

# CHAPTER 13

## Cultural Corridor and Tourism Development in Southeast Asia in the Post- COVID-19 Pandemic Era

*Nguonphan Pheakdey and Sok Serey*

# INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is one of the world's most diverse regions with varied population densities, as well as economic, social, cultural, and religious differences. The region has hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures (Baker et al. 1996; King 2008). ASEAN Member States have made efforts in creating a peaceful coexistence and harmony among the different cultures, religions, ethnicities, and languages at both national and regional levels (Takagi 2009). An epistemic culture of local Southeast Asianists have contributed to the construction of Southeast Asia as a socio-cultural unit (Menkhoff et al. 2011). In the last few decades, regional social and cultural development have changed rapidly from a longstanding interest in cultural artefacts and ways of life to cultural groups and societies (Bunnell et al. 2005). Unfortunately, Southeast Asia is associated with numerous threads of history and cultures and common geopolitical concerns (Woetzel et al. 2004). Moreover, the interconnection and associations between national and regional political, economic, and social establishments and norms have shifted Southeast Asia into a contested region (Chheang 2013).

The ten member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) focus on regional economic, political, and cultural integration. In addition, ASEAN members have cooperated in the arts and culture sectors. As a result, the region has promoted its cultural vibrancy and dynamism (Ahmad 2006). At the ASEAN anniversary celebration held in Kuala Lumpur in 1997, the Heads of States of the ten nations adopted the ASEAN Vision 2024 to enhance stability and peace, economic growth, human development, and cultural heritage. Cultural advancement is considered one of the fundamentals of the ASEAN Community's dynamism to establish a harmonious region (ASEAN Secretariat 2020a). With coordination by the Jakarta-based Secretariat, ASEAN member countries have managed significant cultural heritage through national regulations, regional instruments development, media dissemination, ASEAN civilisation studies, and cultural tourism development (ASEAN Secretariat 2009). In mainland Southeast Asia, the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Program pays specific attention to building strategic alliances, in particular with ASEAN and ASEAN+3 (ASEAN, plus China, Japan, and South Korea) (ADB 2018).

Today, cultural corridors have played a significant role for ASEAN countries in enhancing dynamism in the ASEAN Community. The Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts (2016–2025) aims to promote regional identity, culture, and heritage with a strengthened ability to innovate and participate in the global community. One of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) blueprints is to forge solidarity and unity in the ASEAN region by building a common identity (ASEAN Secretariat 2016). Cultural corridors are important bonds that link cultural nodes with human activities. They play an important role in tourism development, cultural heritage conservation, and promotion of a sense of place (Bozic et al. 2016). Hoppert et al. (2018) believe that a cultural corridor is an integrative concept for integrating the conservation of cultural and natural resources.

The ASCC deals with cultures, languages, and religions, emphasising other common values in the spirit of unity in diversity and adjusting them into reality, potentials, and challenges (ASEAN Secretariat 2009).

Researchers have paid great attention to the East-West corridor, a conceptual tool for identifying standard cultural processes across mainland Southeast (Ishii 2009). A principle of the project East-West Cultural Corridor aims to explore the historical dynamics of cultural exchanges in Thailand and medieval land-based communication networks in the Thai-Myanmar trans-border regions, ancient roads connecting with Angkor, and Northeastern Thailand along the Mekong River basin from the Dvaravati to Ayutthaya periods (Shibayama 2017). Moore (2013) has drawn upon his model to study the histories of sites and their continuities with present traditions. The present proposals are to establish cultural corridors and tourism development in Southeast Asia in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. Accordingly, this chapter examines cultural diversity in Southeast Asia by focusing on World Heritage Sites, the importance of cultural values, the impact of COVID-19 on cultural conservation and tourism development, and ASEAN's cultural linkages and tourism development promotion in the post-COVID-19 era.

## CONCLUSION

Since 1976, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has listed World Heritage Sites as cultural importance and outstanding universal values. The listing of World Heritage Sites attracts international attention to preserve and conserve cultural heritage of ancient significance. Southeast Asian countries are culturally rich and diverse, proudly having many locations classified by UNESCO in the World Heritage of Humanity. In 1991, UNESCO's World Heritage inscription started the first World Heritage Sites of Southeast Asia at the 15th Session of the World Heritage Committee. In 2021, UNESCO listed 41 of the world's 1,121 UNESCO World Heritage sites in Southeast Asia and classified them by heritage and natural areas (Table 1). In 2015, Trang An Landscape Complex of Vietnam was the only mixed cultural and natural site listed by UNESCO. The site is located near the southern edge of the Red River Delta and has a remarkable landscape of limestone karst peaks permeated with valleys. The Bagan Archaeological Zone in Myanmar and the Plain of Jars in Laos were listed during the 43rd Session in July 2019 (UNESCO 2021). The World Heritage Sites are the cultural memoir of Southeast Asia and require a joint task to maintain and preserve the legitimacy of those locations (Peleggi 2017). A collection of World Heritage Sites has made heritage tourism in Southeast Asia a huge business. As a result, the number of tourists and infrastructure development are increasing. Angkor Wat is, for example, a major site for tourism development, along with the Malaka of Malaysia and Ayutthaya and Khao Yai of Thailand. The World Heritage Sites consider tourist attractions because they have cultural and natural values and significance.

