

SHARED STORIES, SHARED VALUE: ROLE ALLOCATION AND MEASUREMENT FOR ASEAN CROSS-BORDER CULTURAL TRAILS

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of Shared Stories, Shared Value, a framework for cross-border cultural trails in Southeast Asia, with a focus on ASEAN collaboration. The study underscores the strategic importance of a joint multi-nation cultural tourism project for ASEAN integration, sustainable development, and shared economic growth. Adopting a qualitative approach, we synthesize literature on cultural routes, regional tourism cooperation, and case studies of ASEAN initiatives to propose a taxonomy of narrative themes mapped onto a Proposition-Capability matrix assigning complementary roles to member states. We design an accountable governance model, a regional cultural trail council with clear mandate, funding mechanisms, and decision rules, to steer these initiatives. We then present a phased pilot plan for an ASEAN cross-border cultural trail (using the Peranakan heritage as an illustrative case), along with a lightweight monitoring and evaluation toolkit. The findings highlight how shared cultural narratives can foster unity and deliver mutual value, leveraging each country's strengths. The paper concludes with implications for ASEAN destination marketing, the role of the sharing economy in tourism, and recommendations for scaling up cultural trails across the region.

Keywords: ASEAN Tourism, Cultural Routes, Cross-Border Collaboration, Sustainable Tourism Development, Sharing Economy, Regional Governance, Destination Marketing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a powerful catalyst for regional integration and sustainable development in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Arnakim et al., 2023). In particular, cross-border cultural tourism initiatives exemplify how countries working together can achieve greater collective impact than isolated efforts. By sharing cultural, historical and natural stories across borders, ASEAN member states can create shared value, boosting economic growth, fostering mutual understanding, and preserving shared heritage (Chen et al., 2024). The ASEAN region's rich tapestry of interconnected histories and cultures provides an ideal foundation for transnational heritage routes. Tourists traveling seamlessly between ASEAN countries experience a single destination with diverse yet linked attractions (Jamaluddin et al., 2024; Chhinh et. al, 2022). Such cross-border travel not only generates economic benefits like employment and local business growth but also strengthens people-to-people bonds and regional identity (Chen et al., 2024; ASEAN Secretariat, 2016a). Research has shown that cross-border tourism can advance peace and development by facilitating cultural exchange at the micro level (tourists and locals dispelling stereotypes) and by spurring intergovernmental cooperation at the macro level (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016b; Council of Europe, 2021). These strategic benefits align with ASEAN's vision of a cohesive, people-centered community and with global sustainable development goals.

However, realizing joint cultural trails in ASEAN faces several challenges. Coordination across sovereign nations requires overcoming institutional and logistical barriers, aligning funding and marketing, and ensuring equitable benefits. Clear frameworks are needed to assign roles, which country leads or contributes what, so that each member can capitalize on its strengths without duplication or competition. Moreover, governance mechanisms must be in place to manage the initiative collectively and accountably. Past ASEAN tourism collaborations have sometimes struggled due to undefined mandates or lack of sustained commitment. To address these gaps, this paper proposes a structured approach to developing an ASEAN cross-border cultural trail project entitled Shared Stories, Shared Value. The objectives are fourfold: (1) Highlight the strategic importance of launching a joint cross-border cultural trail project for ASEAN; (2) Develop a concise taxonomy of narrative themes and map them onto a Proposition-Capability matrix that assigns complementary lead roles to ASEAN member states; (3) Design an accountable governance framework, including mandate, funding, and decision rules, for a regional council to steer cross-border cultural trail initiatives; and (4) Present a phased pilot implementation plan (with a monitoring toolkit) to test one trail and generate evidence for ASEAN-wide scale-up. In addressing these objectives, we also situate the proposed initiative in the broader context of regional cooperation imperatives, sustainable tourism development, and the sharing economy in travel. The significance of this study lies in providing ASEAN policy-makers and stakeholders a blueprint for collaborative destination development that leverages shared cultural assets for mutual gain. Ultimately, Shared Stories, Shared Value aims to illustrate how ASEAN nations, by working together, can turn shared heritage into shared prosperity, strengthening the ASEAN brand as a unified yet diverse tourism destination (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016, 2017).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-Border Cultural Tourism and Regional Integration: Prior studies affirm that cross-border tourism plays a crucial role in fostering regional integration and socio-economic growth (Arnakim et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Arnakim et al. (2023) observe that ASEAN's seamless flow of tourists has boosted prosperity by generating jobs, stimulating local enterprises, and encouraging cultural exchange. Intra-ASEAN travel allows citizens to reconnect with shared histories and deepen mutual understanding, thereby strengthening regional bonds (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016b). Likewise, Chen et al. (2024) note that cross-border tourism cooperation advances regional peace and development by opening channels of communication and economic collaboration between nations (Council of Europe, 2021). Tourists bring not only spending power but also opportunities for intercultural dialogue, helping dispel stereotypes and build goodwill at the grassroots level (Chen et al., 2024; Council of Europe, 2021). On a larger scale, governments that collaborate on tourism initiatives often also align on infrastructure and visa policies, which can spill over to improved trade and diplomatic relations (Chen et al., 2024). For example, Chen et al. (2024) highlight that formal regional agreements (such as the European Union's and NAFTA's provisions) have significantly enhanced cross-border tourism by reducing travel barriers and strengthening connectivity. In ASEAN, the

importance of regional tourism cooperation is reflected in high-level schemes like the new Seamless ASEAN initiative, an ASEAN Drive Tourism plan approved in 2024 to market Southeast Asia as a single destination (Jamaluddin et al., 2024). Spearheaded by Thailand, this plan is likened to a Schengen for ASEAN, aiming to enable travelers to explore multiple countries with ease (e.g., via unified visa arrangements and overland tour circuits) (Jamaluddin et al., 2024). Such efforts underscore the strategic value perceived in joint tourism development: it can boost visitor numbers, extend length of stay across countries, and distribute economic gains region-wide (Jamaluddin et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024). Studies also indicate that cross-border tourism tends to enhance competitiveness of the region as a whole in the global market, as countries pool their attractions and resources to offer more compelling multi-destination packages (Chen et al., 2024).

Cultural Routes and Shared Heritage: The concept of cultural routes or corridors provides a useful framework for developing themed cross-border trails. The Council of Europe's Cultural Routes program, established in 1987, demonstrates how multi-country itineraries built around a unifying theme can promote shared heritage, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable tourism (Council of Europe, 1987/2019; Timothy, 2020). A cultural route is defined as a path through one or more countries organized around themes of historical, artistic, or social significance that bring people and places together in networks of shared history (Berti & Mariotti, 2015; Council of Europe, 1987/2019). There are currently dozens of certified European routes (e.g., the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrimage Way, the Silk Roads heritage corridor), which collectively illustrate a model of transnational management of culture and tourism (European Institute of Cultural Routes, 2022; Timothy, 2020). These routes have been effective in linking sites in different nations under a common narrative, raising awareness of lesser-known locales, and fostering collaboration between local and national authorities (Berti & Mariotti, 2015; Timothy, 2020). Importantly, they emphasize community involvement, cultural exchange, and responsible tourism, aligning with sustainable development principles (Council of Europe, 2019; Timothy, 2020). In the Southeast Asian context, the notion of cultural corridors has gained attention as well. ASEAN's current Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts (2016–2025) explicitly aims to promote a shared regional identity and heritage, in part through multi-country cultural initiatives (ASEAN, 2016). Pheakdey and Serey (2022) describe cultural corridors as important bonds linking cultural nodes across the region, playing vital roles in tourism development, heritage conservation, and creating a sense of place. They argue that a cultural corridor is an integrative concept that simultaneously advances conservation of cultural and natural resources in a cross-border setting (Chhinh et. Al, 2022; Sok, 2021). Similarly, Božić and Tomić (2016) developed a Cultural Route Evaluation Model, finding that successful routes (e.g., a Trail of Roman Emperors spanning Balkan countries) leverage thematic unity to enhance visitor experience and require coordinated governance across borders, such as joint marketing and quality standards.

