Original Paper

A SWOT Analysis and Development Strategies for Red Tourism in Xinjiang

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Abstract

Red tourism is an important vehicle for carrying forward the revolutionary spirit and promoting patriotism in the new era. Xinjiang is culturally diverse and multiethnic, with rich red tourism resources embedded in its distinctive cultural landscape, conferring significant economic value and political significance. Using the SWOT analytical framework, this paper examines the current state of red tourism in Xinjiang, identifies its strengths and weaknesses, and proposes concrete pathways for improvement. The findings indicate that, despite Xinjiang's unique red tourism resources, development and utilization remain insufficient. Optimization should focus on four areas: building a distinctive red tourism brand system, sharpening brand differentiation, improving supporting infrastructure, and strengthening regional collaboration.

Keywords

Xinjiang, Red tourism, SWOT analysis, Tourism market, Development strategies

1. Introduction

Red tourism refers to tourism resources created by the Communist Party of China over the course of revolution, nation-building, and reform, centered on memorial sites and symbolic landmarks and grounded in revolutionary history, deeds, and spirit (Zha, R., Huang, Y., & Yu, J. 2024). In 2004, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued the Outline for National Red Tourism Development (2004–2010), which emphasized promoting red tourism nationwide in a coordinated, multi-party, and locally tailored manner, advancing balanced socioeconomic development in old revolutionary base areas, and fostering new drivers of economic growth. The issuance of the outline marked the formal elevation of red tourism to a national strategy. According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in the first half of 2025, nationwide visits to red

tourism destinations increased by 78% year-on-year. During the same period, participation in immersive experience programs reached 63%, and visitors under age 30 accounted for more than 50% for the first time. Located on China's western frontier, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region is a key hub of the Belt and Road Initiative (Let revolutionary history become a perceptible and personal experience, 2025). It not only boasts striking natural endowments but also a rich array of red tourism resources. According to the Second Catalog of Revolutionary Cultural Relics in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (released in 2021 by the Xinjiang Department of Culture and Tourism), Xinjiang has 1 site under nationallevel protection, 15 under autonomous region-level protection, 1 under municipal-level protection, 13 under county-level protection, and 1 site not yet officially designated for protection (Xinjiang announces the second batch of revolutionary cultural relics, 2021). From Xinjiang's establishment as a province in 1884, through its peaceful liberation in 1949, to the founding of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in 1955, the region has retained invaluable red cultural sites and revolutionary historical imprints that constitute precious assets for red tourism development. However, compared with provinces rich in red tourism resources such as Guizhou, Shaanxi, and Jiangxi, Xinjiang's red tourism remains at an early stage of development. The academic literature is also relatively thin, with most studies focusing on the broader agenda of promoting development through tourism—examining enabling conditions, development constraints, and optimization pathways at the sector level. In response, this paper isolates red tourism from the broader "tourism-driven Xinjiang" framework and, using a SWOT approach, first assesses the current landscape of red tourism in Xinjiang, then analyzes its strengths and weaknesses, and finally proposes optimization strategies, with the aim of providing practical guidance for the development of red tourism in the region.

2. Current State of Red Tourism Development in Xinjiang

Xinjiang has played an important role in the CPC's history of revolution, nation-building, and reform, giving rise to distinctive red tourism resources that constitute an integral part of China's broader red tourism landscape.

2.1 Diverse Types of Red Tourism Resources

At present, Xinjiang's red tourism resources can be broadly grouped into three categories. First are revolutionary historical sites. As of 2021, Xinjiang had 28 such sites, including the former site of the office and lodgings of Martyr Mao Zemin, the Memorial Hall of the Western Route Army of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, the Eighth Route Army's Office in Xinjiang, and the Karamay No. 1 Well. Of these, six are under national-level protection, sixteen under autonomous region—level protection, and six under municipal or county-level protection (Xinjiang announces the first batch of revolutionary cultural relics. 2021). Second are heritage sites of military-agricultural reclamation, primarily associated with the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), such as the XPCC Military Reclamation Museum, the Wujiaqu Military Reclamation Museum, the Xinjiang Museum of Reclamation History, the former military reclamation site at Xiaolizhuang, and the First Military Reclamation Company. These