Table 1. World heritage sites in Southeast Asia listed by UNESCO

| Country   | Number | Description  |
|-----------|--------|--|
| Cambodia  | 3      | Cultural (3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Angkor (1992)</li> <li>. Temple of Preah Vihear (2008)</li> <li>. Temple Zone of Sambor Prei Kuk, Archaeological Site of Ancient Ishanapura (2017)</li> </ul>  |
| Indonesia | 9      | Cultural (5) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Borobudur Temple Compounds (1991)</li> <li>. Cultural Landscape of Bali Province: the Subak System as a Manifestation of the Tri Hita Karana Philosophy (2012)</li> <li>. Ombilin Coal Mining Heritage of Sawahlunto (2019)</li> <li>. Prambanan Temple Compounds (1991)</li> <li>. Sangiran Early Man Site (1996) Natural (4)</li> <li>. Komodo National Park (1991)</li> <li>. Lorentz National Park (1999)</li> <li>. Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra (2004)</li> <li>. Ujung Kulon National Park (1991)</li> </ul> |
| Laos      | 3      | Cultural (3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Megalithic Jar Sites in Xiengkhuang–Plain of Jars (2019)</li> <li>. Town of Luang Prabang (1995)</li> <li>. Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape (2001)</li> </ul>  |
| Malaysia  | 4      | Cultural (2) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Archaeological Heritage of the Lenggong Valley (2012)</li> <li>. Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca (2008) Natural (2)</li> <li>. Gunung Mulu National Park (2000)</li> <li>. Kinabalu Park (2000)</li> </ul>   |
| Myanmar   | 2      | Cultural (2) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Bagan (2019)</li> <li>. Pyu Ancient Cities (2014)</li> </ul>   |

|                 |   |   |
|-----------------|---|---|
| The Philippines | 6 | <p>Cultural (3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Baroque Churches of the Philippines (1993)</li> <li>. Historic City of Vigan (1999)</li> <li>. Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras (1995) Natural (3)</li> <li>. Mount Hamiguitan Range Wildlife Sanctuary (2014)</li> <li>. Puerto-Princesa Subterranean River National Park (1999)</li> <li>. Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park (1993, 2009)</li> </ul>   |
| Singapore       | 1 | <p>Cultural (1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Singapore Botanic Gardens (2015)</li> </ul>  |
| Thailand        | 5 | <p>Cultural (3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Ban Chiang Archaeological Site (1992)</li> <li>. Historic City of Ayutthaya (1991)</li> <li>. Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns (1991) Natural (2)</li> <li>. Dong Phayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex (2005)</li> <li>. Thungyai-Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries (1991)</li> </ul>   |
| Vietnam         | 8 | <p>Cultural (5)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Central Sector of the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long in Hanio (2010)</li> <li>. Citadel of the Ho Dynasty (2011)</li> <li>. The complex of Hué Monuments (1993)</li> <li>. Hoi An Ancient Town (1999)</li> <li>. My Son Sanctuary (1999) Natural (2)</li> <li>. Ha Long Bay (1994, 2000)</li> <li>. Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park (2003, 2015) Mixed (1)</li> <li>. Trang An Landscape Complex (2014)</li> </ul> |

UNESCO has documented cultural and historical significance in Southeast Asian countries. The 41 UNESCO World Heritage Sites are of great value to domestic and international tourists who look for exclusive cultural experiences, for no place can better encapsulate a country's past and worldview than its World Heritage Sites. UNESCO also ranked 12 out of 41 sites as the great Heritage Sites. They include (1) City of Temples: Bagan, Myanmar, (2) The Universe in Stone: Angkor Wat, Cambodia, (3) Old Capital Renewed: Luang Prabang, Laos, (4) Two Religions, One Empire: Borobudur and Prambanan, Indonesia, (5) What Fire Couldn't Destroy: Ayutthaya, Thailand, (6) Historic Trading Towns: Melaka and George Town, Malaysia, (7) Stairways to the Sky: Banaue Rice Terraces, the Philippines, (8) Old Greens Made New: Singapore's Botanic Gardens, (9) Centuries of Business: Hoi An and My Son, Vietnam, (10) If it Ain't Baroque: the Philippines' Churches, (11) Forgotten City-States: Pyu Ancient Cities, Myanmar and (2) Tales from the Emperors: Vietnam's Hue Monument (UNESCO 2021).

