

China-Central Asia Tourism Trains: Market Demand and Competition under the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: Cross-border tourism initiatives are vital for fostering economic integration and cultural exchange, especially in regions with historical and geographical significance. This study examines the market demand and competitive positioning of the proposed China-Central Asia tourism train, a key initiative under the Belt and Road framework. Grounded in motivation and consumer value theories, the research analyzes travel motivations, consumer psychology, and market trends to identify demand preferences. A questionnaire survey was conducted to forecast market demand, complemented by competitive analysis of existing international tourism train routes. Findings highlight older travelers as the primary audience, favoring affordable pricing, flexible itineraries, and cultural immersion. Competitive analysis reveals the train's potential to capitalize on Central Asia's strategic Silk Road role through unique services and experiences. This study provides practical insights for cross-border tourism development, enhancing regional connectivity and promoting sustainable tourism under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: China-Central Asia tourism train, Belt and Road Initiative, Cross-border Tourism, Market Demand Analysis, Competitive Positioning, Sustainable Tourism Development.

1. Introduction

Cross-border tourism plays a pivotal role in fostering economic growth, cultural exchange, and regional cooperation. Central Asia, as a historically significant hub of the ancient Silk Road, holds immense potential for enhancing connectivity and collaboration with China. In recent years, efforts to strengthen ties between China and Central Asia have been bolstered by initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI emphasizes "Five Connectivity"—policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties—with the latter serving as a critical driver of cultural and social integration.

In May 2023, the China-Central Asia Summit held in Xi'an highlighted the potential of regional tourism as a driver for economic integration and cultural exchange. One of the proposals was the launch of a China-Central Asia tourism train, envisioned as a platform to leverage shared cultural and geographical resources. This initiative aims to enhance connectivity between Xi'an, the historic starting point of the Silk Road, and key destinations in Central Asia, promoting sustainable tourism development and regional collaboration. Building on this concept, this study systematically analyzes the tourism train's market potential from the perspectives of demand and competition, offering actionable insights to guide its planning and implementation.

While the potential benefits of the proposed tourism train are clear, achieving its objectives requires a comprehensive understanding of the market dynamics. The demand perspective necessitates an analysis of tourist motivations, preferences, and behaviors to identify target segments and their specific needs. Simultaneously, the competitive perspective involves evaluating existing international tourism train services and alternative transportation modes to identify opportunities for differentiation and competitive advantage. These insights are essential to ensure the train's viability and alignment with the expectations of modern travelers.

This study adopts an integrated approach, systematically analyzing the market potential of the China-Central Asia tourism train from the dual perspectives of demand and competition. By exploring market drivers, competitive challenges, and strategic opportunities, this study provides actionable insights to guide the planning and implementation of the tourism train. Furthermore, it contributes to the broader discourse on cross-border tourism development, offering a replicable model for similar initiatives worldwide.

2. Literature Review

Since its inception, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has not only fostered economic and cultural exchanges among participating countries but also created new opportunities for cross-border tourism cooperation. Tourist trains, as an emerging mode of tourism transportation, possess unique advantages in enhancing transportation connectivity and catering to diverse travel demands. Central Asia, as a critical hub along the Silk Road Economic Belt, holds significant potential in its tourism market and prospects for regional collaboration. However, while numerous studies have focused on the economic and social benefits of the BRI, limited research has been conducted on the market analysis, competitive landscape, and demand forecasting for China-Central Asia tourist trains.

Existing studies on cooperation along the BRI have predominantly examined the economic impacts, with limited exploration of social benefits. Regarding economic benefits, Abirov and Karimov (2023) highlighted the pivotal role of the Silk Road in shaping Uzbekistan's trade and economic framework[1]. Ma (2022) found that the BRI has significantly improved local economic performance, particularly benefiting low-income countries[2]. Similarly, Meng and Wang (2024), through empirical analysis, demonstrated that the BRI has effectively reduced income inequality within participating countries, laying a foundation for sustainable development in the region[3]. In terms of social benefits,

Song et al. (2018) emphasized that the BRI fosters mutual benefits and promotes harmonious coexistence among participating nations[4]. Li et al. (2024) identified infrastructure as a critical factor under the BRI, not only enhancing connectivity among countries but also elevating their positions in global value chains[5]. These studies provide a valuable backdrop for analyzing the market potential of tourist trains, indicating that the BRI's stimulation of regional economic vitality creates favorable conditions for their development.

