and regional economic disparities.

Future research is essential to explore visitor perceptions and assess demand across the thematic routes, with particular attention to the motivations and expectations of key target segments, including affluent Chinese tourists, cultural travelers, and eco-tourists. Pilot projects are recommended to evaluate the corridor's impact on local economies, environmental sustainability, and community well-being. With strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, and adherence to sustainable tourism principles, the China–Mongolia–Russia thematic tourism corridor has the potential to become a regionally significant model for cross-border tourism development that benefits both travelers and host communities.

Use of AI tools declaration

The authors declare they have not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the creation of this article.

Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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