These insights suggest that ASEAN has much to gain by structuring cultural tourism products on a regional thematic basis. By identifying shared narratives, or stories, that

resonate across member states, ASEAN can create travel experiences greater than the sum of their parts. Tourists are increasingly seeking authentic, narrative-driven experiences that transcend single destinations (Richards, 2018; Timothy, 2020). A well-curated cultural trail allows visitors to follow a storyline—historical, religious, culinary, etc.—through multiple locales, thereby deepening engagement. For Southeast Asia, potential unifying themes abound: the maritime Spice Route trading heritage linking port cities, the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism leaving temples across countries, colonial-era history connecting former colonies, or even shared artistic traditions like batik textiles or puppetry present in several cultures. Indeed, ASEAN already identified culture and heritage trails as a key product segment in its Tourism Strategic Plan, calling for development and marketing of thematic multi-country routes (ASEAN, 2016).

Recent initiatives include the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office's efforts to promote the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)—spanning five ASEAN countries plus China's Yunnan and Guangxi—as a single tourism destination with multi-country circuits (Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office [MTCO], 2021). The GMS Tourism Strategy 2030 emphasizes innovative travel routes that span multiple countries in the Mekong region as a way to boost arrivals and dispersal of tourism benefits (Post, 2021). One concrete example is the Mekong Tea Caravan Trail, which retraces old tea trading routes through Yunnan (China), Laos, Thailand, and beyond (MTCO, 2021). Such examples illustrate growing momentum for cross-border trails in Asia.

ASEAN Cases and Shared Themes: ASEAN has piloted a few cross-border cultural tourism concepts on a sub-regional scale. Under the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) initiative, tourism authorities launched a Peranakan Heritage Trail in 2019, linking communities in the three countries that share Peranakan culture (IMT-GT Secretariat, 2020). Peranakan (Baba-Nyonya) refers to the blended Chinese–Malay local cultures that flourished in port cities like Penang (Malaysia), Phuket (Thailand), and parts of Indonesia. An International Peranakan Festival was co-hosted to celebrate this shared heritage (IMT-GT Secretariat, 2020). A related output was *Peranakan: A Colourful Culture*, The ASEAN Heritage Trail booklet, published by Thailand's Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2019). This booklet, also released as an e-book by the Tourism Authority of Thailand in 2023, positions Peranakan culture as embodying the essence of Southeast Asia, a fusion of diverse Asian traditions into a unique regional identity (Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT], 2023). The Peranakan trail case illustrates how a narrative theme can be used to bind multiple destinations: travelers can visit historical neighborhoods, museums, cuisine trails, and festivals across countries, all tied together by the Peranakan story. Another example is the planned Ancient Kingdoms Trail, a concept circulating in ASEAN tourism circles that would connect major archaeological and historical sites of past civilizations (e.g., Angkor in Cambodia, Bagan in Myanmar, Borobudur in Indonesia, Ayutthaya in Thailand, and Hue in Vietnam). While not yet formally launched, this theme taps into the pre-colonial empires that had intra-regional influence. ASEAN has also leveraged nature–culture linkages: the ASEAN Heritage Parks network (primarily ecological sites) and initiatives like the Coral Triangle (marine eco-cultural region) show willingness to collaborate on thematic assets. These

cases reveal both opportunities and lessons. First, selecting outstanding shared themes is crucial: the theme should be distinctive, appeal to international markets, and genuinely involve multiple countries. Second, branding and storytelling need to be coordinated—the Peranakan trail benefited from a unified narrative and promotional materials distributed by all three countries. Third, multi-country projects require sustained coordination mechanisms. Ad hoc festival events are a start, but to endure, a formal body or agreement must guide the trail’s development, marketing, and maintenance. This aligns with findings in cross-border tourism literature that governance arrangements, whether via a secretariat, steering committee, or memorandum of understanding, are key to long-term success (Chen et al., 2024; Timothy, 2020).

Sustainable Tourism and the Sharing Economy Context: It is widely acknowledged that tourism growth must be balanced with sustainability. Cross-border cultural trails inherently support sustainable tourism by dispersing visitor flows beyond single hotspots and encouraging longer stays, thus increasing economic yield per arrival while reducing overconcentration. They often involve secondary cities or rural areas (e.g., old trading towns, border communities), spreading benefits to less-visited locales. ASEAN’s commitment to sustainable tourism is evident, as member states collectively prioritize preserving natural and cultural heritage and practicing responsible tourism development (Arnakim et al., 2023; ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Through collaboration and sharing of best practices, ASEAN countries can tackle common challenges such as heritage conservation, environmental protection, and inclusive community participation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016, 2017). Joint initiatives allow pooling of resources for training, marketing, and visitor management in a way that single nations might struggle to afford alone. For instance, a cultural trail council could develop a shared low-impact tourism guideline applicable across all trail sites, ensuring tourist conduct is respectful of local culture and environment in each community. Moreover, cultural routes contribute to multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): they promote inclusive economic growth (SDG 8) by involving local artisans, guides, and homestays; they help preserve cultural heritage (SDG 11.4) by revitalizing appreciation for traditions; and they foster partnerships (SDG 17) between countries and stakeholders. The rise of the sharing economy in tourism further augments the potential of such trails. Digital platforms for home-sharing, ride-sharing, and experience-sharing can empower local residents in multiple countries to directly engage with tourists. According to the ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017), the sharing economy is transforming the travel landscape by offering authentic, personalized experiences and lowering costs. Services like Airbnb, for example, enable visitors on a cultural route to stay in heritage houses or community homestays, enriching the cultural immersion while channeling income to local families. Ride-sharing apps operating across some ASEAN borders (or local equivalents) can facilitate transportation on overland routes. Peer-to-peer dining platforms (e.g., EatWith) allow tourists to have home-cooked Peranakan meals in a local’s home, turning food into a cultural exchange. An Tourism Authority of Thailand industry analysis notes that, from lodging to travel advice to local cuisine, the sharing economy offers tourists an insider’s touch to their travel. Such peer-to-peer engagement is

particularly well-suited for cultural trails, which thrive on authentic community interactions. However, policymakers must adapt to and support the sharing economy's role, for example by harmonizing regulations so that homestays or community drivers are legally recognized across countries. Removing unnecessary barriers to sharing platforms can help attain sustainable tourism outcomes by enabling broader participation from both travelers and small providers (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). In summary, the contexts of regional cooperation, sustainability, and sharing economy innovation all favor the implementation of ASEAN cross-border cultural trails at this time. What remains is to devise a structured approach to capitalize on this momentum, which the subsequent sections address by proposing a role allocation matrix, governance framework, and pilot plan.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research is conducted as a qualitative, exploratory study with a constructive framework design. Given the nascent stage of ASEAN cross-border cultural trail development, a qualitative approach is appropriate to formulate concepts and models rather than test hypotheses. The study methods included:

- **Literature and Document Analysis:** We reviewed relevant literature on cross-border tourism, cultural routes, ASEAN tourism agreements, and sustainable tourism (as summarized in the Literature Review). Key sources included academic journals, ASEAN policy documents (e.g. ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community blueprint), reports from international organizations (UNWTO, UNESCO), and case documentation of existing cultural route projects. This provided theoretical grounding and identified success factors and challenges noted in other contexts.
- **Comparative Case Review:** We examined case examples of multi-country cultural trails, both within ASEAN (e.g. the IMT-GT Peranakan trail) and outside (e.g. Council of Europe Cultural Routes). Through a comparative lens, we identified common elements such as theme selection, stakeholder structure, marketing approaches, and governance mechanisms. These cases served as analogs to shape our proposed framework.
- **Expert Input (Informal):** To supplement published sources, we drew insights from tourism industry experts and heritage professionals familiar with ASEAN cooperation (through informal interviews and roundtable discussions). They provided practical perspectives on issues like funding feasibility, political will, and cultural sensitivities that might not be explicitly detailed in literature. (For instance, feedback from a regional tourism consultant underscored the importance of a rotational leadership to ensure all countries feel ownership.) While not a formal Delphi process, this expert engagement informed the design of the governance model and pilot implementation considerations.
- **Iterative Framework Development:** Using the above inputs, we employed an iterative design process to develop the Proposition-Capability Matrix and the governance framework. Initial drafts were critiqued and refined, ensuring they align with ASEAN's

institutional norms (e.g. consensus-based decision-making, respect for national sovereignty) and the practical realities of implementation. We also validated that the proposed narrative themes are rooted in authentic cultural linkages recognized by the countries involved.

- **Qualitative Validation via Pilot Planning:** As a form of preliminary validation, we applied the proposed framework to a specific pilot case (the Peranakan cultural trail) to test its viability. This involved scenario planning: mapping the roles of specific countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, etc.) in developing that trail and designing a monitoring plan. This step helped in fine-tuning the toolkit for measuring outcomes and the phase-wise approach.

This research focus is on conceptual and strategic development. The outcome of this methodology is a set of proposed models (presented in the next section) that are grounded in existing knowledge yet tailored to ASEAN’s context. While exploring, the approach ensures that the recommendations are evidence-informed and practical, setting the stage for future empirical studies once pilot projects roll out.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Strategic Rationale for an ASEAN Cross-Border Cultural Trail

Our analysis confirms a strong strategic rationale for ASEAN to pursue a joint cross-border cultural trail project. Table 1 summarizes the multi-dimensional benefits such an initiative would confer, aligned with ASEAN’s strategic objectives and global sustainable tourism criteria.

Table 1: Strategic Importance of an ASEAN Cross-Border Cultural Trail

Dimension	Strategic Benefit (Shared Value)	Supporting Evidence
Economic Development	Increases tourist arrivals and expenditures across multiple countries, as tourists stay longer to visit all trail stops. Generates employment in tourism and creative industries, including guides, craftsmen, and homestays, in multiple locales, including rural or secondary cities. Encourages investment in connectivity infrastructure, such as roads and cross-border facilities, benefiting trade and mobility (Jamaluddin et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024).	ASEAN tourism contributes significantly to GDP; cross-border circuits encourage dispersal of spending (Arnakim et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Flexible visa policies and multi-country packages can stimulate not just tourism but also trade and foreign direct investment (Chen et al., 2024; Timothy, 2020).
Socio-Cultural Integration	Fosters a sense of shared ASEAN identity by highlighting common heritage and narratives, reinforcing the ASEAN motto One Vision, One Identity. Enhances people to people connectivity, as tourists and hosts engage in cultural exchange, building mutual understanding and regional solidarity (Council of Europe, 2021; ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Help preserve and	Cross-border tourism has been shown to advance peace and mutual understanding (Council of Europe, 2021; Chen et al., 2024). ASEAN’s cultural diversity is a foundation for unity; shared tourism experiences strengthen regional bonds (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016; ASEAN Secretariat, 2016b). Cultural routes

Dimension	Strategic Benefit (Shared Value)	Supporting Evidence
	revitalize intangible cultural heritage, such as traditional crafts, festivals, and languages, through renewed pride and tourism revenue.	often revive interest among younger generations in traditions, as seen in European routes and local festivals (Council of Europe, 2021; Timothy, 2020).
Political & Institutional	Demonstrates ASEAN cohesion and effective cooperation, giving substance to ASEAN Community goals, especially the Socio-Cultural Community blueprint (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016; Pheakdey & Serey, 2022). Provides a platform for ASEAN members to work together on practical projects, improving coordination capacity, representing a “learning by doing” benefit for integration. Can leverage existing ASEAN mechanisms, such as tourism working groups and cultural exchanges, under a high-profile flagship project, attracting international support and funding.	ASEAN leaders have emphasized tourism as a tool for regional integration (Arnakim et al., 2023). A joint project would mirror EU-style regional tourism initiatives, showcasing ASEAN’s maturity. It could be championed in ASEAN Summits and ministerial meetings, bolstering political commitment (Jamaluddin et al., 2024).
Sustainable Development	Promotes sustainable tourism by spreading visitor traffic, reducing over-tourism at single sites, and encouraging year-round visitation through different events on the trail. Encourages environmental and cultural preservation via tourism revenue and awareness, for example, entry fees funding site conservation. Involves local communities in the tourism value chain, advancing inclusive growth and poverty reduction in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016; ASEAN Secretariat, 2017).	ASEAN’s commitment to sustainability is underscored in policies promoting collective preservation efforts (Arnakim et al., 2023; ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Multi-country heritage projects often receive support from bodies like UNESCO and the Asian Development Bank for their conservation and community benefits (Chhinh et. al, 2022).
Destination Marketing	Strengthens ASEAN’s brand as a unified destination with unique, interlinked experiences, enhancing its global appeal in an increasingly competitive tourism market. Allows joint marketing and promotion, such as at international travel fairs with a combined ASEAN cultural trail booth, which can be cost-shared and more impactful than separate national campaigns (Jamaluddin et al., 2024). Differentiates ASEAN by showcasing the authenticity and depth of cultural offerings, moving beyond generic sun–sand–sea images.	The Visit ASEAN campaigns have highlighted multi-country themes, but a concrete trail gives a tangible product to market. As noted in the ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy, modern travelers seek authentic and exclusive experiences, which themed routes can provide (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017). The upcoming showcase of new ASEAN routes at ITB Berlin 2024 indicates recognition of this marketing value (Jamaluddin et al., 2024).

Overall, the rationale for Shared Stories, Shared Value is compelling: it aligns with ASEAN’s integrated development ethos and yields a spectrum of benefits that no single-country initiative could achieve alone. This forms the foundation for our proposed frameworks.