As a key pillar of the BRI, Central Asia has achieved notable results in its trade, energy, and investment cooperation with China. For example, studies have examined China's oil and gas partnerships with the five Central Asian countries[6], energy collaboration[7], East Asian and South Asian investment[8], and China-Southeast Asia food trade and investment cooperation[9]. However, research on cultural tourism cooperation between China and Central Asia remains scarce. For instance, Khikmatov and Nurullayev (2024) noted that while China is Uzbekistan's largest trade partner and Uzbekistan plays a crucial role in the BRI, there is insufficient research depth on tourism cooperation[10]. Koh and Kwok (2017) explored how political, economic, and social cooperation influences tourism development in Central Asia, identifying both opportunities and challenges[11]. Despite the evident importance of Central Asia in regional cooperation, research on the market demand, competitive dynamics, and feasibility of tourist trains remains underdeveloped, particularly concerning specific models of cross-border tourism collaboration.

In summary, existing studies have largely concentrated on the overarching economic and social benefits of the BRI or the macro-level mechanisms of regional cooperation. However, there is a lack of in-depth investigation into specific models of China-Central Asia tourism cooperation, such as tourist trains. Research on market demand, competitive landscape, and demand forecasting is especially scarce. To address this gap, this study aims to analyze the market characteristics and feasibility of China-Central Asia tourist trains through the lens of market demand and competitive frameworks. By doing so, it seeks to provide theoretical foundations and practical insights for deepening cross-border tourism cooperation and advancing the sustainable development of the BRI.

3. Method

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies to comprehensively analyze the feasibility and market potential of the proposed China-Central Asia tourism train. The research design includes two key components: a competitive market analysis and a survey-based demand forecast.

3.1. Competitive Market Analysis

The competitive analysis focused on existing international tourism train routes and transportation modes connecting China and Central Asia. Data were collected through secondary sources, including government reports, industry publications, and official websites of relevant railway services. The analysis evaluated the unique characteristics, strengths, and limitations of these transportation modes and routes, emphasizing their appeal to potential tourists. Special attention was given to factors such as service quality, cultural immersion, pricing, and accessibility to identify gaps and

opportunities for the proposed tourism train.

3.2. Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire was designed to investigate the travel preferences, motivations, and expectations of potential consumers. The survey included sections on demographic characteristics, travel motivations (e.g., physiological, cultural, social, and esteem factors), perceived value, preferred destinations, budget, and travel duration. The questionnaire was distributed online, targeting individuals with varying travel experiences and interests in Central Asia.

A total of 100 valid responses were collected, comprising 47 male and 53 female participants. Respondents ranged in age, with 10 under 18 years old, 24 between 18-25, 29 between 26-45, and 37 aged 46 or older. The collected data were analyzed to identify key consumer segments, pricing preferences, and destination expectations. Statistical tools were employed to extract trends and correlations, forming the basis for market forecasting.

3.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the competitive analysis were used to contextualize the quantitative findings from the survey. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to the survey data to identify primary audience segments, preferences for travel routes, pricing, and service features. Cross-tabulation and frequency analysis were employed to uncover relationships between demographic characteristics and travel motivations.

This mixed-methods approach ensures a comprehensive evaluation of both the demand-side dynamics and the competitive landscape, offering actionable insights into the planning and implementation of the China-Central Asia tourism train.

4. Market Demand Analysis

4.1. Travel Motivations

According to McIntosh's motivation model, tourism is driven by four categories of motivations: physiological, cultural, social, and esteem motivations (Figure 1) [12]. These motivations form the foundation for understanding tourists' needs and behaviors in the context of a China-Central Asia cultural tourism train.



Figure 1. McIntosh's motivation model

4.1.1. Physiological Motivation

Physiological motivations are among the most fundamental

drivers of tourism, encompassing the desire to explore new environments, enjoy diverse climates, and savor unique cuisines. Travel often serves as a means to relax, alleviate daily stress, and enhance physical and mental well-being. Central Asia, with its varied climate conditions and diverse natural landscapes, offers a wealth of opportunities for outdoor adventures, cultural exploration, and leisure vacations, catering to tourists with diverse preferences. Popular destinations such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have significantly invested in tourism infrastructure, creating safe and well-equipped environments for travelers, even amid regional variations in security conditions.

Additionally, the region's rich culinary heritage, shaped by its ethnic and cultural diversity, provides visitors with an exceptional gastronomic experience. The serene natural environment and the warm hospitality of local communities offer a respite from the pressures of modern urban life, making it an ideal destination for relaxation and rejuvenation. The proposed China-Central Asia cultural tourism train directly addresses these physiological needs by providing a safe and comfortable travel experience, access to diverse climates, pristine environments, and unique culinary offerings. These features strongly appeal to travelers seeking physical and emotional fulfillment.

4.1.2. Cultural Motivation

Cultural exploration is a cornerstone of tourism motivation, with studies indicating that over 80% of global tourists engage in cultural tourism. Travelers are often driven by the desire to experience new cultures, arts, and histories, broadening their knowledge and satisfying their curiosity. Immersion in local traditions also fosters cultural understanding and mutual respect.

