



# A SWOT Analysis of Short-Term Study Tour Programs in Khon Kaen, Thailand: Toward a Well-Being-Oriented Perspective

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**Abstract.** Background - Education-related travel has grown remarkably over recent decades. Within this trend, cross-border short-term study tours have attracted growing attention as a more flexible form of international learning. Objective - In Asia, Thailand has emerged as a practical destination for Chinese college students, largely due to its relatively lower costs and cultural familiarity. Yet, compared with established destinations like Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen has yet to attract a comparable level of participation. Method - This study focuses on Khon Kaen and draws secondary data analysis combined with a SWOT framework to assess its current standing in the short-term study tour market for Chinese college students. Findings - Khon Kaen demonstrates clear strengths in cost, educational resources, and cultural authenticity, but faces challenges in brand recognition, product development, and international accessibility; growing market demand and policy support present opportunities, while competition and external uncertainties remain key threats. Contribution - The study introduces a well-being-oriented lens, arguing that short-term study tours can enrich students' physical and psychological experiences during their journey. Embedding well-being considerations into program design could meaningfully enhance the overall value and long-term sustainability of educational tourism. These key observations lay useful groundwork for future research, particularly in developing practical, market-oriented strategies.

**Keywords:** Khon Kaen, Chinese University Students, Short-term Study Tour, SWOT Analysis.

## 1 Introduction

As higher education becomes increasingly internationalized, cross-border student mobility has risen sharply. Alongside this shift, well-being has emerged as a growing consideration in both international education and tourism research. This change in expectations calls for a fresh look at short-term study tour programs through a well-being-oriented lens. At the same time, China remains one of the world's most significant source countries for internationally mobile students [1].

Within Asia, Thailand is emerging as a destination, but the market is highly concentrated in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, leaving Khon Kaen underdeveloped. Bangkok and

Chiang Mai continue to dominate, drawing on concentrated educational resources and well-established brand recognition, while Khon Kaen — the administrative and educational center of the northeast — has yet to fully realize its potential, despite offering a strong academic base and a favorable location.

The short-term study tour market for Chinese college students is also evolving. Students and their families are increasingly seeking better value, greater specialization, and more immersive experiences. There is growing appetite for destinations that go beyond the well-worn tourist circuit.

With this in mind, this study aims to explore the market potential of Khon Kaen as a short-term study tour destination for Chinese college students, and to identify what it would take to make such programs more market-ready. The main research question is: What is the current state of the short-term study tour market in Khon Kaen, Thailand? More specifically, this paper attempts to answer: 1) what are the strengths and weaknesses of Khon Kaen's Short-Term Study Tour? And 2) What opportunities and threats Khon Kaen's Short-Term Study Tour are facing? This paper is intended to lay the foundation for future empirical research and for the development of actionable marketing strategies.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Concept of Educational Tourism**

Educational tourism refers to travel for learning purposes, integrating knowledge acquisition and cultural experience [2].

### **2.2 The Concept and Characteristics of Short-Term Study Tours**

Short-Term Study Abroad (STSA) is an established subfield of Study Abroad (SA). The Institute of International Education (IIE) defines it as an overseas study program lasting no more than eight weeks, distinguishing it from longer-term programs of 8 to 52 week (LTSA) [3]. In essence, short-term study tours combine structured academic activities — such as classroom learning and skills training with non-classroom elements like cultural immersion and community engagement. Compared with degree-seeking mobility, short-term study tours carry lower entry barriers and lower financial risk, making them one of the fastest-growing segments in the international education market [3].

### **2.3 Well-being in Educational Tourism**

Well-being has become a prominent theme in both tourism and education research. Studies increasingly show that travel is not simply about leisure or entertainment — it closely tied to people's quality of life. Participating in tourism activities can boost happiness, reduce stress, and contribute to overall life satisfaction [4]. In the context of

educational tourism specifically, well-being extends well beyond physical considerations like accommodation and safety. It also encompasses psychological and social dimensions, including emotional comfort, cultural adaptation, and meaningful interaction with others [4].

Recent research suggests that international study experiences can generate lasting benefits that go well beyond short-term enjoyment. Students often return with a stronger sense of identity, broader perspectives, and deeper social connections [5]. These outcomes point to a richer, more enduring form of well-being. Building on this, the present study treats well-being as a multidimensional concept encompassing physical, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions — a lens that helps reveal how different aspects of study tour programs shape students' overall experience.

## **2.4 Mobility of Chinese Students Traveling to Thailand for Educational Purposes**

Research by Franco et al. [2] confirms that students who participate in educational tourism programs make meaningful gains in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral learning. Increasingly, Chinese students are turning away from traditional destinations in Europe and North America and looking toward Southeast Asia. Thailand has become a particularly attractive option thanks to its geographical proximity, manageable costs, and cultural familiarity. This shift reflects broader changes in the global higher education landscape and the growing momentum of regional educational cooperation [6].