The UNESCO World Heritage Sites have characterised shared and symbolic significance of cultural relevance for Southeast Asia. The preservation of cultural heritage is generally to generate economic values (Noonan 2003). However, Thannakvaro de Lopez et al. (2006) claim that cultural heritage sites have produced a sufficient budget for preservation and conservation programmes. On the other hand, many heritage sites were in poor condition or deteriorating due to insufficient resources for protection (Tuan and Navrud 2007). International tourism in Southeast Asia is gradually restructuring the relationship between the state and local cultures because culture and ethnicity have played a critical role in regional tourism. At the same time, tourism creates a new relationship among local cultures, as planner of tourist development, marketer of cultural meanings, arbiter of cultural practices displayed to tourists, and an arena for new forms of politics (Wood 1984).

Furthermore, Southeast Asian countries have unique cultural and religious festivals. Table 2. illustrates known cultural festivals in Southeast Asian countries. All those events attract millions of domestic and international tourists. Many festivals in the region happen during the solar new year, with the audiences washing off the bad luck, ill health, and evil spirits from the previous year to start the new year fresh. Other festivals are held to bring people closer together or to celebrate different holidays. The Southeast Asian region has a rich heritage in Hinduism because of its long history as part of the Indianised states. The most common characteristic of the ancient Indianised states was the religious influence of Hinduism and Buddhism brought by Indian traders (ASEAN Secretariat 2020b). For example, water festivals originated from the Hindu festival of Holi, celebrated in many countries of Southeast Asia. But each culture has its traditions and beliefs, so the water festival is celebrated slightly differently. Whether it is the celebration of Songkran in Chiang Mai, Thailand, or Chol Chnam Thmey in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, water festivals in Southeast Asia offer great opportunities for fun to splash water at strangers. The three-to-five-day festival signifies an agricultural society where abundant rainfall is essential to the population's livelihoods. Moreover, the festivals are celebrated under different names Songkran (Thailand), Pi Mai (Laos), Chol Chnam Thmey (Cambodia), Feast of Thingyan (Myanmar), Water splashing festival (Yunnan, China), and Tết (Vietnam) (ASEAN Secretariat 2020b)

Table 2. Known cultural festivals in Southeast Asia

| Cultural events                       | Visitors        | Description   |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Halong tourism week-Vietnam           | 12 mil-lion     | The celebration of Halong tourism week started as a celebration for tourism promotion in 2011. This event is held with different activities in the northeastern coastal province of Quang Ninh in late April and early May. Thousands of superstars, dancers, musicians, and students joined this festival.     |
| Boun Pi Mai-Laos                      | N/A             | In Lao, New Year is considered as the most vital annual event, particularly in Luang Prabang, and is celebrated in mid-April. The festival is celebrated with great excitement of water-throwing, street parades, circle dance, traditional Lao display, and folk singing.                                      |
| Sinulog Festival-Philippines          | 1 to 2 mil-lion | Filipinos in Cebu celebrate the annual Sinulog as a religious and cultural festival on 15 January. This festival is also well-known for its street parties before the day of celebration and during the day of the festival.  |
| Nyepi-Indonesia                       | 4.225 mil-lion  | The Hindu Day of Silence celebrates the Hindu New Year on the Balinese Saka calendar on 14 March. Nyepi is a day of silence, fasting, and meditation for the Balinese, and it is a public holiday in Indonesia. Balinese Hindus around Indonesia held this festival, and it is the largest celebration in Bali. |
| River Hongbao, Singapore              | 1.2 mil-lion    | Dated back over 3500 years, the Lunar New Year is one of the most favourite festivals in Chinese culture. Singaporeans celebrate this traditional event in various ways on the island. The River Hongbao has been one of the most iconic festive calendars every year since 1987.                               |
| Songkran -Thailand                    | 3.09 mil-lion   | Songkran is Thailand's most famous festival in mid-April, and it is an important event on the Buddhist calendar. Traditional Thai New Year starts with a water festival.  |
| Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda Festival-Myanmar | N/A             | Filipinos in Cebu celebrate the annual Sinulog as a religious and cultural festival on 15 January. This festival is also well-known for its street parties before the day of celebration and during the day of the festival.  |

|                           |     |   |
|---------------------------|-----|---|
| Gawai Festival-Malaysia   | N/A | The Dayak people in Sarawak of Malaysia and West Kalimantan of Indonesia celebrate this annual festival on 1 and 2 June. In Sarawak, Gawai is a public holiday, and it has been both a religious and social occasion registered since 1957.   |
| Chol Chnam Thmey-Cambodia | N/A | The New Year, usually falling on 13 or 14 April, is the traditional celebration of the solar new year, and Cambodians enjoy this 3-day public holiday. This event is organised to celebrate the end of the harvesting season when farmers enjoy their labour crops before the rainy season. |