The cities along the proposed train route are historically significant nodes of the ancient Silk Road, renowned for their cultural and historical heritage. These destinations feature an array of historical landmarks, including ancient cities, temples, and tombs, each narrating profound stories of the past. Moreover, the region's ethnically diverse population offers visitors a unique chance to experience various customs, traditional attire, music, and handicrafts, epitomizing the richness of multiculturalism. The China-Central Asia tourism train aligns seamlessly with cultural tourism motivations, serving as a platform for meaningful cultural discovery and immersion.

4.1.3. Social Motivation

Social motivations, including reconnecting with family and friends, forming new relationships, and expanding social networks, are key drivers of tourism. Traveling to Central Asia offers tourists a unique opportunity to engage with local communities, fostering authentic cultural exchanges. Activities such as exploring bustling markets, participating in traditional celebrations, or attending local workshops encourage meaningful connections with residents, enabling visitors to experience the region's renowned hospitality.

For many, travel also represents a chance to strengthen personal relationships. Whether reuniting with relatives working abroad or spending quality time with friends, such journeys create cherished moments. Furthermore, Central Asia's appeal as an emerging destination attracts visitors from around the world, facilitating interactions among travelers who share similar interests. Group activities, such as hiking expeditions or cultural exchange programs, further enhance social bonding and foster lasting memories. The China-Central Asia cultural tourism train is uniquely positioned to

cater to these social motivations by promoting interpersonal exchanges and enriching travelers' social experiences.

4.1.4. Esteem Motivation

Tourism can fulfill esteem-related motivations by enabling individuals to demonstrate their achievements, gain recognition, and bolster their social status. Under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China and Central Asia have established extensive collaborations in trade, energy, and technology, contributing to regional development. For Chinese tourists, visiting Central Asia is often accompanied by a sense of pride and confidence, as the region represents an area of increasing geopolitical and economic significance.

Travel to such a niche destination is frequently perceived as prestigious, enhancing social standing and garnering admiration from peers. Sharing unique experiences from this relatively unexplored region further reinforces travelers' sense of accomplishment and distinction. Within this context, the China-Central Asia tourism train provides an avenue for tourists to fulfill their esteem-related motivations by combining an exclusive travel experience with the opportunity to strengthen cultural ties and highlight personal achievements.

4.2. Consumer psychology

4.2.1. Perceived Value

According to the Customer Delivered Value theory proposed by Philip Kotler, consumers seek to maximize benefits while minimizing costs, aiming for the highest perceived value (Figure 2) [13]. In the context of tourism, perceived value often hinges on the uniqueness and appeal of a destination's resources. Central Asia offers exceptional tourism resources that combine rich cultural and historical significance with excellent value for money.

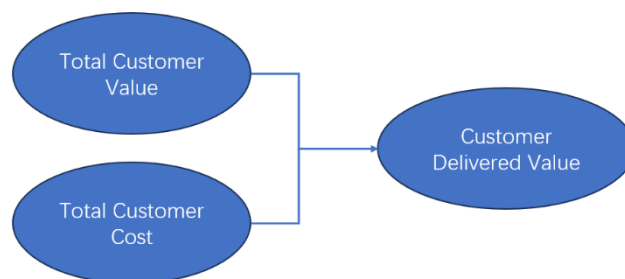


Figure 2. Phillip Kotler's Customer Delivered Value

As a crossroads between Asia and Europe, Central Asia embodies a profound cultural legacy forged over millennia through the Silk Road. This distinctive region harmoniously blends the subtle elegance of Asia with the vibrant dynamism of Europe. Travelers can immerse themselves in a confluence of Asian and European cultures, from art and cuisine to daily customs. Such experiences not only deepen understanding of cultural interactions but also enrich personal perspectives, broadening travelers' horizons.

For Chinese tourists, Central Asia's historical and cultural ties with China provide a unique and irreplaceable layer of meaning. This connection resonates deeply, offering a travel experience that combines cultural discovery with a sense of shared history. The region's singular cultural resonance distinguishes it from other global destinations, making it particularly appealing to Chinese tourists seeking meaningful and reflective journeys.

4.2.2. Engagement and Relatedness

Drawing on Engagement Theory and Relatedness Theory [14-17], consumer interest is heightened when a product establishes personal or cultural connections. A significant factor driving Chinese tourists' enthusiasm for Central Asia lies in the regions' shared historical and cultural roots.

The Silk Road has long served as a bridge between China and Central Asia, facilitating extensive exchanges in trade, religion, and culture. Iconic elements such as the Taiji symbols engraved on the wooden columns of Khiva's mosques, the timeworn but familiar features of elders in Bukhara, and traditional children's games in Samarkand evoke profound emotions among Chinese travelers. These connections instill a sense of familiarity and nostalgia, transcending geographical boundaries.