3.2 Taxonomy of Narrative Themes and Proposition-Capability Matrix

A crucial step in operationalizing an ASEAN cultural trail initiative is to identify suitable narrative themes that can serve as the unifying story for the trail. Based on our research, we propose a concise taxonomy of themes that are particularly relevant to Southeast Asia’s shared heritage. These themes are intentionally broad yet distinct, allowing inclusion of sites/attractions from multiple countries under each theme. The taxonomy (Table 2) is categorized into five primary narrative themes:

Table 2: Taxonomy of Shared Narrative Themes for ASEAN Cross-Border Cultural Trails

Theme Category	Description & Examples (Shared ASEAN Context)	Potential Member States Involved
Maritime Trade & Civilization	Focus on the maritime heritage of Southeast Asia, ancient trade routes (Spice Route, Silk Route maritime extension), port cities, and mercantile culture. Includes colonial trading posts and indigenous kingdoms linked by sea. Examples: Malacca and Penang (Malaysia) with their spice trade history, Hoi An (Vietnam) as a Cham and later trading port, Galle Fort (Sri Lanka) linking beyond ASEAN, Makassar (Indonesia) spice port, Manila’s galleon trade (Philippines).	Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei (e.g. Brunei’s role in spice trade), plus links to external hubs (India, Sri Lanka) as extensions.
Sacred Landscapes & Pilgrimage	Centers on the shared religious and spiritual heritage. Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage circuits, Islamic heritage sites, and even Christian churches from colonial era. Examples: Buddhist trail linking Borobudur (Indonesia), Luang Prabang (Laos), Angkor’s Buddhist temples (Cambodia), Bodh Gaya (India) as extension; Islamic civilization trail linking Aceh (Indonesia), Malacca’s mosques, Pattani (Thailand), Mindanao (Philippines); Catholic heritage from Spanish era in Philippines and Timor-Leste (possible extension).	Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines (each with significant religious heritage sites). Possible involvement of ASEAN partners like India (for Buddha’s life sites) under ASEAN+ cooperation.
Colonial History & Independence	A route tracing the colonial era experience and paths to independence across Southeast Asia. It strings together sites like colonial districts, museums, battlefields of WWII, and independence monuments. Examples: Hanoi’s French Quarter (Vietnam) and Ho Chi Minh’s mausoleum, Dien Bien Phu; Yangon’s colonial architecture (Myanmar); the Bridge on the River Kwai (Thailand, WWII); Corregidor Island (Philippines, WWII); Bandung’s Asian-African Conference Museum (Indonesia).	Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia (French Indochina history), Myanmar (British colonial), Malaysia/Singapore (British Malaya), Indonesia (Dutch East Indies), Philippines (Spanish/American). This theme inherently includes all for independent stories.
Ethnic Diasporas &	Celebrates hybrid cultures and migratory heritage that transcend borders. This includes	Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand exemplify the

Theme Category	Description & Examples (Shared ASEAN Context)	Potential Member States Involved
Cultural Fusion	the Peranakan trail, reflecting Chinese-Malay fusion in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023), the Indian diaspora heritage, such as Little India in Singapore, Hindu temples in Malaysia, and Bali's culture, the Chinese diaspora's impact visible in Chinatowns and temples across ASEAN, and transboundary ethnic groups, for example, the Hmong across Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, and the Austronesian seafaring peoples. Examples include the Peranakan Museum in Singapore, Phuket Old Town in Thailand, and Georgetown in Penang, Malaysia, for the Peranakan trail (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023); Chinatowns in Yangon, Bangkok, and Ho Chi Minh City; and Tamil cultural sites in Malaysia and Singapore.	Peranakan heritage; virtually all ASEAN states reflect the Chinese diaspora (e.g., Buddha Tooth Relic Temple in Singapore, Chinese temples in Vietnam); and select countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar, represent the Indian diaspora and other transboundary groups (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023).
Nature and Cultural Landscapes	Emphasizes the interplay of people and nature, cultural landscapes that span borders. Could include highland tribes' routes (e.g. trails of the Karen or Hmong between Myanmar-Thailand-Laos); Mekong River cultural landscape (villages, floating markets from the river's source in China through Mekong delta Vietnam); Borneo rainforest cultures (crossing Malaysian and Indonesian Borneo, plus Brunei, e.g. longhouse communities); and shared ecological heritage like the Coral Triangle (marine culture in Philippines-Malaysia-Indonesia).	Mekong subregion countries (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, plus China's Yunnan) for river theme; Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei for Borneo; Thailand/Myanmar/Laos for hill tribes; Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Timor-Leste for maritime eco-culture.

Each of these themes offers a value proposition to visitors, a unique lens through which to explore Southeast Asia, and each requires certain capabilities from participating countries to be effective (such as possessing relevant sites, having infrastructure, expertise in interpretation, etc.). To align themes with execution, we developed a Proposition-Capability Matrix (Figure 1). This matrix maps the narrative propositions (rows, as above themes) against key capability factors (columns) and highlights which country could take a lead role in that intersection.

The capability factors include Resource Endowment (having significant sites/heritage for the theme), Infrastructure & Access (good connectivity, tourist facilities for that theme's sites), Expertise/Content Leadership (scholars, institutions or experience in interpreting that theme's heritage), and Marketing/Brand Strength (international image or appeal related to the theme). The idea is that for each theme, different ASEAN members can assume complementary leadership roles based on their strengths. For instance, in a Maritime Trade trail, Malaysia might lead on content and branding (with iconic sites like Malacca and Penang known for spice trade history), Indonesia on resource endowment

(numerous spice islands, old ports), Singapore on infrastructure (world-class cruise and port facilities as a hub), and Vietnam on a niche content aspect (e.g. ancient Cham ports). This complementary role allocation ensures each state contributes in a way that adds value without duplicating efforts. It also fosters a sense of co-ownership, as no single country dominates the entire theme, reflecting ASEAN’s ethos of unity with diversity.

Theme / Country	Brunei	Cambodia	Indonesia	Laos	Malaysia	Myanmar	Philippine	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
1. Maritime Trade & Civilization	RES		RES		CL		RES	INF	INF	CL
2. Sacred Landscapes & Pilgrimage	RES	RES	RES	CL	INF	RES	RES	INF	CL	RES
3. Ethnic Diasporas & Cultural Fusion	RES	RES	RES	RES	CL	RES	RES	CL	INF	RES
4. Colonial History & Independence		RES	RES	RES	CL	RES	RES	INF	CL	CL
5. Nature & Cultural Landscapes	RES	RES	RES	CL	RES	RES	RES	INF	INF	CL

■ CL = Content Leadership
 ■ RES = Resource Endowment
 ■ INF = Infrastructure & Access

Figure 1: Proposition-Capability Matrix for ASEAN Cultural Trail Themes

According to Figure 1, this visually assigns lead roles. e.g., Under Ethnic Diasporas theme: Malaysia & Singapore highlighted for Peranakan content leadership; Thailand for infrastructure (Phuket tourism ready); Indonesia for resource (large Chinese diaspora sites); etc.

Illustrative Highlights from the Matrix: To provide an example, consider the Ethnic Diasporas & Cultural Fusion theme. The matrix indicates: Singapore and Malaysia as co-leads in Marketing/Brand, given their strong Peranakan heritage branding and established tourism appeal for cultural fusion (e.g. Singapore actively promotes its multicultural heritage in tourism campaigns). Indonesia might lead in Resource Endowment for this theme, by virtue of its diverse ethnic mix (Chinese Indonesians, Indian Indonesians, and indigenous fusion cultures in Java, Sumatra) and multitude of heritage sites (old Chinatown districts, etc.). Thailand (particularly Phuket and other southern provinces) could take the lead in Infrastructure, Phuket has well-developed tourist facilities and an international airport, suitable as a gateway for a Peranakan trail. Finally, Academic/Content Expertise could see Malaysia in a lead role, as it hosts institutions like the Penang Heritage Trust and scholars who have documented Peranakan and other fusion cultures in depth. In practice, this means Malaysia would steer the development of interpretive content/curricula for the trail (ensuring historical accuracy and engaging storytelling), Singapore and Thailand would ensure the visitor experience is world-class

(through marketing and hospitality quality), and Indonesia would ensure lesser-known community sites are included and preserved, adding authenticity. Similar mappings were done for other themes in the matrix.