Southeast Asia is naturally blessed with diverse cultures and international heritage sites servicing tourists worldwide. Every country within the region entices national and international tourists with even more stunning ethos, architecture, and nature. In recent years, Southeast Asia has been one of the world's most popular tourist destinations because the region has a tropical climate, rich cultures, diverse cuisines, and gorgeous beaches. Moreover, most countries there depend on rich natural resources and affordable prices to appeal to tourists. As a result, the governments of Southeast Asia, have used cultural heritage to promote tourism by promoting cultural elements that are immediate, accessible, distinctive, inspiring, colourful and visible to the tourist gaze, and whose meanings and significance can be constructed, shaped, changed and controlled (Wood 1997). Moreover, the region is opened to international tourists through favourable visa policies because the governments recognise the strategic role of tourism in generating employment and support different sectors (World Economic Forum 2017).

According to ASEANStatsData, international tourists to Southeast Asia gradually increased from 102.2 million in 2013 to 125.7 million in 2017 and 143.5 million in 2019. In 2019, the four countries, including Thailand (27.7%), Malaysia (18.2%), Vietnam (12.6%), and Indonesia (11.2%), contributed 69.7% of the total international arrival in Southeast Asia. The latest report of the Asia Pacific Visitor Forecasts 2019–2023 shows that Vietnam will be leading in the Asia-Pacific destinations in terms of its average annual growth rate over the next five years. The projection also reveals that Vietnam will be followed by Lao PDR, which has averaged annual growth rates below the regional average of 5.5% between 2018 and 2023 (Pusparani 2020). In 2019, the 38th annual meeting of ASEAN's Asian Tourism Forum (ATF) was held in Vietnam to discuss the present and future of tourism in the region. The ATF 2019, under a theme of "The Power of One", highlighted the regional desire to work together as a region to develop and foster tourism responsibly (McGough 2019). Moreover, Tourism Destination Market Insights: ASEAN (2021) reveals that every country in Southeast Asia has huge potentials and advantages for growth in the next three years as intra-ASEAN travel increases and tourists from farther afield seek more adventurous holidays. The development of low-cost airlines and open-sky agreements have also made intra-ASEAN travel more accessible and available. For example, AirAsia is a regional budget carrier, and this company has increased its offerings. As a result, more people in Southeast Asia can travel due to proximity, simpler visa processes, and similar cultures (Research and Market 2021).

Table 3. International tourist arrivals in Southeast Asia by country, 2013–2019

| Country     | 2013        | 2014        | 2015        | 2016        | 2017        | 2018        | 2019        |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Brunei      | 3,279,160   | 3,885,537   | 218,213z    | 218,809     | 258,955     | 278,136     | 333,244     |
| Cambodia    | 4,210,165   | 4,502,775   | 4,775,231   | 5,011,712   | 5,602,157   | 6,201,077   | 6,610,592   |
| Indonesia   | 8,802,129   | 9,435,411   | 10,406,759  | 11,519,275  | 14,039,799  | 15,810,305  | 16,106,954  |
| Lao PDR     | 3,779,490   | 4,158,719   | 4,684,429   | 4,239,047   | 3,868,838   | 4,186,432   | 4,791,065   |
| Malaysia    | 25,715,500  | 27,437,315  | 25,721,251  | 26,757,392  | 25,948,459  | 25,832,354  | 26,100,784  |
| Myanmar     | 2,044,307   | 3,081,413   | 4,681,020   | 2,907,207   | 3,443,133   | 3,549,428   | 4,364,101   |
| Philippines | 4,681,307   | 4,833,368   | 5,360,682   | 5,967,005   | 6,620,908   | 7,127,678   | 8,260,913   |
| Singapore   | 15,567,916  | 15,095,152  | 15,231,469  | 16,403,595  | 17,424,611  | 18,508,302  | 19,113,842  |
| Thailand    | 26,546,725  | 24,779,768  | 29,881,091  | 32,529,588  | 35,591,978  | 38,178,194  | 39,797,406  |
| Viet Nam    | 7,572,352   | 7,874,312   | 7,943,651   | 10,012,735  | 12,922,151  | 15,497,791  | 18,008,591  |
| ASEAN       | 102,199,051 | 105,083,770 | 108,903,796 | 115,566,365 | 125,720,989 | 135,169,697 | 143,487,492 |

Most tourist arrivals are from within the region, with intra-ASEAN tourists representing 36.7% (49.7 million people) in 2018 (Abueg 2019). But all countries in Southeast Asia have attracted a massive surge in the number of Chinese tourists and helped make the tourist sector a boom in this region. In 2019, around 60 million Chinese travellers, or more than 40% of international tourists, visited the ten countries (Pusparani 2020).