This historical and cultural affinity fosters a strong sense of identification and goodwill, often outweighing tangible considerations such as cost or convenience. Central Asia's ability to evoke these emotional ties positions it as a preferred destination for Chinese tourists amidst a competitive global tourism landscape.

4.2.3. Tourism as a Trend-Driven Activity

Tourism behavior frequently mirrors trends observed in fashion, with individuals motivated by a desire to participate in emerging phenomena. Destinations such as Zibo in Shandong, Tianshui in Gansu, and Yuncheng in Shanxi have recently experienced surges in popularity due to their viral appeal on social platforms. The desire to experience trending destinations, coupled with the fear of missing out, drives this behavior.

Despite over a decade of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promoting connectivity and collaboration, Central Asia remains a niche destination for Chinese tourists. Limited accessibility and high travel costs have constrained its popularity beyond China's border regions.

The introduction of a China-Central Asia cultural tourism train could address these challenges, using Xi'an as a central hub to improve accessibility and attract tourists from across China. This innovative approach has the potential to gradually mainstream tourism to Central Asia, fostering greater cultural exchange and unlocking multifaceted benefits, including economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts.

4.3. Conclusion

Central Asia presents Chinese tourists with a uniquely compelling travel proposition. Its rich cultural heritage, breathtaking natural landscapes, diverse Eurasian cuisine, and warm, authentic communities collectively create an unparalleled travel experience.

By aligning with tourists' physiological, cultural, social, and esteem-related motivations, Central Asia holds significant potential for growth in the tourism sector. Furthermore, the region's blend of Eurasian cultural assets, historical ties with China, and the strategic promotional leverage of the Belt and Road Initiative can serve as a catalyst to unlock new demand for China-Central Asia cultural tourism. These initiatives promise to strengthen regional connections and generate sustained mutual benefits across multiple dimensions.

5. Market Competition Analysis

5.1. Overview of China Central Asia Cultural Tourism Special Train

This tourist train starts from Xi'an and ends in Uzbekistan, passing through Dunhuang in Gansu, Zhangye in Gansu, Urumqi in Xinjiang, Turpan in Xinjiang, and other places along the way. This special tourist train allows passengers or tour groups to board at stations along the way, but cannot accommodate passengers. However, on the way back, tourists or tour groups can disembark at a certain station on their own and end the journey. This tourist train can be operated through a combination of short-term and regular operations, using a combination of domestic Silk Road special lines and international trains in the short term; In the future, we plan to adopt a customized "Xi'an Tashkent Silk Road International Special Train" to carry out regular operations.

5.2. Transportation modes

Aviation, highways, and railways, as the main modes of transportation for tourism in Central Asia, have different characteristics and relative advantages. Aviation, with its unparalleled speed, provides tourists with a fast mode of transportation, but the cost is generally higher than that of railways, and the single load capacity is generally smaller than that of railway transportation. Highway transportation is known for its flexibility and convenience in short distance transportation, making it the most suitable for short and multi segment trips. For long-distance international travel, road travel takes a longer time and is relatively less comfortable. Although the railway tourism special train takes a long time, it has the characteristics of large capacity, moderate price, and high comfort, and has unique competitiveness in the long-distance international travel market. In addition, tourist trains can also provide unparalleled special services, such as entertainment facilities, health facilities, offering local specialty cuisine along the route, medical staff and other necessary service personnel, providing tourists with peace of mind for booking travel transportation.

5.3. International tourism special train routes

Currently, there are five international tourism trains operating in China (Table 1).

The currently operational five tourism special train routes exhibit four characteristics in terms of spatial layout and the combination of transportation modes: they lead to "Belt and Road" destination countries, have longer travel durations, feature the criticality and centrality of departure points, and demonstrate the combinational nature of transportation methods.

Firstly, all these tourism special trains are directed towards countries along the "Belt and Road," namely Laos, Vietnam, South Korea, Mongolia, and Russia. There are two routes heading to Laos, one each to Vietnam and South Korea, and another one that travels northward through Mongolia and Russia. The primary directions of the routes are southward and eastward. All planned durations for the routes range from 11 to 16 days, exceeding 10 days (the round-trip train journey between Beijing and Russia lasts 12 days), highlighting the characteristic of longer travel times associated with tourism special trains.