sites house extensive collections of artifacts related to military reclamation. At present, Xinjiang's red tourism resources can be broadly grouped into three categories (Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Reclamation Museum: Telling the Corps story more vividly. 2024). First are revolutionary historical sites. As of 2021, the region had 28 such sites, including the former office and residence of martyr Mao Zemin, the Memorial Hall of the General Detachment of the Western Route Army of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, the Xinjiang Office of the Eighth Route Army, and Karamay's No. 1 Well. Of these, six are under national-level protection, sixteen under autonomous region-level protection, and six under municipal or county-level protection. Second are military-reclamation heritage sites, primarily associated with the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), such as the XPCC Military Reclamation Museum, the Wujiaqu Military Reclamation Museum, the Xinjiang Reclamation History Museum, the former Xiaolizhuang military reclamation site, and the First Company of the military reclamation corps; these sites collectively preserve a substantial body of militaryreclamation artifacts. For example, the XPCC Military Reclamation Museum houses more than 20,000 artifacts and serves as an important window into Xinjiang and the XPCC. Third are education bases for ethnic unity. In recent years, Xinjiang has emphasized patriotism and ethnic unity as core themes and has built 313 such bases, including 14 at the national level, 120 at the prefectural level, and 179 at the county level, gradually forming a three-tier system of education bases for ethnic unity and progress (Xinjiang strengthens the construction of ethnic unity and progress education bases. 2021). In short, whether revolutionary historical sites, military-reclamation heritage sites, or education bases for ethnic unity, all are imbued with rich red cultural elements and embody the animating ideals behind the CPC's pursuit of national independence and the people's well-being.

2.2 Sustained Expansion of Red Tourism and Growing Economic Benefits

In recent years, Xinjiang has intensified efforts to develop red tourism resources, deeply tapping the embedded themes of patriotism and ethnic unity. While leveraging these resources to drive economic growth, the region has also significantly broadened domestic and international visitors' understanding of Xinjiang. To expand the scale of red tourism, Xinjiang has launched ten signature red-themed itineraries, among them, routes such as Patriotic Border Defense: Youth Without Regrets; Reclamation and Border Defense: The Red Corps (Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, XPCC); and Revolutionary Memory: Footprints in Xinjiang have been designated as national key signature red tourism routes. The rollout of these itineraries has not only promoted integrated regional development across red tourism destinations but also substantially boosted surrounding local economies. According to official statistics, from 2016 to 2020 Xinjiang's red tourism attracted a cumulative 42.25 million visitors and generated total revenue of 37.48 billion yuan, including 2.97 million inbound visitors ('Red resources' boost high-quality development of Xinjiang tourism, 2021). As a key platform for red tourism in the region, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) has also expanded aggressively to spur rural incomes. In 2021, leveraging its military-reclamation cultural assets, the XPCC advanced red tourism to promote high-quality development of the sector, receiving 31.19 million visits over the year (up 36.82%

year-on-year) and generating 14.48 billion yuan in tourism revenue (up 63.22% year-on-year) (Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps fully promotes red tourism development, 2022).

3. SWOT Analysis of Red Tourism in Xinjiang

3.1 Internal Strengths

First, strong resource endowments. Xinjiang not only offers unique natural scenery but also a wealth of red tourism resources. According to the regional Department of Culture and Tourism, the region has 69 red tourism sites, including 12 designated "classic" red tourism attractions, 7 of which are on the national list. Representative examples include the Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial Hall of the XPCC Eighth Division, the Reclamation Memorial of the 359th Brigade in Alar City (XPCC First Division), and the Military Reclamation Museum of the XPCC Sixth Division in Wujiaqu City (Zhang, Y.-D., Guan, S.-H., Chen, Y., et al., 2022). Notably, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (est. 1954) has played an irreplaceable role in safeguarding national unity, consolidating border defense, and promoting social stability and long-term peace in Xinjiang. Over the course of its construction and development, the Corps has generated numerous elements of red heritage. Shihezi, for instance, transformed from a barren stretch of Gobi—once described as "no birds in the sky, no grass on the ground"—into a modern frontier city. The Corps' ethos of arduous struggle and pioneering enterprise, forged in that process, has become a red spiritual resource that continues to inspire successive generations.

Second, rich and diverse cultural connotations. Xinjiang's red tourism resources were jointly shaped by multiple ethnic groups—including Han, Uyghur, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz—and, compared with other provinces, distinctly embody themes of intercultural exchange and ethnic unity. Today, the Three Districts Revolution Memorial Hall and the Martyrs' Cemetery in Yining have become education bases that commemorate the sacrifices of patriots from many groups, such as Han, Uyghurs, and ethnic Russians, in pursuit of common ideals. As one scholar notes: "Xinjiang's red cultural resources epitomize how, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang have consistently taken root in, dedicated themselves to, and built up the frontier" (Zhao, L, 2022).