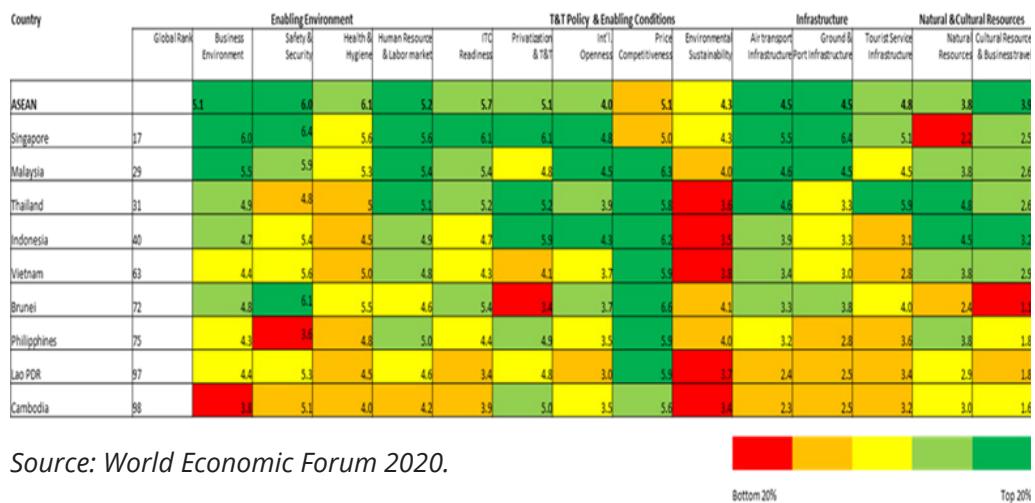
There were two main reasons for the high figures of Chinese tourists in the region: (1) the rise of incomes in China as the world's second-largest economy with a substantial size of middle class (2) and budget air travel. For example, in Thailand, Chinese tourists accounted for around one-third of the 35.6 million international tourists, and a similar trend was also observed in other countries in Southeast Asia (Intelligence 2019).

In recent years, the regional tourism sector has speedily improved due to the industry's free-market-oriented economy and foreign exchange earnings capability. International tourists have recognised the attractiveness of tourism experiences in Southeast Asia in terms of rich cultural heritage and natural environment.

Southeast Asian countries recognise that tourism can be part of their development strategies, especially from an economic perspective (Hieu et al. 2019). The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report has annually ranked countries based on policies to enable the sector's sustainable development. The report looks at how convenient it is to conduct business in a country, legal papers on travel and tourism, the existing infrastructure, and cultural and natural resources. In 2020, the report concluded that Singapore was the most tourist-friendly country, followed by Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Brunei, the Philippines, Lao PDR, and Cambodia. The rank is also reflected in their competitiveness in the tourism industry of countries in the region (Figure 1).

According to the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016–2025, the region is promoting an ASEAN mindset and the cultural diversity of ASEAN with an emphasis on the long-lasting cultural threads that bind this region to advance intercultural understanding to counter against violent extremism that may emerge from a lack of knowledge of cultures of each country. Advancing the cultural rights of all the citizens of ASEAN is the catalyst for growth of the region, where people have equivalent access to cultural properties and where culture is comprehensive and supports sustainable development (ASEAN Secretariat 2016). ASEAN needs to enhance its competitiveness as a single tourist destination by developing and adopting tourism standards. The ATM adopted the ASEAN Tourism Standards and their certification process for green hotels, homestays, spa services, public toilets, clean tourist cities, community-based tourism in 2015, and meeting, incentive, convention, and exhibition venues in 2017. Following the adoption of these standards, the ASEAN Tourism Standard Awards Ceremony is organised annually to honour relevant establishments in the region that have fulfilled the requirements of the tourism standards. In January 2018, 47 hotels, 47 MICE venues, and 23 cities received the awards, while 30 homestay establishments, 26 communities-based tourism, 44 spas, and 42 public toilets received the awards in January 2019 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019b).