Table 1. International Tourism Trains Operating in China (As of October 2024)

Special Train Name	Mode of Transportation	Route	Special Services
Chengdu Panda Express: “China-Korea Mountain and Sea Love” 11-Day Tour	Railway, ferry, and bus	Chengdu–Yantai, Shandong–Incheon, South Korea–Seoul–Yantai–Jinan–Liaocheng–Tai’an–Luoyang–Chengdu	Organized by Chengdu Railway Business Travel Company in collaboration with Chengdu Passenger Transport Section, this tour features a range of activities, including the China-Korea Cultural Exchange Performance, the “Panda Special Train” Interactive Treasure Hunt, Korean Ethnic Song and Dance Performances, the “Search for the Most Beautiful Travel Scenery” Photography Exhibition, and the China-Korea Cultural Tea Party.
“Laos + Yunnan, Guizhou, and Hubei” 15-Day Tour Special Train	Tourist train, cross-border train, and bus	Beijing–Kaili–Guiyang–Anshun–Kunming–Vientiane–Vang Vieng–Luang Prabang–Xishuangbanna–Kunming–Chibi–Beijing	Organized by China Railway Travel Group, this tour provides experienced and responsible professional tour guides, onboard medical staff, and dedicated attendants throughout the journey to ensure passenger safety and comfort.
“Harbin-Laos” 16-Day Tourism Special Train	Tourist train, cross-border train, and bus	Harbin–Hubei–Guizhou–Hunan–Yunnan–Vientiane–Vang Vieng–Luang Prabang–Harbin	Operated by Heilongjiang Province, this train includes onboard health professionals to support elderly travelers. Additional offerings include birthday celebrations with cake and longevity noodles, as well as entertainment activities like singing, dancing, poetry recitation, and interactive competitions to enrich the travel experience.
Hohhot-Vietnam 14-Day Tourism Special Train	Tourist train and bus	Hohhot–Baotou–Xiangyang–Jiujiang–Yingtian–Zhanjiang–Yingtian–Mount Longhu–Mount Lu–Halong Bay, Vietnam–Hanoi–Hohhot	This train, jointly developed by the railway department and multiple travel agencies, allows travelers to explore provinces such as Hubei, Guangxi, Hainan, Guangdong, and Jiangxi, as well as visit Hong Kong, Macau, and Vietnam to experience the unique charm of Sino-Vietnamese cultural integration. The train offers seamless travel with no need to change trains or beds. Tour guides and health professionals accompany the journey, ensuring safety and comfort. Onboard entertainment includes chess, card games, and karaoke, adding to the fun of the journey.
Beijing-Moscow 6-Day International Special Train (K3)	International special train	Beijing–Shalingzi Station–Jining South Station–Zhurihe Station–Erlian Station–Zamyn Uud Station–Sainshand Station–Choir Station–Ulaanbaatar Station–Ulan Ude Station–Irkutsk Station–Novosibirsk Station–Moscow Yaroslavsky Station	Spanning three countries—China, Mongolia, and Russia—this train provides passengers with stunning views of mountain ranges, vast grasslands, lakes, and birch forests. The retro-style carriages offer a comfortable travel environment, and the train features catering services where passengers can enjoy the cuisines of different countries along the route.

Secondly, the selection of starting points for the tourism special trains is also distinctive. One category includes Harbin and Hohhot as the departure points for tourist hubs, cities that possess natural locational advantages for developing international tourism due to their proximity to border regions. Another category comprises first-tier large cities such as Beijing and Chengdu, chosen primarily because of their economic prosperity, dense population, thriving tourism industry, and extremely high accessibility, making them preferred starting points for international tourism special trains.

Lastly, the combination of transportation modes used by the tourism special trains showcases diverse features. Combinations such as railway + ferry + bus, tourism special train + cross-border train + bus, etc., are selected based on

actual conditions, which not only save costs but also provide tourists with a variety of transportation experiences.

From an overview of the five international tourism special trains already in operation in China, it can be seen that the routes cover Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and northern continental Asia, while Central Asia remains unexplored. Compared to the regions where tourism special trains have been launched, Central Asia is a necessary route for the land-based Silk Road extending westward to Europe. This corridor can radiate to vast areas and has the highest driving effect. Opening up international tourism special trains from China to Central Asia at the earliest opportunity could maximize the foundational support role of cultural exchanges in the development of various national endeavors.

6. Market Forecast Analysis

6.1. Current Market Situation

Central Asia has experienced rapid growth in both tourist arrivals and tourism revenue since 2015. The number of international tourists surged from 12.76 million in 2015 to 67.2 million in 2019. Focusing on the Chinese outbound market to Central Asia, 2019 data indicates that 157,000 Chinese tourists visited Kazakhstan, followed by 42,000 to Uzbekistan. The numbers for Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan stood at 18,200, 33,200, and 5,800, respectively.

On February 16, 2024, Kazakhstan's Minister of Tourism and Sports, Ermek Marjyqpaev, announced a record-breaking 217,000 Chinese tourists visiting Kazakhstan in 2023,

underscoring the growing interest among Chinese travelers in Central Asia. Moreover, visa-free policies introduced by several Central Asian countries have significantly enhanced travel convenience for Chinese tourists. For instance, Kazakhstan offers a 14-day visa-free entry, while Uzbekistan has implemented a 7-day visa-free policy for short-term tourists. These initiatives have effectively addressed visa-related barriers, making cross-border travel more accessible.