The Proposition-Capability Matrix thus serves as a planning tool for ASEAN: when a theme is selected for development, the matrix guides how to allocate responsibilities. It transforms the broad narrative proposition into concrete actions, designating which country (or countries jointly) will: coordinate storyline and research, handle marketing outreach, invest in necessary infrastructure upgrades, and spearhead community engagement. This division of labor also aligns with existing strengths, for example, Thailand has a strong track record in tourism marketing and could naturally handle PR for a regional route[50], whereas Vietnam and Laos might leverage new infrastructure programs (with ADB support) to improve connectivity on a shared heritage circuit. By playing to each member's comparative advantage, the cultural trail initiative can be more efficiently and effectively implemented. Moreover, such role allocation can be rotated or redistributed over time, preventing any one country from shouldering excessive burden or reaping disproportionate benefit. In essence, the matrix operationalizes the philosophy that ASEAN's shared stories yield the greatest value when each state contributes its best capabilities.

3.3 Governance Framework for a Regional Cultural Trail Council

To steer cross-border cultural trail initiatives, we propose the establishment of an ASEAN Cultural Trails Council (ACTC), a dedicated regional governance body under the auspices of ASEAN, likely reporting to the ASEAN Ministers Meeting on Tourism and coordinating with the ASEAN Senior Officials on Culture and Arts. Good governance is key to accountability and long-term success, as evidenced by models like the European Institute of Cultural Routes, which oversees Europe's transnational routes (Council of Europe, 2021; Chhinh et. al, 2022). The ACTC framework is designed with a clear mandate, funding structure, and decision-making rules as follows:

- **Mandate & Scope:** The ACTC's core mandate would be to plan, develop, and manage ASEAN-endorsed cross-border cultural trail projects. This includes selecting trail themes (through consensus of members), setting quality standards (for interpretation, signage, visitor experience), mobilizing resources, and monitoring outcomes. The ACTC would also serve as a knowledge hub, collecting research, best practices, and providing technical assistance to national agencies for trail implementation. Importantly, it has a coordination mandate to liaise among tourism, culture, and transport authorities in each country, given the cross-sector nature of trail development. The scope initially could be one pilot trail, expanding to multiple trails if successful, effectively creating a portfolio of ASEAN Cultural Trails under its purview.
- **Institutional Form & Membership:** We recommend ACTC be formed as a public-public partnership within ASEAN's structure. It would consist of representatives from all 10 ASEAN member states, ideally at a mix of levels: the national tourism organization (NTO) or ministry of tourism, plus representatives from ministries of culture, and

possibly heritage experts. This ensures multi-sector input. Each member state has equal representation (one vote or say each), consistent with ASEAN norms of equality. The council might also include ex-officio or advisory members from ASEAN's Dialogue Partners or organizations (e.g. ASEAN-China Centre if relevant, UNWTO, etc.) when external expertise or support is needed. A small Secretariat would be set up for day-to-day operations, which could be housed in an ASEAN Secretariat department or rotated among member states. Given funding considerations (below), a lean secretariat (perhaps 3-5 staff) could suffice, supplemented by secondments from member countries for specific projects.

- **Funding Mechanism:** Funding for the ACTC and its projects would come from a mix of sources. Each ASEAN member could make an annual contribution (even a modest sum) to a common Cultural Trails Fund. This ensures buy-in and shared ownership. Additional funding should be sought from ASEAN's development partners and funding facilities, for instance, the ASEAN Cultural Fund, ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (since cultural exchange is a priority area), or international donors like the Asian Development Bank for tourism infrastructure, and UNESCO for heritage preservation components. The council can also generate revenue by branding and marketing the trails: for example, creating an ASEAN Heritage Trail Pass for tourists (a bundled ticket or app that covers multiple sites with some proceeds going back to maintenance), or merchandising. Private sector partnerships can be pursued, airlines or hotel groups might sponsor trail development in exchange for branding rights. Financial rules should ensure transparency: an annual budget approved by the council, audits, and published financial reports. The funding must cover not only central coordination (meetings, secretariat) but also provide seed grants to member states for site upgrades, signage, etc., in their territory as part of trail implementation (especially for less developed members who may need support).
- **Decision-Making and Leadership:** In line with ASEAN's consensus tradition, major decisions in ACTC (e.g. approving a new trail theme, major budget allocations) would be made by consensus of all member representatives. For routine operational decisions, a simple majority voting could be used to expedite work, with at least a quorum of say 7 of 10 present. The council's chairmanship should rotate annually (or bi-annually) among member states, following the ASEAN Chairmanship rotation to align with broader ASEAN themes. The Chair (e.g. the tourism ministry representative of the chairing country) will host meetings and serve as the spokesperson for that period. This rotation encourages each country to champion the initiative and prevents stagnation. Technical committees can be established under the ACTC for specific trails or functions. For example, a Marketing Committee composed of tourism boards' marketing directors could jointly plan promotions; a Technical Heritage Committee of archaeologists and historians could advise on content accuracy. These committees would report to the council. Decision rules also need to define how to handle disagreements, perhaps via consultation or third-party mediation (ASEAN often prefers behind-the-scenes diplomacy to formal votes). To maintain accountability, we suggest

the ACTC provide an annual progress report to the ASEAN Ministers of Tourism and to the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts, detailing activities, finances, and outcomes (visitor numbers on trails, etc.). This ensures alignment with ASEAN's overall governance and allows high-level oversight.

- **Legal/Policy Framework:** The establishment of ACTC could be formalized through an ASEAN Ministerial Declaration or a Memorandum of Understanding signed by all tourism/culture ministers. This would give it a clear mandate and legitimacy. The MoU should spell out the objectives, structure, and commitments (including financial) of each party. Over time, if the program proves successful, it might even be integrated into the ASEAN Tourism Agreement updates or a dedicated charter. On a national level, member governments might need to tweak certain policies, e.g., visa policies to facilitate easier multi-country travel (extending multi-entry visas, etc.), customs allowances for tourists moving across borders on the trail (maybe a special fast-track for those on recognized tour programs), and consistency in standards (like honoring other countries' museum passes or tickets). The ACTC would coordinate these policy harmonization efforts, working through existing ASEAN committees on facilitation.

In summary, the ACTC provides the institutional backbone for cross-border trail projects. This governance framework was designed to be light enough to be feasible (leveraging existing ASEAN structures, not creating an unwieldy bureaucracy) but robust enough to ensure ongoing coordination. Without such a council, the project risks being a one-off event or falling victim to changing political winds. With it, ASEAN can systematically plan multi-country tourism products with accountability and shared benefit. Notably, the ACTC model also embodies the sharing of governance, much like the sharing economy shares assets, here the ASEAN nations share responsibility and authority in managing common cultural assets for tourism. This collaborative governance is analogous to the cooperative management of transboundary parks or heritage sites seen elsewhere, but at a broader programmatic level. It operationalizes the principle that no single nation owns a shared story; rather, the story is co-owned and must be co-managed.

3.4 Phased Pilot Plan and Monitoring Toolkit

To test and refine the above concepts, a phased pilot implementation is proposed. The pilot will focus on one cultural trail theme, roll it out on a smaller scale, measure results, and then inform an ASEAN-wide scale-up. Based on the analysis of potential themes and readiness, we have selected the Peranakan Heritage Trail as the pilot case, branded as Shared Stories, Shared Value: The Straits Shared Heritage Trail. This theme is chosen because it ticks several boxes: it clearly involves multiple countries (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia), has existing interest (as noted, an earlier IMT-GT initiative tested the waters), and encompasses tangible (architecture, museums) and intangible heritage (cuisine, costume) that can engage tourists. It is also relatively compact geographically (concentrated around the Malacca Straits and nearby regions), which is advantageous for a pilot in terms of managing logistics.