Third, robust policy support. At the national level, in 2015 the China National Tourism Administration issued the Guiding Opinions on Further Promoting Tourism Assistance to Xinjiang, proposing ten measures to advance red tourism in Xinjiang. The document called for establishing Xinjiang tourism offices, supporting the XPCC in building the "China Reclamation Tourism" brand, and actively publicizing and promoting military-reclamation culture. Since 2011, the CNTA has earmarked 20 million yuan annually specifically to support the development of red tourism in Xinjiang (Five years of fruitful results, today welcomes spring again - Written on the occasion of the National Tourism Assistance to Xinjiang Work Conference, 2015). At the autonomous region level, a series of policies have been introduced to promote high-quality development of red tourism, including the 13th Five-Year Plan for Tourism Development of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, the XPCC Implementation Plan for Advancing Red Tourism Development (2016–2020), the Regulations on Promoting Tourism in the

Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, and the XPCC Implementation Opinions on Further Unlocking the Potential of Culture and Tourism Consumption. These policy instruments cover funding support, brand promotion, and regulatory safeguards, and have become important vehicles for driving the high-quality development of red tourism in Xinjiang.

Fourth, pronounced locational advantages. Situated in the core area of the Silk Road Economic Belt under the Belt and Road Initiative and serving as a hub for the China–Europe Railway Express, Xinjiang enjoys inherent advantages for developing and promoting red tourism. By 2023, passenger throughput at Urumqi Diwopu International Airport exceeded 25 million. Inbound passengers reached 158,813—up 36.9-fold from the previous year—while outbound passengers totaled 163,907, a 57.1-fold increase (Nearly 359,000 people entered and exited Urumqi airport port in 2023, 2024). Urumqi Diwopu also resumed air links with 13 international cities, including Islamabad, Almaty, Dushanbe, and Tbilisi. In addition, buoyed by the momentum of the Belt and Road, the China–Europe Railway Express has scaled up to regularized operations, significantly bolstering Xinjiang's regional economy—thereby providing stronger resource and environmental support for the growth of red tourism.

3.2 Internal Weaknesses

First, weak tourism infrastructure. Transportation has long been the binding constraint on the development of red tourism in Xinjiang. Red tourism resources are characterized by "small clusters widely dispersed," which compounds logistical challenges in three ways: First, external connectivity is inadequate. Despite recent investment in transport, many remote red tourism sites still suffer from limited access, forcing visitors to undertake arduous journeys over long distances or difficult terrain and undermining the travel experience. Second, internal road networks are incomplete: many sites lack essential feeder roads linking them to trunk highways, raising travel costs and safety risks. Finally, complementary transport and reception infrastructure is insufficient, and many sites have limited carrying capacity. For example, in Alar City, although tourist visits rose from 1.38 million to 2.06 million between 2016 and 2018 and tourism revenue doubled from 200 million to 400 million yuan, the number of hotels remained at seven (Li, J., Li, S., & Niu, F., 2020).

Second, low-level product development. At present, red tourism in Xinjiang is still dominated by basic sightseeing, with limited experiential and interactive components. This results in more static displays than dynamic experiences and more passive reception than active participation. Such static presentations struggle to evoke emotional resonance or intellectual engagement; likewise, mere photo ops fail to convey the core ethos of arduous struggle and selfless dedication embedded in red tourism resources. In addition, serious homogenization persists: most sites rely on straightforward guided narration, with visitors following guides through memorial halls and learning via "panels plus narration," which significantly undermines the visitor experience.

Third, a shortage of professional talent. In recent years, red tourism in Xinjiang has surged in popularity and become an important pillar of the regional cultural industry. Yet behind this boom lies a pronounced talent gap in two respects. First, there is a dearth of high-caliber professionals: many scenic sites and

tourism investment companies lack experienced managers, as well as top-tier talent in planning, product development, and event design. With market trends and visitor preferences evolving, shortages remain acute in areas such as event planning, scenic-area operations management, and emerging roles including homestay hosts and study-tour instructors. Second, the capabilities of frontline service personnel are uneven. Some practitioners still fall short in historical knowledge, interpretive technique, service skills, and professional etiquette.