6.2. Results

A total of 100 valid questionnaires were collected, with respondents consisting of 47 males and 53 females. Among them, 10 participants were under 18 years old, 24 were aged 18-25, 29 were aged 26-45, and 37 were 46 or older (Figure 3).

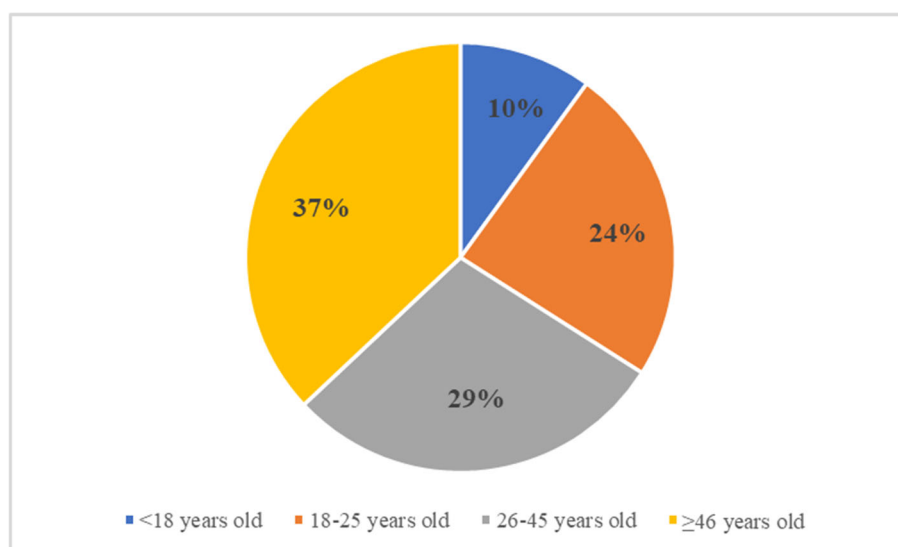


Figure 3. Age Distribution of Respondents

The survey results revealed that the majority of respondents demonstrated a strong interest in the scenery and culture of Central Asia, as well as a positive attitude toward traveling to

the region via a tourist train. Specifically, 96 respondents expressed interest in Central Asia's scenery and culture, with 26 individuals reporting a high level of interest (Figure 4).

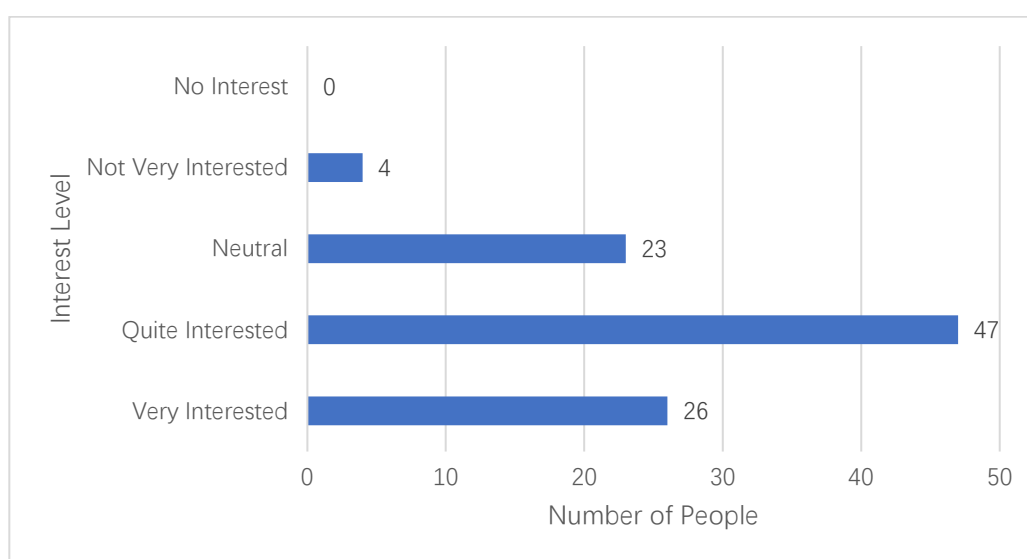


Figure 4. Participants' Interest Levels in Traveling to Central Asia

In terms of attitudes toward railway-based tourism in Central Asia, 47 respondents held positive views. Regarding costs, most respondents indicated an acceptable price range of 5,000 to 10,000 RMB. Specifically, 37 respondents

preferred a budget under 5,000 RMB, 35 were willing to pay between 5,000 and 8,000 RMB, 23 found 8,000 to 10,000 RMB acceptable, and 5 respondents were open to spending more than 10,000 RMB (Figure 5).