When choosing a destination, students rarely base their decisions on a single factor. Financial considerations, ease of travel, and the perceived difficulty of adapting to a new environment all play a role [7]. Despite this, student mobility across Thailand remains heavily concentrated in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, with the northeastern region — including Khon Kaen — attracting a much smaller share. This is true even though Khon Kaen has a solid higher education base and rich cultural resources. This regional imbalance is part of what makes the city a meaningful focus for this study.

## **2.5 Existing Research and Research Gaps**

Much of the existing literature on short-term study tours for Chinese students has focused on the demand side. Some scholars argue that students' ability to integrate smoothly into the local environment has a direct bearing on their learning outcomes [8]. Others have noted that international students bring both economic benefits — through consumer spending — and social benefits — through cultural exchange — to host countries, while themselves gaining academically, professionally, and personally [9].

However, most existing work has centered on individual student experiences or the broader policy environment, with relatively little attention paid to market-oriented operational models. This gap is especially pronounced in the context of second-tier cities, where questions about how market actors can participate in resource integration and sustain program development over time remain largely unexplored. This study aims to address that gap by examining Khon Kaen from both an operational and supply-side perspective.

## **2.6 SWOT Analysis as an Analytical Framework**

SWOT analysis is a well-established method for systematically examining the internal strengths and weaknesses of an organization or destination, alongside the external opportunities and threats it faces. The goal is to clarify strategic direction: how to leverage strengths, address weaknesses, capitalize on opportunities, and mitigate threats. The framework has been widely applied in areas such as international university strategy and the feasibility assessment of educational programs [10]. In this study, SWOT analysis serves as the primary analytical tool for classifying study tour-related resources in Khon Kaen, evaluating overall feasibility, and laying the groundwork for market strategy recommendations.

## **3 Research Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on secondary data analysis to explore the development potential of short-term study tour programs in Khon Kaen, Thailand. Given the exploratory nature of the topic and the limited availability of primary data, secondary sources provide a practical basis for analysis. Data were drawn from three main sources: academic literature, official statistics from Thai government agencies, and institutional reports from universities and related organizations. The study focuses mainly on materials published between 2018 and 2024 to ensure relevance.

A SWOT framework is used to examine internal factors (strengths and weaknesses), such as local resources and institutional capacity, and external factors (opportunities and threats), including market trends, policy context, and competition. A well-being perspective is incorporated throughout the analysis, considering not only academic outcomes but also students' physical, psychological, and socio-cultural experiences. The author acknowledges that the use of secondary data may affect data consistency, and the lack of primary data means individual experiences are not directly captured. In addition, SWOT analysis involves some degree of subjective judgment. Despite these limitations, the research approach would provide a useful foundation for initial exploration and future research.

## **4 SWOT Analysis of Khon Kaen's Short-Term Study Tour Market**

### **4.1 Key Profile of Khon Kaen Province**

According to official data from the National Statistical Office of Thailand [11], Khon Kaen has a population of approximately 1.7–1.8 million.

In terms of transportation, Khon Kaen occupies a strategically important position within Thailand's national network. The city is located along Mittraphap Road (Highway 2), one of the country's main arterial highways linking Bangkok with northeastern provinces and the Lao border. It is also connected by Highway 12 Thailand, an im-

portant east–west corridor that enhances regional accessibility across central and northeastern Thailand. In addition to its road infrastructure, Khon Kaen is served by an active domestic airport, with passenger traffic reported in the annual reports of Airports of Thailand [12], and is integrated into the national railway system operated by the State Railway of Thailand [13]. Ongoing infrastructure developments, including future rail connectivity projects, are expected to further strengthen the city’s accessibility.

Economically, Reports from the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council [14] indicate that the province plays a meaningful role in the broader economy of northeastern Thailand, with the service sector becoming increasingly prominent. The presence of major hospitals and commercial centers further reinforces its function as a regional service hub.

A key strength of Khon Kaen lies in its educational environment. Khon Kaen University, the largest university in northeastern Thailand, hosts a large student population and maintains a growing network of international collaborations [15]. This concentration of higher education institutions contributes to a dynamic academic atmosphere and provides a strong foundation for the development of short-term educational tourism programs.

Culturally, Khon Kaen is considered part of the heartland of Isan culture. Traditional festivals such as Songkran, along with local temples, museums, and community-based cultural sites, offer valuable opportunities for experiential learning and cultural immersion. These features are particularly relevant for international students seeking authentic and less commercialized cultural experiences.

Compared with major tourism destinations such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen attracts fewer international visitors. However, according to statistics from the Department of Tourism Thailand [16], this relatively lower tourism intensity is associated with a more affordable cost of living and a less crowded environment. These characteristics may be particularly appealing to students who prefer a more immersive and unhurried experience.

## 4.2 SWOT Analysis of Khon Kaen’s Short-Term Study Tour Market

**Strengths (S).** S1: Strong university resources. Khon Kaen University is the leading higher education institution in northeastern Thailand, offering a high-caliber faculty and a wide range of programs suited to international students. Its Confucius Institute centered on Chinese language and culture is a particularly meaningful point of connection for Chinese students and serves as direct evidence of the university’s alignment with their cultural background.