Phases of Pilot Implementation: We outline four main phases spanning roughly 2-3 years, which can be adjusted based on funding and ground realities:

- Phase 1: Planning and Stakeholder Alignment (Months 1-6). In this initial phase, the ACTC (or an interim task force if ACTC is not yet formally established) convenes key stakeholders from the countries involved. This includes national tourism and culture agencies, local authorities from identified trail cities (e.g. George Town Penang, Melaka, Phuket, Medan perhaps for Sumatra's Peranakan, and Singapore if it joins), heritage organizations (like Baba Nyonya associations), and private sector reps (tour operators, hotel associations). Workshops and focus group meetings are held to map out the trail route and stops, identifying the anchor attractions in each location (e.g. the Pinang Peranakan Mansion Museum in Penang, the Phuket Thaihua Museum in Phuket, etc.), as well as complementary experiences (walking tours, home dining, craft workshops). A detailed Trail Development Plan is produced, covering route itinerary options, required improvements (e.g. signage in multiple languages at sites, training needs for guides on the shared narrative, uniform branding like trail logo signage to mark all sites), and roles/responsibilities per earlier matrix. Additionally, Phase 1 involves establishing the baseline data for monitoring, conducting surveys or using existing stats to record current visitor numbers at each site, current length of stay, community sentiment, etc., before the trail is marketed. A brand identity and logo for the trail will be created collaboratively in this phase. Finally, the governance arrangements for the pilot are formalized, either the ACTC is launched in this phase to oversee it, or a pilot steering committee that will later fold into ACTC. Securing funding for implementation is a critical output of Phase 1: each government should allocate initial funds, and joint funding proposals to donors can be finalized now (for instance, an ASEAN Cultural Heritage Promotion grant application).
- Phase 2: Development and Capacity-Building (Months 6-18). This is when on-the-ground preparation happens. Key activities include: Site enhancements, installing interpretation panels that not only tell local history but tie into the overall Peranakan trail story (perhaps a standardized design across countries with ASEAN Shared Heritage Trail branding and the trail logo). Upgrading visitor facilities where needed (training local guides to deliver the shared narrative, improving signage to locate the trail sites within cities, etc.). Product development, curating tour packages and modules. Local tour operators from each country might collaborate to offer a cohesive multi-country tour (e.g. a 7-day package that starts in Malacca, goes through Singapore, ends in Phuket, with seamless handovers). At the community level, workshops are held to empower local businesses: e.g. homestay owners get training on hosting international guests; chefs or home cooks are supported to be part of a Peranakan Food Trail program; artisans making Peranakan crafts (beaded shoes, porcelain) are connected with retail opportunities. During this phase, the ACTC (or pilot committee) also sets up a digital platform for the trail, a website and mobile app that provides maps, stories, and perhaps a digital passport feature where visitors collect stamps at each site (encouraging completion of the route). The platform can also

integrate user-generated content (Instagram feeds, etc.) to boost engagement. Importantly, Phase 2 includes a marketing soft launch: attending travel fairs, creating social media buzz, inviting travel bloggers/journalists for familiarization trips along the trail. The marketing emphasizes the uniqueness of a cross-border heritage experience, Travel through 3 countries, 1 story. Additionally, any needed policy adjustments (like visa facilitation) should ideally be piloted now, for instance, Malaysia-Thailand could trial a joint tourist visa for visitors who book the trail, or simply ensure visa-on-arrival is smooth at land crossings on the route. Monitoring tools are readied: a standardized visitor feedback form is created (potentially accessible via the app or QR codes at sites), and community impact surveys are designed.

- Phase 3: Pilot Execution (Months 18-30). The trail is officially launched to the public and operates for at least one full high season cycle. This phase is about execution and monitoring. Tourists start using the trail itinerary, either through packaged tours or self-guided via the app. The ACTC secretariat (or responsible agency in each country) monitors a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in real time. These KPIs constitute the lightweight monitoring toolkit and could include: monthly visitor count at each major trail site (collected from ticket offices or electronic counters), number of cross-border tourist movements along the trail (possibly from immigration if tracking special visa codes or simply by survey sampling), average length of stay for trail travelers (perhaps obtained via tour operator data or tourist surveys), visitor satisfaction scores (via post-visit online survey or app feedback), social media mentions/engagement for the trail hashtag, and community metrics (number of local businesses participating, income generated for local guides/artisans from trail-related activities). Because the toolkit is lightweight, we focus on indicators that can be captured with minimal new bureaucracy, leveraging digital tools and existing data. For instance, the trail mobile app could ping a short survey when a traveler completes the trail asking them to rate their experience; likewise, it could record how many check-ins or QR scans they did, indicating trail completion rates. Community feedback might be gathered through quick interviews by local project officers or an SMS-based system. Throughout Phase 3, quarterly review meetings are held by ACTC to discuss interim findings and address any operational issues (e.g. if one site sees much lower visits, figure out why, is promotion lacking? Is access difficult?). Flexibility is maintained to tweak the program, maybe adding an event like a yearly Peranakan Festival Week rotating among the countries to spike interest.
- Phase 4: Evaluation and Scale-up Planning (Months 30-36). After roughly a year of operation, a comprehensive evaluation of the pilot is conducted. Using the monitoring data collected, the ACTC produces an Evaluation Report assessing to what extent objectives were met: increases in tourism numbers and spend attributable to the trail, distribution of benefits, any issues encountered (such as bottlenecks at border crossings or cultural misunderstandings that needed mitigation), and lessons learned. Importantly, the evaluation should include voices of all stakeholders, tourist feedback, community member interviews, tour operator perspectives, and government

viewpoints, to give a 360-degree assessment. If the pilot is deemed successful (or shows strong promise with manageable issues), the ACTC will use these findings to advocate for ASEAN-wide scale-up. This could take two forms: (a) Expanding the Peranakan Trail itself to include more countries/sites (for instance, inviting Singapore formally if not in pilot, or extending to parts of Java), thus becoming a truly ASEAN-level product; and/or (b) Launching additional cultural trail projects using the developed framework. For example, planning might commence for a second trail theme, say the Maritime Trade Route, involving a different combination of countries. The phased approach ensures that ASEAN does not over-extend but rather builds on proven concepts. The evaluation report, alongside anecdotal success stories (e.g. a small Baba-Nyonya craft shop in Phuket saw a 50% increase in sales due to trail tourists; visitors report high satisfaction and deeper appreciation of ASEAN's cultural mosaic), will be presented at an ASEAN Tourism Forum or ministerial meeting to secure buy-in for further funding and support. By Phase 4's end, we expect the institutionalization of the program, meaning the pilot trail moves from project to a permanent offering maintained by the relevant countries with oversight by ACTC, and the council shifts into planning the next endeavors with a stronger evidence-based understanding.

Lightweight Monitoring Toolkit: A distinctive element of our approach is emphasizing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) from the start, but in a practical, non-burdensome way. Traditional large projects often have heavy logframes and costly surveys, our toolkit leverages technology and existing systems to keep it lightweight yet effective. Some key components include:

- A digital dashboard maintained by ACTC that aggregates real-time data feeds. For example, if each site installs a simple people-counter or uses ticketing data, these can feed into the dashboard via monthly inputs. Social media scraping tools can tally uses of official hashtags or geotags related to the trail, giving a sense of online engagement.
- Tourist feedback loops that are largely automated: the trail app can send push notifications at journey's end prompting a quick review (How likely are you to recommend this trail to others? Any highlight or issue to share?). Also, partnering with travel platforms like TripAdvisor to create a dedicated listing for the trail where people can post reviews could be insightful (this externalizes some of the data collection to platforms tourists already use).
- Community and business surveys kept short and focused, perhaps conducted by local university students or tourism officers as part of their routine. Questions like Has your income from tourism changed since the trail started? can be asked quarterly to a sample of homestays or shops.
- Importantly, we include not just quantitative metrics but also qualitative observations in the toolkit. For instance, capturing one or two illustrative case studies of local individuals benefiting (storytelling for impact) and any unexpected outcomes (maybe new partnerships formed between cities, or spin-off products like a cookbook of

Peranakan recipes published collaboratively). These qualitative insights ensure the project isn't judged only by numbers but also by value creation on the ground.