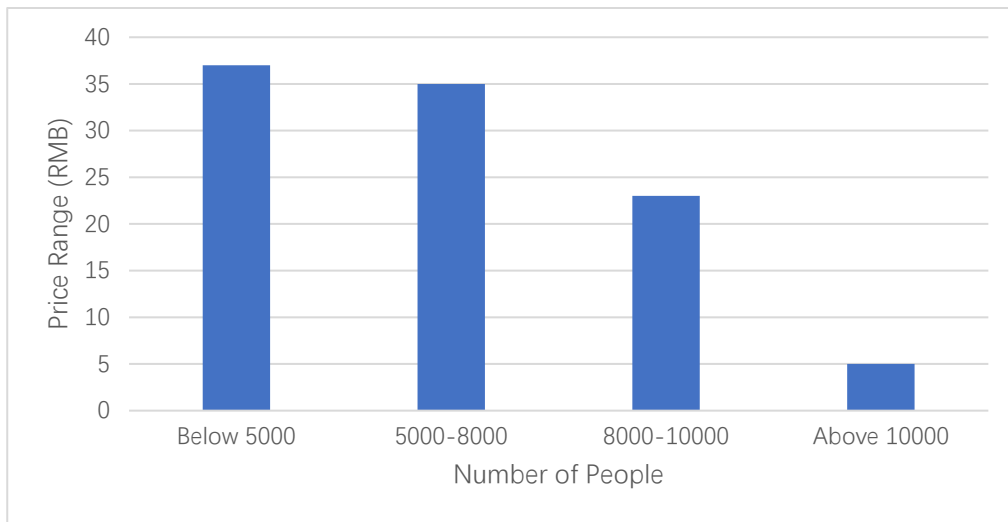


Figure 5. Expense Ranges Willing to Be Incurred by participants

Regarding travel duration, 47 respondents preferred trips lasting fewer than seven days, while 38 were open to itineraries of 8 to 10 days. For Central Asian destinations, 58

respondents expressed high expectations for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, with a slightly higher proportion showing greater interest in Uzbekistan (Figure 6).

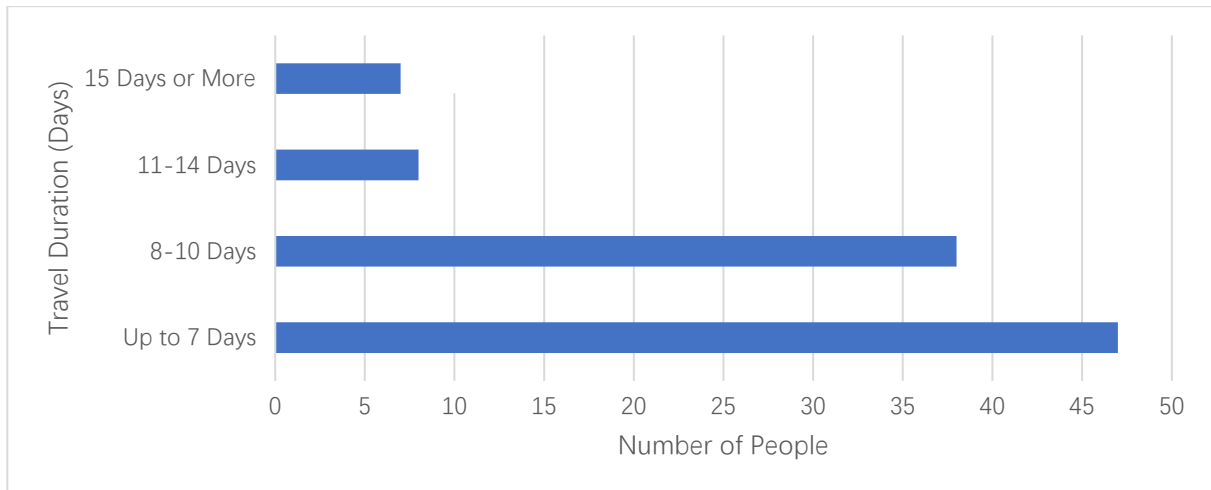


Figure 6. Acceptable Travel Duration Ranges for participants

Additionally, respondents expressed interest in passing through cities such as Tianshui, Zhangye, Lanzhou, Dunhuang, and Urumqi during the journey. Among these, Dunhuang, Lanzhou, and Uzbekistan ranked as the top three

most anticipated destinations (Figure 7).

Overall, the survey results indicate a generally positive attitude among potential travelers toward the introduction of a China-Central Asia cultural tourism train.