3.3 External Opportunities

First, a vast national market for red tourism. According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in the first half of 2025 nationwide visits to red tourism destinations increased 78% year-on-year; participation in immersive experiences reached 63%; and, for the first time, visitors under age 30 accounted for more than 50% (Making revolutionary history a tangible and knowable personal experience, 2025). As China's overall national strength has grown and cultural confidence has risen, younger cohorts have shown stronger identification with heroic figures and domestic revolutionary narratives, making the "youthful turn" in red tourism a reality. Ctrip data indicate that users engaging in red tourism are predominantly people born in the 1980s (38%) and 1990s (31%), with the number of 1990s-born users rising by nearly 40% in the first half of 2019 (Generation Z has become the main force in red tourism consumption, favoring red heritage sites and red memorial halls, 2021). Young travelers actively share their experiences on platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, and WeChat, serving as secondary disseminators. Xinjiang's distinctive red tourism resources are particularly appealing to this demographic and will help the region better integrate into the broader national tourism market.

Second, modern technologies are empowering red tourism in Xinjiang. Rapid advances in 5G, AI, and big data are providing a solid technical backbone for the sector's growth. For example, at the Urumqi VR Red Education Base, virtual and augmented reality technologies overlay revolutionary historical scenes onto real-world settings via a mobile app and dedicated devices, allowing visitors to experience battle scenarios firsthand and view staged historical vignettes. At the XPCC Military Reclamation Museum, holographic displays "give voice" to wartime letters, recounting the moving stories of the families behind them. In addition, with VR headsets, AR devices, and software platforms, visitors can select routes in real time, book accommodations online, and access travel information on demand—greatly facilitating trips and enhancing the overall experience.

Third, deepening regional tourism cooperation. As the core area of the Silk Road Economic Belt, Xinjiang has seen increasingly close people-to-people exchanges with neighboring countries in recent years. In 2024, inbound visitor arrivals reached 5.1482 million, and the international tourism market continued to expand, with Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Thailand ranking as the top three source markets. Domestically, under strong support from the "tourism assistance to Xinjiang" initiative, 19 aiding provinces and municipalities planned 124 tourism projects in 2016 with intended investment of 3.256 billion yuan; 116 projects were actually under construction, with 1.098 billion yuan invested (Tourism assistance to Xinjiang adds new engine for rapid development of Xinjiang tourism, 2017). Tourism

assistance to Xinjiang has become a key driver of the region's rapid tourism development.

3.4 External Threats

First, intensifying interregional competition. Spurred by national policies to accelerate tourism, provinces across China are stepping up red tourism development—especially resource-rich regions such as Jiangxi and Tibet, which have rolled out their own plans and targets. For example, Jiangxi has issued special-purpose red tourism bonds; according to the provincial Department of Finance, the program envisions total investment of 25.615 billion yuan with projected cumulative revenue of 55.369 billion yuan. By the end of June 2024, the bond proceeds had been fully deployed, with funded projects completing 18.084 billion yuan in investment and generating 5.172 billion yuan in revenue (Jiangxi Provincial Government Bond 2024 Follow-up Rating Report, 2024). Tibet has incorporated red tourism into its 14th Five-Year tourism development plan and set strategic goals to revitalize the educational function of red tourism and to advance integrated innovation. These developments are placing considerable competitive pressure on Xinjiang's red tourism.

Second, relatively low market recognition. Compared with "red" cities such as Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai, Nanchang, Yan'an, and Jinggangshan—which are closer to the core theaters of China's revolution and CPC history and thus natural first-choice destinations—these locales are also more centrally situated, with convenient transport that favors short-trip planning and offers inherent advantages in both travel cost and comfort. By contrast, Xinjiang sits on China's far western frontier, far from the heartland, which lowers visitors' familiarity with—and emotional affinity for—the region's history. In addition, some prospective travelers still harbor safety concerns about Xinjiang, leading many to take a wait-and-see attitude toward choosing red tourism there.

4. Development Strategies and Optimization Pathways for Red Tourism in Xinjiang

Building on the foregoing analysis of Xinjiang's red tourism strengths and weaknesses, this study proposes concrete optimization pathways.