By keeping monitoring integral and easy, we ensure the project remains goal-oriented and adaptable. The evidence generated will help justify the concept to political leadership and potential funders for future scaling. It also allows the public to see transparency, publishing some key stats and stories in press releases or on the project website can maintain enthusiasm and accountability.

In the case of the Peranakan Trail pilot, some expected KPIs could be: a 20% increase in tourist arrivals to secondary heritage sites on the trail within one year; an average tourist satisfaction score of say 4.5/5 for the trail experience (measured via app or survey); at least 50 local SMEs actively involved (from food vendors to craft sellers, across the trail); and evidence of community benefits, such as at least 100 community members trained or employed in trail-related services. If such targets are met or exceeded, it would validate the approach. If not, the toolkit data will highlight where the shortfall was, perhaps marketing wasn't sufficient to drive numbers, or perhaps tourists came but didn't spend locally, etc., enabling a focused strategy to address those in the next phase or project.

In conclusion, the phased pilot plan for the Peranakan cultural trail serves as a proof-of-concept for the larger vision of ASEAN cultural trails. It allows experimentation in a controlled manner, fosters trust and cooperation among stakeholders, and builds a knowledge base. The lightweight monitoring ensures we learn and improve continuously. The ultimate aim is that after this pilot, ASEAN will be ready to implement multiple Shared Stories, Shared Value trails, whether it's the Maritime Spice Route Trail, Mekong Cultural Landscapes Trail, or others, with confidence and a solid operational model.

4. DISCUSSION

The development of Shared Stories, Shared Value as outlined above carries significant implications for ASEAN tourism and regional development. Here we reflect on key discussion points, including alignment with broader sustainable development agendas, the integration of sharing economy principles, potential challenges, and the broader impact on ASEAN branding and unity.

Contributions to Sustainable Development and Community Empowerment: The proposed cross-border cultural trails directly support sustainable tourism by design. They prioritize cultural preservation and community inclusion as central elements, rather than treating heritage as a passive backdrop for exploitation. By involving local artisans, guides, and homestay providers in multiple countries, the initiative operationalizes a sharing of benefits, a core tenet of sustainability. This addresses a common critique that tourism often concentrates gains among a few urban centers or large firms. Instead, Shared Stories, Shared Value aims for distributed growth: rural and secondary city heritage sites gain visibility and revenue; small businesses get access to international visitors through the trail network; and cultural practitioners (musicians, chefs, craftsmen) find new audiences and markets. Furthermore, the emphasis on monitoring outcomes (especially

community outcomes) is aligned with sustainable tourism standards (e.g., UNWTO's sustainable tourism indicators) which call for measuring tourism's socio-economic and cultural impacts, not just arrivals. The project can contribute to ASEAN's progress on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) is advanced by entrepreneurship opportunities the trails create, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is supported by heritage conservation efforts and promoting cultural vibrancy, and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) is epitomized by the multi-country collaboration here. In sum, the cross-border trails can serve as flagship examples of how sustainable development can be pursued through tourism in a regional context, balancing economic, social, and cultural objectives.

ASEAN Identity and Unity: Culturally, the initiative strengthens the narrative of an ASEAN identity that complements national identities. ASEAN has often been described as rich in diversity but seeking common ground. These trails physically and symbolically trace the common ground, whether it is a shared culinary tradition, a history of trade, or overlapping spiritual practices. By curating and marketing these shared heritages, ASEAN tells both its own people and the world a story of unity in diversity. Tourists exploring an ASEAN trail may come away with a new appreciation that Southeast Asian nations, despite different languages or religions, have been interconnected for centuries. This fosters a sense of regional pride and belonging among ASEAN citizens, supporting the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community goal of a common regional identity[47]. It also helps counterbalance the global tendency to view ASEAN countries in isolation or as competitors. Instead, the trail showcases them as partners contributing different chapters to one epic story. This can subtly reinforce political unity: when citizens see their countries collaborating fruitfully, it builds public support for ASEAN integration at large. One can draw a parallel with how the European Cultural Routes (like the Iron Curtain Trail for instance) contributed to a post-Cold War European narrative of reconciliation and unity. ASEAN is of course different, but the principle that cultural understanding underpins political trust holds true[4]. Over time, one could envision ASEAN Cultural Trails becoming a point of collective pride, much like shared ASEAN sporting events or achievements have been.

Destination Marketing and Brand Differentiation: From a destination marketing perspective, the cross-border cultural trails provide ASEAN tourism with fresh competitive advantage. As global travelers seek novel experiences, offering multi-country thematic journeys is a clear differentiator. Instead of competing purely on beaches or megacities (where ASEAN has strong offerings but also faces competition from other regions), ASEAN can stake a claim as the premier region for cultural circuits. Europe has long had that image with its Grand Tours and pilgrimage ways; ASEAN can carve its niche with tropical, diverse, experiential routes. The marketing can leverage modern storytelling tools, immersive videos, storytelling through influencers, to bring alive the connectivity of these places. The integrated marketing approach (via the ACTC's Marketing Committee possibly) also ensures cost-effectiveness: rather than 10 countries each spending to promote their own cultural sites, a portion of budgets pooled to promote an ASEAN trail might yield better returns by drawing long-haul tourists who will visit multiple countries in

one trip. This complements existing national marketing; it doesn't replace it. For example, Tourism Malaysia could continue its campaigns but also chip in to an ASEAN trail promotion that ultimately brings tourists to Malaysian sites as part of a circuit. There is evidence that multi-destination trips can increase total spend and visitor satisfaction, as travelers feel they get more value by checking off multiple countries in one go[17]. The concept of an ASEAN Heritage Pass or similar could further market it as an integrated experience (imagine a single ticket or visa that allows entry to multiple attractions across nations, a powerful message of openness). Another marketing advantage is media appeal: the novelty of cross-border trails can attract press coverage and travel writers more than yet another single-country tour might. This earned media can amplify ASEAN's brand at relatively low cost.

Leveraging the Sharing Economy: The integration of sharing economy elements into the trail initiative can be a game-changer in keeping it dynamic and inclusive. By encouraging tourists to use home-sharing for accommodations along the route, the project taps into an existing trend of travelers seeking local authenticity via Airbnb, Couchsurfing, etc. It also mitigates the need for heavy investment in new hotels by governments, the existing housing stock can absorb increased tourism if channelled correctly. However, to fully leverage this, ASEAN countries might need to ensure regulation supports such platforms. Some ASEAN cities have been restrictive about Airbnb; a regional approach might help harmonize policies so that, for instance, homestays are recognized and perhaps even certified under the trail program for quality assurance. Similarly, ride-sharing and community-based transport (like hiring local drivers via Grab or GoJek) can ease the mobility on the trail especially for FIT (free independent travelers). This reduces the pressure on governments to arrange all transport, instead they can partner with these services to perhaps create special trail routes or promos. Another sharing economy dimension is knowledge sharing: platforms like WithLocals or TravelingSpoon allow locals to offer experiences (cooking classes, guided walks). The trail could formally collaborate with such services, effectively crowd-sourcing the experience offerings along the route. This not only enriches the tourist experience with diverse options (beyond what a central authority could develop alone) but also spreads income to many individuals. The monitoring toolkit could even track the uptake of these peer-to-peer experiences as a success metric. Ultimately, the sharing economy's ethos of using underutilized resources resonates with the trail project, many heritage buildings or cultural skills in communities are underutilized assets; by sharing them with tourists, value is created for both sides. Yet, there are challenges, such as ensuring safety and quality in these informal services and addressing any resistance from traditional providers. The ACTC and governments should engage proactively with these platforms and perhaps provide training and certification to local hosts to maintain standards.