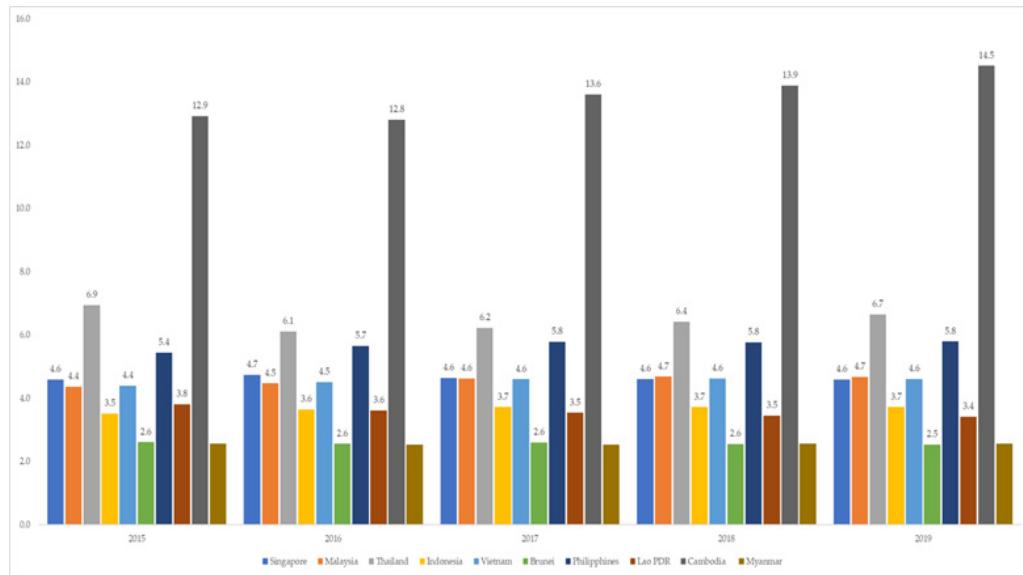
Figure 1. Travel competitiveness index in Southeast Asia, 2020



### Impact of COVID-19 on Cultural Conservation and Tourism Development in ASEAN Countries

Hitchcock et al. (2009) suggest that tourism has vast social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental implications. Tourism is considered one of the fastest-growing industries to support social development (Shahzad et al. 2017), facilitating economic recovery and growth if the potentials are appropriately managed. Recently, the tourism industry has received attention worldwide because of its contribution to stimulating consumption, endorsing trade, and facilitating international communication (Qian et al. 2018). As a result, tourism growth is making a positive economic impact on the region. In 2018, the sector was estimated to have directly contributed USD 161.5 billion to the ASEAN economy (5.4% of GDP) and created 15.5 million jobs, up from USD 79.3 billion and 10.9 million jobs in 2010 (ASEAN Secretariat 2019). Since 2010, the tourism industry's employment has steadily increased from 10.9 million in 2010 to around 16 million jobs in 2019 (Statista 2021). Out of the ten countries, Cambodia shared the highest percentage of employment generated by the tourism industry, which gradually increased from 12.9% in 2015 to 13.6% in 2017 (Figure 2). In 2019, 14.5% or 1.3 million jobs in ASEAN nations were generated from tourism. Cambodia has a year-on-year average growth rate of 9.87% between 1995 and 2028. The average growth rate in other countries was 3.76% (Lao PDR), 3.39% (Myanmar), 3.18% (the Philippines), 3.04% (Singapore), 2.11% (Thailand), 1.14% (Vietnam), and 1.3% (Malaysia). In contrast, the projection by the World Bank has estimated a year-on-year average growth rate of Indonesia would be -0.29% for the period from 1995 to 2028.

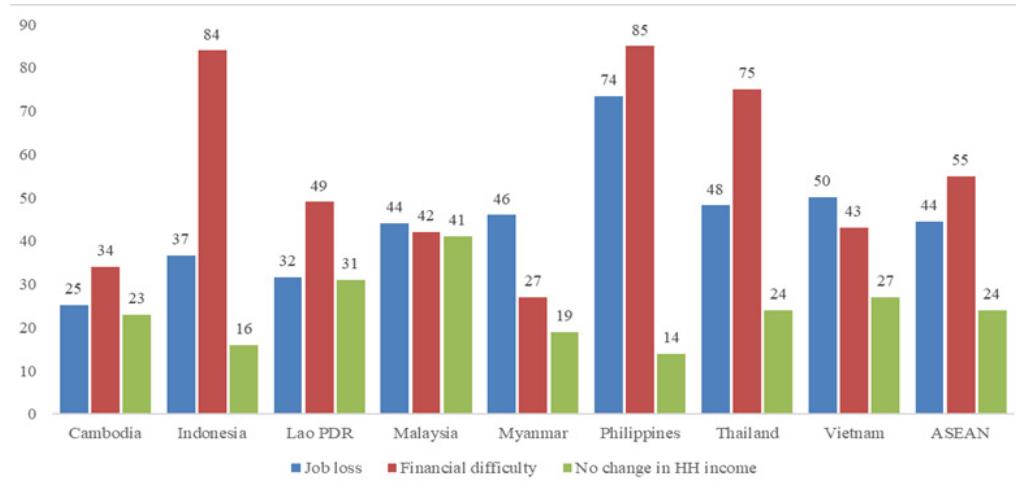
Figure 2. Travel and tourism direct contribution to employment (%)



SOURCE: WORLD BANK 2021.