S2: Cost advantages in living and education. Compared with Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen offers significantly lower living and education costs, making it better for budgets of many Chinese families. Beyond price, the city’s relatively relaxed pace of life and lower daily pressures can genuinely support students’ psychological well-being a consideration that matters increasingly to today’s students and their families.

S3: Location and cultural distinctiveness. As the center of northeastern Thailand, Khon Kaen is the heartland of Isan culture — a cultural world quite different from what

Bangkok or Chiang Mai can offer. For Chinese college students, this means the opportunity to step into a rich and authentic cultural environment that sets Khon Kaen clearly apart from more familiar destinations.

S4: Established institutional partnership. For example, Khon Kaen University has already built a solid foundation of cooperation with a number of Chinese universities, including Southwest University, Wenzhou Medical University, and Southwest Jiaotong University. These partnerships have produced short-term exchange programs and reciprocal faculty and student visits, providing an existing infrastructure that could support broader market development.

**Weaknesses (W).** W1: Low brand recognition. Among Chinese college students, Khon Kaen remains largely unknown as a study destination. Khon Kaen University itself does not carry the same name recognition as Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok or Chiang Mai University in north. Building brand awareness will require sustained and targeted effort.

W2: Underdeveloped study tour products. To date, Khon Kaen has not produced market-ready short-term study tour packages specifically designed for Chinese college students. The exchange and visiting programs that currently exist such as a ten-day summer pharmacy exchange with Southwest University are essentially academic exchanges rather than commercially structured study tour products. They do not yet meet the expectations of the broader student market.

W3: Limited promotional reach. Channels for promoting Khon Kaen a study tour destination to Chinese students are currently very thin. Most students simply have no way of learning about what the city has to offer. This information gap is a genuine competitive disadvantage and one that needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

W4: Infrastructure gaps. Unlike Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen currently lacks international flight connections, which limits its accessibility for incoming students. Support services for Chinese-speaking visitors — including Chinese-language assistance, pre-departure orientation, and arrival support — also remain limited. These gaps affect not only convenience but also students' sense of psychological comfort and security during their stay.

**Opportunities (O).** O1: Growing market demand. Demand for short-term study tours among Chinese college students continues to grow. There is a clear appetite for programs that combine good value with distinctive and meaningful experiences — something Khon Kaen is well-positioned to provide, if it develops the right offerings.

O2: Policy and bilateral cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative has helped deepen China–Thailand educational ties, and Khon Kaen University is well-placed to benefit from this broader policy momentum. A supportive policy environment could ease the development of new programs and cross-institutional partnerships.

O3: Post-pandemic recovery and industry growth. Since the pandemic, educational tourism in Thailand has been recovering steadily. The Thai government has also simplified visa requirements for Chinese visitors, lowering the barriers to participation. Meanwhile, growing global awareness of well-being presents an opportunity to reframe study tours not just as academic experiences, but as holistic personal development journeys a positioning that could give Khon Kaen a genuine competitive edge.

O4: Improving regional connectivity. The ongoing development of the China–Laos–Thailand high-speed railway corridor is expected to significantly improve Khon Kaen’s accessibility in the years ahead. Better transport links could transform the city’s logistical standing and make it a far more viable choice for students traveling from China.

**Threats (T).** T1: Competitive pressure from established markets. Internationally, short-term study tour markets in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore are already mature and well-established. Within Thailand, Bangkok and Chiang Mai have a significant head start and enjoy strong brand loyalty. Breaking into this competitive landscape a relative newcomer will not be easy.

T2: Market demand volatility. Demand for international travel and study can shift sharply in response to events outside anyone’s control — global economic downturns, geopolitical tensions, or unexpected crises can quickly reshape consumer confidence. The rise of destinations that actively market themselves around well-being and lifestyle quality also adds a new layer of competitive pressure.

T3: Policy and external risks. Short-term study tour programs are sensitive to changes in entry and visa policies between China and Thailand. Natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and other unforeseen events can also have a swift and significant impact on program viability.

T4: Risk of homogenization. If Khon Kaen simply replicates the study tour model of Bangkok or Chiang Mai without building on its own distinctive strengths, it risks becoming just another undifferentiated option in a crowded market. The city’s best opportunity lies in developing a genuinely unique identity — not through imitation, but through authenticity.

## 5 Conclusion

This study finds that Khon Kaen has the foundational resources to support a viable short-term study tour market, but that this potential has not yet been fully activated. Strengthening brand communication, developing distinctive and differentiated program offerings, and bringing those programs to market in a more structured way would go a long way toward securing a meaningful share of the Chinese college student market.

The findings also point to a clear need to move toward a more well-being-oriented approach — one where academic value is integrated with quality of life, environmental comfort, and psychological support. Future empirical research and practical marketing strategies built on this foundation could meaningfully advance educational tourism across Khon Kaen and the wider northeastern Thailand region.

This study has certain limitations. First, it relies entirely on secondary data, with no primary empirical research. Second, conclusions drawn from existing secondary sources may carry analytical assumptions that limit their objectivity. Future research would benefit from field surveys, interviews, and more direct engagement with market actors and students.

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