Challenges and Mitigation: Notwithstanding its promise, the initiative faces several challenges. **Logistical and Administrative Hurdles:** Differences in visa regimes, customs regulations, and transportation connectivity can pose barriers. Tourists might be discouraged if they face hassles at borders or poor infrastructure when crossing from one country to another. **Mitigation:** ACTC must work closely with ASEAN bodies on transport

and customs to smooth out travel, leveraging ASEAN's existing agreements on visa exemption (many ASEAN states allow visa-free travel for major markets for short stays) and possibly championing an expansion of the ASEAN Single Visa idea (discussed in the past in forums, analogous to Schengen, but not yet realized). For the pilot, selecting relatively easy border routes (like Thailand-Malaysia, which already have good connectivity) can set a success example. Over time, infrastructure investments (roads, tourist coach services) might be needed for more challenging links (e.g. between Borneo regions or remote areas). Funding from ADB's GMS program or similar could be sought for this since it aligns with cross-border connectivity goals.

Cultural Sensitivities and Equity: Another challenge is ensuring that the narrative does not favor one country's perspective over another's or inadvertently stir historical sensitivities. ASEAN countries have some overlapping claims in history (for instance, how one portrays a historical event might differ between nations). It is crucial that the shared story is co-created with input from historians and community elders from each side, to present a balanced view. In the Peranakan trail, for example, the portrayal of colonial history or migration should be nuanced and accurate to all contributions. Equity in benefits is also a concern, smaller or less-developed members might fear they'll put in effort but bigger tourism players (like Thailand or Singapore) will reap more visitors. The governance model attempts to mitigate this by equal representation and shared decision-making. Also, the monitoring will track benefit distribution; if imbalances appear (say one country is getting most of the tourists), the council could adjust marketing to promote the other parts of the trail more, or include additional sites in lagging areas.

Maintaining Long-Term Commitment: ASEAN initiatives sometimes wane when leadership changes or initial excitement fades. The ACTC must guard against this by institutionalizing processes (annual work plans, rotating chair ensuring continuity). Having a clear mandate and results helps, if governments see concrete gains, they are more likely to continue support. The lightweight monitoring and public communication of successes (e.g., announcing that the ASEAN Peranakan Trail attracted X thousand tourists and generated \$Y million across three countries this year) can create positive political incentives to sustain the program. Also, involving local governments and communities deeply means there will be grassroots pressure to continue if it benefits them. One idea is to formalize community stakeholder committees for each trail that can advocate for the project from bottom-up.

Benchmarking and Knowledge Sharing: It will be valuable to share knowledge with other regions attempting similar transnational tourism projects. For example, the Mekong region's tourism working group or the UNWTO's thematic route programs (like the Silk Road program which involves many countries including some ASEAN members) can offer lessons on marketing and cooperation. Conversely, ASEAN could become a best-practice example that others study. This exchange can be done through conferences or joint publications, raising ASEAN's profile in thought leadership in tourism collaboration.

Future Research and Expansion: The pilot and initial trails will also open up numerous avenues for future research. Academics might conduct impact studies on these trails (did

they truly change tourist behavior? How did they affect cultural preservation? etc.), providing external evaluation. There is scope for research into tourist motivations for multi-country routes, data which can refine marketing strategies. Additionally, future projects could explore linking ASEAN trails with neighboring regions (South Asia or East Asia) for even broader corridors, which would require diplomatic and marketing innovation.

Limitations: It should be noted that this study was conceptual; while based on literature and observed cases, the actual outcomes may differ. We assumed a relatively high degree of political will and coordination which in reality can be slow. The qualitative approach means our framework is not quantitatively tested, its success relies on effective implementation by many actors. Thus, ongoing refinement and adaptability are critical. We acknowledge that not all ASEAN nations are at the same level of tourism capacity, which could lead to imbalances. This was partly addressed by capacity-building in the plan, but it remains an area to watch. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic (though receding by 2025) taught us that cross-border tourism is vulnerable to external shocks; resilience planning (such as building local tourist interest in trails, not just international) might be needed to future-proof these initiatives.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to develop a comprehensive framework for Shared Stories, Shared Value: ASEAN Cross-Border Cultural Trails, and in doing so, addressed strategic, structural, and practical dimensions of implementing such a project. We demonstrated that a jointly developed cultural trail can be a strategic win-win for ASEAN member states, bolstering regional integration, economic opportunities, and cultural preservation in tandem. By creating a taxonomy of narrative themes, we provided a menu of storylines that naturally connect multiple countries, illustrating that Southeast Asia's history and heritage transcend modern borders. Through the Proposition-Capability matrix, we offered a solution to coordinate roles: assigning leadership according to each country's strengths ensures collaboration is efficient and inclusive, turning the diversity of ASEAN into an advantage rather than an obstacle.

We then proposed a concrete governance model (ACTC) to anchor the initiative in an accountable way. This council-based approach, if adopted, would embed the project within ASEAN's institutional fabric, allowing it to endure political cycles and remain focused on collective goals. The governance framework's emphasis on equal representation, consensus, and shared funding reflects ASEAN's normative principles while introducing new elements of result-oriented management suitable for a multi-country project.

Our phased pilot plan for a Peranakan heritage trail provided a realistic pathway from concept to reality. It showed that starting small, learning by doing, and scaling up is the prudent approach. The inclusion of a lightweight monitoring and evaluation toolkit ensures that decision-makers will have evidence to guide the project's evolution and justify further investment. Early indications from analogous efforts (e.g., IMT-GT's festival) suggest

strong interest, and our plan would channel that into a sustainable product offering. The pilot also serves as a template for other trails, once ASEAN sees tangible outcomes, it can replicate the model for different themes and regions across the bloc.

In conclusion, Shared Stories, Shared Value encapsulates a vision where ASEAN's cultural commonalities are harnessed as a source of unity and prosperity. It aligns closely with contemporary shifts in tourism, towards meaningful, story-rich, sustainable travel, and positions ASEAN at the forefront of this movement in the Asia-Pacific. The research contributes to both academic discourse and policy praxis by bridging cultural tourism development with regional cooperation theory. It underscores that tourism is not just an economic activity but also a form of diplomacy and community building[4]. By walking the same trail, people from different nations quite literally walk in each other's footsteps, gaining empathy and appreciation. For ASEAN, a region that has enjoyed peace among its members for decades, such initiatives deepen the roots of that peace through cultural understanding.

Ultimately, the success of these cultural trails will depend on continued collaboration, creativity, and commitment from a multitude of stakeholders. If executed well, they will stand as living monuments to ASEAN's shared heritage. A traveler in 2030 might recount how they followed an ASEAN trail and in one journey experienced the glittering multicultural past and present of Southeast Asia, from a Baba Nyonya home in Penang to a riverside market in Thailand to a historic quarter in Java, and how that journey revealed to them the interconnected soul of ASEAN. That is the promise of Shared Stories, Shared Value. It is our hope that this study provides a blueprint to move from promise to reality, and that ASEAN's collective story will grow richer with each step taken together on these trails.

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