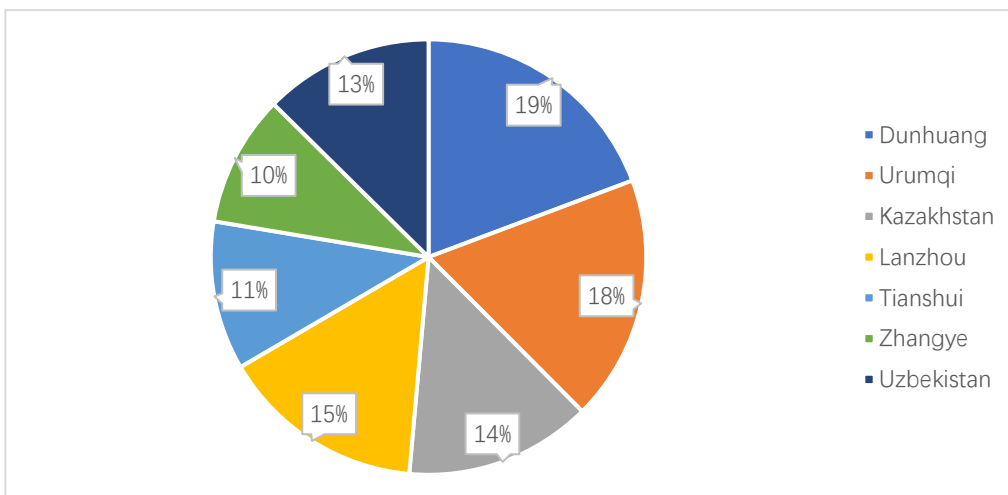


Figure 7. Distribution of Cities Expected to Visit by participants (Unit: Number of people)

6.3. Market Forecast

Based on the operation of current tourism trains, their primary target market comprises older adults. According to the latest statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics, as of early 2024, individuals aged 15 and below account for 18% of China's population, while those aged 15–59 make up 61%. The population aged 60 and above constitutes 21%, with those aged 65 and above representing 15.4%. Internationally, a region is considered an aging society when individuals aged 60 and above account for over 10% of the population, or those aged 65 and above exceed 7%. Thus, China has already entered a stage of deep population aging. Given the current age structure, China's aging trend is expected to accelerate significantly over the next 5-10 years.

The existing tourism trains, including international routes, primarily cater to the “silver market” of older travelers. Based on survey data and practical observations from travel agencies, the proposed China-Central Asia cultural tourism train will likely also target this demographic. However, considering the spending habits of this market segment and operational practices, most older travelers are unlikely to accept high-priced travel products.

Given that Central Asia is still a niche market, the travel patterns of this demographic often progress from short-distance to long-distance destinations, from domestic to international travel, and from intraregional to interregional journeys. Consequently, the primary customers for the proposed international tourism train would likely be older travelers who have already experienced traditional domestic and international classic travel routes. Nevertheless, due to China's large population base, the size of this target group remains substantial. Moreover, the unique appeal of Central Asia suggests that effective marketing could attract other demographics to explore this region.

Based on available data, the potential China-to-Central Asia tourism market can be segmented into four groups: senior travel groups, educational tours, business travelers, and other tourists interested in the region. Historical tourism data shows that May-June and September-October are peak travel seasons for older adults, while July-August sees high demand for educational tours.

In summary, the introduction and operation of the China-Central Asia cultural tourism train is expected to inject new vitality into the Central Asian tourism market. It will also support the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, enhance the visibility of Central Asia as a tourist destination, and highlight its unique attractions. By stimulating the travel motivations and actions of diverse market segments, the initiative is poised to deliver integrated benefits across economic, social, cultural, and environmental domains.

7. Conclusion

In summary, this study underscores the significant potential of cultural tourism special trains as an innovative and sustainable mode of cross-border travel between China and Central Asia. By analyzing market demand, competition, and forecast trends, the research reveals the growing appeal of Central Asian destinations among Chinese tourists, driven by their rich cultural and historical significance, stunning natural landscapes, and the introduction of favorable visa policies. These trains meet diverse traveler motivations—ranging from cultural exploration to social engagement—while offering a

unique, immersive travel experience that distinguishes them from other modes of transportation.

The findings also highlight the strategic importance of cultural tourism special trains in advancing the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative. Beyond economic contributions, these trains serve as a cultural bridge, fostering mutual understanding and strengthening ties between China and Central Asian countries. Additionally, they provide a platform for sustainable tourism development by promoting regional connectivity and enhancing the global visibility of Central Asian destinations. By addressing gaps in market demand analysis, competitive dynamics, and feasibility assessment, this study not only enriches academic discourse but also offers practical insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders. The development of cultural tourism special trains has the potential to redefine regional tourism cooperation, boost economic vitality, and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry in the Belt and Road region.

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