Southeast Asia is increasingly integrated into the global economy, regarding both international travel and trade. Since international travel halted almost completely in March 2020, the tourism and business travel sectors have experienced an unprecedented contraction. Many small-scale businesses have permanently closed because COVID-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions do not make them survive the economic losses. With each passing month, millions of workers were at risk of descending into poverty, including the middle class. When the pandemic drags on, temporary job losses become permanent, and household incomes have fallen (Parks et al. 2020). Relationships between crises and tourism in Southeast Asia require urgent examination in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic. The example in Malaysia and its northern Borneo State of Sabah reveals some issues caused by the pandemic, and the responses to a multidimensional crisis. One major factor affecting the region is the collapse of the East Asian market as an increasingly important source of tourists for Southeast Asia. Due attention is paid to the implications of the increasing interdependence of Southeast and East Asia, of which Sabah is a prime example. In this introduction, the complex interactions between crises and tourism addressed the utility of adopting a comparative approach in examining a range of situations, the importance of tourism to the Southeast Asian economies, and some of the overall consequences of the current pandemic for the tourism industry and the responses to them in the Malaysian and Sabah case (Chan et al. 2019).

Figure 3. Impact of COVID on employment, financial difficulty, and HH income



SOURCE: ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK 2020.

The COVID-19 outbreak has diminished prospects of economic recovery from a worldwide slowdown last year. While initial statements projected a brief and limited impact on the global economy, the exponential spread of the outbreak to other regions, for example, Europe, the US, and ASEAN, set off the tapering of growth prospects (ASEAN Secretariat 2020c). A survey conducted in Southeast Asian countries by the Asian Development Bank (2020) shows that more than half of ASEAN residents (55%) faced financial difficulty following 44% of job losses. The same survey reveals that only 24% of ASEAN residents had no change in their household income. Out of the total, the majority of interviewed households in Indonesia (85%), the Philippines (85%), and Thailand (75%) faced financial difficulty. In addition, residents in the Philippines (74%), Vietnam (50%), and Thailand (48%) lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Malaysia, a similar proportion of residents losing their jobs was (44%), had financial difficulty (42%), and had no change in household income (41%). In the Lao PDR, almost half of the residents had financial problems, but only one-third of them lost their jobs (Morgan and Long 2020).

# PROMOTING ASEAN CULTURAL LINKAGE AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE POST-COVID-19

ASEAN countries share a common goal of providing a quality tourism destination through delivering a unique, diverse ASEAN experience. In addition, the region has committed to having responsible, sustainable, inclusive, and balanced tourism development to significantly contribute to the socio-economic condition of ASEAN people in 2025 (ASEAN Secretariat 2015).

In particular, tourism is part of the regional integration process, and each country cooperates in regional tourism development. Tourism development has helped create a good environment and pushed ASEAN countries to work together more closely, resulting in other fields of cooperation and integration (Ho 2001). In addition, the Forum of Lanchang-Mekong Tourist Cities Cooperation was organised in Hainan province and signed the Sanya Vision to tap tourism resources. The forum also concluded with the recognition of the importance of establishing a mutual communication mechanism and official policy support, and building an integrated tourism development pattern in the region, which boasts rich natural, historical and cultural resources (China Daily, 31 October 2016).

In 2022, Cambodia will assume the role of ASEAN Chairmanship. It will need to properly balance among and between the three pillars: the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, the ASEAN Political-Security Community, and the ASEAN Economic Community (Sim 2021). In this third ASEAN Chairmanship, Cambodia will play a very important role in promoting peace, regional stability, and tourism development in the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Cambodia used to be a killing field and an insecure place; the country is now a peaceful island and a popular tourism destination in Southeast Asia, attracting millions of tourists every year (Kin 2021). During its ASEAN Chairmanship, Cambodia will apply action-oriented approaches for equal benefits sharing and for promoting openness, honesty, good faith, solidarity, and harmony among ASEAN nations to address common issues and challenges facing the region (*Ibid.*). In promoting regional cultural corridors and tourism development, Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship should draw regional attention to dialogues and cooperation to restore these sectors after the COVID-19 pandemic.