4.1 SO Strategy: Build a Distinctive Red Tourism Brand System and Innovate Product Offerings

At present, Xinjiang has yet to establish a well-structured red tourism brand system. In response, the region should build on its unique cultural resources and, with forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation as the central thread, actively promote the message that "Xinjiang is a wonderful place." Priority should be given to leveraging Xinjiang's distinctive military-reclamation (XPCC) culture. Building on the existing ten signature red-themed routes, Xinjiang can curate additional flagship itineraries themed around "military reclamation," "ethnic unity," "arduous struggle," and "selfless dedication," achieving seamless, region-wide connectivity of red tourism routes both horizontally and vertically. In addition, by harnessing AI technologies, Xinjiang should continuously develop products that align with younger consumers' preferences. For example, in partnership with education authorities, it can launch age-differentiated red study-tour curricula—such as retracing XPCC reclamation routes; immersive programs that recreate the arduous years of the pioneers who braved the "sea of sand"; and

diversified "red +" models that integrate revolutionary heritage with ecology, cuisine, and folk traditions.

4.2 ST Strategy: Highlight Brand Differentiation and Enhance Service Quality

Given its cultural and ethnic diversity, Xinjiang is an ideal setting for building distinctive red tourism brands. The region should leverage ethnic cultural features to pursue differentiated positioning vis-à-vis inland red tourism, with a strong emphasis on the signature themes of military-reclamation (XPCC) culture and ethnic unity. It can curate "Xinjiang Red Culture Discovery" itineraries that immerse visitors in the region's multicultural tapestry—for example, showcasing Kazakh kız kuu (the "girl-chasing" equestrian game) and the Uyghur Twelve Muqam. In parallel, Xinjiang should fully utilize social platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin to promote the message that "Xinjiang is a wonderful place" to audiences in Central Asia, Europe, and beyond, tell compelling Xinjiang stories, and amplify Xinjiang's voice. On the service side, efforts should focus squarely on visitor needs by establishing local service standards that cover scenic-area management, guiding services, and safety assurance; regularly administering visitor satisfaction surveys; and using the findings to implement continuous, targeted improvements to site operations, thereby better protecting visitors' rights and interests.

4.3 WO Strategy: Upgrade Infrastructure and Implement a Talent-driven Tourism Strategy

Although Xinjiang—supported by central funding and assistance from partner provinces—has largely completed an integrated transport network spanning rail, road, and air, parts of southern Xinjiang still face connectivity gaps. In recent years, the region has accelerated upgrades to transport infrastructure; in 2025 alone, Xinjiang plans to invest 80 billion yuan in highways to advance 26 national and provincial trunk-line projects, including the G0711 Urumqi–Yuli Expressway. Alongside these upgrades, Xinjiang should develop a set of "internet-famous" scenic byways by further improving the Duku Highway and the Hemu Highway, enhancing roadside infrastructure with a focus on the amenities visitors care about most—restrooms, lodging, and rest areas. To address talent shortages in red tourism, Xinjiang can partner with local universities—such as Xinjiang University, Shihezi University, and Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics—to launch or strengthen tourism programs. Priority should be given to cultivating multilingual professionals in Uyghur, Kazakh, Russian, and other languages to meet the needs of both domestic and international visitors. In addition, establishing a dedicated talent fund and expanding recruitment incentives will help retain local talent and attract skilled professionals from outside the region.

4.4 WT Strategy: Strengthen Regional Collaboration and Enhance Risk Management

As the Silk Road Economic Belt continues to advance, Xinjiang can leverage Belt and Road momentum to work with Gansu, Shaanxi, and Qinghai to jointly develop a "Silk Road Red Culture Corridor," establishing cooperation mechanisms for information sharing, resource sharing, and product complementarity. In parallel, it should coordinate with aiding provinces to form a red tourism alliance, reach consensus on talent development, financial support, and technology sharing, and host regular promotion events. For example, in 2025 Hami held the "Yu Meets Hami: Beauty in Shared Harmony" tourism promotion in Chongqing to showcase its economic performance and culture—tourism assets and

to deepen bilateral cooperation. Xinjiang should also accelerate XPCC-local integration, optimize resource allocation, avoid homogeneous competition, and maximize resource use. In addition, risk management should be strengthened by building a Xinjiang tourism observatory platform to monitor visitor flows in real time and to develop contingency plans.

5. Conclusion

As the Belt and Road Initiative advances in depth, Xinjiang's red tourism has entered a window of rapid development. It can not only stimulate regional economic growth and raise household incomes, but also serve as an important avenue for domestic and international audiences to gain a fuller understanding of Xinjiang and its overall socioeconomic trajectory. In sum, developing red tourism in Xinjiang is a systemic undertaking that requires concerted efforts by government, enterprises, and the public. With forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation as the guiding thread, Xinjiang should work to maximize the socioeconomic benefits of red tourism.

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