To strengthen public health cooperation measures to contain the pandemic and protect people, the Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) released on 14 April 2020 through the implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on an ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework has limited travel to only essential business trips (ASEAN Secretariat 2020d).

Furthermore, the Special Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), held on 29 April 2020, issued a joint statement of the ASEAN Ministers on strengthening cooperation to revitalise ASEAN tourism for pursuing collaboration with ASEAN dialogue partners to shape a resilient and prepared Southeast Asia to effectively implement and manage sustainable and inclusive tourism in the aftermath of the crisis (ASEAN Secretariat 2020e).

Furthermore, a meeting in February 2021 released the Phnom Penh declaration on a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient ASEAN tourism for strengthening regional efforts to revitalise and build a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient ASEAN tourism through the expeditious development of a Post COVID-19 Recovery Plan for ASEAN Tourism. The meeting also discussed best international practices, local responses and recovery policies, and the lesson learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to better respond to changing global tourism trends (ASEAN Secretariat 2021).

In principle, economic recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is not an easy task, but nothing is impossible. In the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, ASEAN cultural linkage and tourism development can be promoted into four different stages. First, domestic tourism should be encouraged because of the collapse of international arrivals. Gradual free mobility of residents would probably maintain tourism activities and investment in each country. At the same time, the governments of ASEAN countries may consider subsidising hotels and restaurants to provide affordable prices to attract domestic tourists. Second, ASEAN governments should be ready to provide sufficient incentives, for example, tax exemption or social tax depreciation. However, China is the most significant external trade partner and investor. The US and European Unions are also among ASEAN's largest trade and investment partners. Therefore, the governments of ASEAN countries should seek a good enabling environment for promoting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in tourism in the framework of cultural corridor development.

Third, implementing the ASEAN Readies Regional COVID-19 Vaccine Certificate should be speeding up because the move is an essential step in reviving intra-regional tourism and recovery from the Coronavirus recession. The proposed ASEAN vaccine certificate comes as the European Union finalises plans for a digital green pass that proves a traveller has been vaccinated against the Coronavirus (ASEAN Secretariat 2020f). This implication can be learned for promoting intra-regional tourism instead of being limited to business trips only. Fourth, international tourism beyond ASEAN nations should be permitted when intra-regional mobility is gradually recovered. Cultural corridor establishment in Southeast Asia is highly dependent on the growth of the tourism industry. Effective management and conservation of the World Heritage Sites could happen when tourism is well developed.

# CONCLUSION

Based primarily upon our findings above, but with some additional insights from Cambodia's cultural corridor and tourism development, we come to the following conclusions: First, since the first UNESCO's inscriptions in 1991, 41 items, including cultural and natural sites, in Southeast Asia have been inscribed in the World Heritage List. In general, the preservation of cultural heritage is for generating economic values.

The UNESCO World Heritage Sites are shared as necessary for cultural corridor establishment because they share a common and symbolic significance of the cultural relevance of Southeast Asia. Moreover, Southeast Asia has hosted various unique cultural and religious festivals, mainly rooted in the Hindu festival of Holi, for example, the water festival and the new year in the region. Cultural and religious festivals are attracting millions of domestic and international tourists to visit Southeast Asian countries as well. Second, Southeast Asian countries are naturally blessed with diverse cultures and international heritage sites, with approximately 143.5 million tourists from all over the world visiting the region. Four countries, namely Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia, contributed 69.7% of the total international arrivals, 36.7% of which were intra-ASEAN tourists.

The Travel Competitiveness Index in Southeast Asia ranked Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand as the most tourist-friendly countries. Third, the tourism industry generated 16 million jobs in Southeast Asia in 2019. Cambodia shared the highest proportion of jobs generated from the tourism industry, increasing from 12.9% in 2015 to 13.6% in 2017. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism and business travel sectors faced unprecedented reductions because Southeast Asia is increasingly integrated into the global economy concerning trade and international travel. According to the Asian Development Bank (2020), more than half of ASEAN residents (55%) faced financial difficulty, and 44% of job losses followed. While residents in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand faced financial hardship, those in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourth, as ASEAN Chair in 2022, Cambodia will play a significant role in reducing the negative impacts of COVID-19. Various regional ministerial meetings, declarations, and frameworks have been developed. It is a fact that tourism is part of the regional integration process, and each country is cooperating in regional tourism development. The recovery of the tourism industry is key to establishing cultural corridors in the region. In the post-COVID-19 era, the tourism industry can recover through four stages: (1) promotion of domestic tourism, (2) attraction to investment by providing tax exemption or tax depreciation, (3) implementation of the ASEAN Readies Regional COVID-19 Vaccine Certificate, and (4) permission of international tourism after intra-regional mobility recovery.

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