

Research on Inter-provincial Cooperative Development of Regional Tourism: A Case Study of Hukou Waterfall in Shaanxi and Shanxi, a 5A Scenic Spot

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Abstract

The Hukou Waterfall is located in the provinces of Shaanxi and Shanxi. Due to its unique geographical location, the waterfall is divided into two parts and managed separately by the respective administrative regions. However, the potential social and economic benefits of the Hukou Waterfall, which boasts exceptional tourism resources, have not been fully realized. The development of regional tourism cooperation across provinces has always been a challenge. It requires careful consideration on how to overcome differences and foster collaborative development among regions to create a unified and exceptional tourist destination that provides the best experience for visitors. This paper analyzes the successful path of the Hukou Waterfall, a typical case of regional tourism cooperation across provinces, to identify the current issues and future development directions. It also provides a theoretical foundation and cooperative model for similar cross-provincial regional collaboration.

Keywords

Regional Tourism; Cross-provincial; Cooperative Development; Collaboration; Hub-and-spoke; Core-periphery.

1. Background

Regional tourism cooperation is an important trend in the continuous development of the tourism industry in the context of economic globalization and regional integration. However, research on regional tourism cooperation was relatively late to start. The rapid development of international tourism industry in the 1960s led to an increase in tourism competition among regions[1]. Scholars realized that cooperation, in addition to competition, was an indispensable element in regional tourism development. Some early foreign scholars began to study the organized behavior patterns among tourism entities, focusing on the interactions of interests, behaviors, and management among tourism enterprises in tourist destinations. Regional tourism aims to maximize the effective utilization of regional resources to enhance the tourism competitiveness of the area. It is a comprehensive project involving multiple stakeholders, and the development of regional tourism cooperation requires mutual benefits and common development. It is necessary to consider not only self-interest but also the interests of common welfare[2].

In border areas between administrative regions, some resources span across two or more administrative regions. Each region has the authority to develop these resources, resulting in the development of tourism resources being divided. To some extent, the differences in administrative regions affect the overall functionality, utilization, and redevelopment of the scenic areas. For such resources spanning multiple regions, there are two options: separate development by two entities or the establishment of a unified development entity to ensure that tourism resources are treated as a whole in terms of space. Both parties have the right to choose the development approach. However, in reality, this integrated image is often defeated

by the freedom to choose. Different administrative divisions and interest pursuits of different entities hinder the development of tourism resources across administrative regions, resulting in insufficient planning and management. On one hand, border areas pursue their own interests, resulting in excessive development of tourist projects, cloned attractions without novelty, each promoting itself, and even engaging in malicious competition. On the other hand, even though border areas recognize the necessity of cooperation, they struggle to find effective methods and approaches[3]. Therefore, the correct development of tourism resources spanning two provinces has been an ongoing topic of exploration in both theory and practice.

Hukou Waterfall is a shared tourism resource between Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces, and it is the only golden waterfall in the world. The development of Hukou Waterfall tourism resources in the Shanxi-Shaanxi region has made it a famous tourist attraction at home and abroad. In 1988, it was designated as a national key scenic spot. In 1997, it was included in the 35 excellent tourist products of China Tourism Year to promote both domestically and internationally[4]. In July 2000, the Ministry of Land and Resources approved the establishment of the Hukou Waterfall National Geopark, consisting of four parts: the Hukou Waterfall Scenic Area, the Ke'nanpo Scenic Area, the Zhongshi Scenic Area, and the Xiaochanwo Scenic Area[5]. In November 2001, it was formally approved as a national geopark. In 2002, Hukou Waterfall was officially rated as a national AAAA-level scenic spot by the National Tourism Administration. In 2018, it was recognized as one of the "Top 50 Scenic Spots of the Yellow River" at the China Yellow River Tourism Conference. On July 15, 2022, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced that Hukou Waterfall Scenic Area (located in Linfen, Shanxi Province and Yan'an, Shaanxi Province) is a national 5A-level tourist attraction. Jixian County in Shanxi and Yichuan County in Shaanxi jointly created a national 5A-level tourist attraction and unified management and promotion measures, achieving successful cooperation in establishing a national 5A-level tourist attraction[6].

Hukou Waterfall is located in Yichuan County, Shaanxi Province and Jixian County, Shanxi Province, both of which are national poverty-stricken counties and the tourism resources in these two counties are crucial for local economic development. As a prominent showcase among the 5A-level tourism resources in the Jin-Shaan Canyon region, Hukou Waterfall plays an important role in the Yellow River Cultural Route. It is of strategic significance to utilize the reputation of the 5A-level scenic area to drive the development of the surrounding areas. Continuously developing and utilizing these resources, optimizing market layout, and creating corresponding tourism products will propel the development of Hukou Waterfall to new heights. It is of great strategic significance for the social and economic development of the Jin-Shaan Plateau region. With the intensification of competition in the tourism market and the decline of the tourism market, the reorganization of tourism resources and the further strengthening of regional tourism cooperation have become an inevitable choice in the regional tourism market competition.

2. Overview of Domestic and International Regional Tourism Cooperation

2.1. Theoretical Research on Domestic Regional Tourism Cooperation

Research on regional tourism cooperation in China is limited. In 2007, scholars such as Jiang Kun, Zhang Jinhe, and Wang Hao conducted in-depth discussions from the perspectives of government, enterprises, and communities. They proposed a new model of tourism cooperation called "boundary symbiosis" in the Dabie Mountains region, where the government leads, enterprises operate, and communities participate. Scholars like Ma Yong (1996) emphasized the importance of regional tourism cooperation in the construction of large tourism circles. Chen Shulan and Liu Liping (2008) proposed a multi-level tourism center-based spatial layout for central China tourism cooperation, aiming to build a multi-level tourism

circle centered around regional tourism cooperation, and establish a "three verticals and three horizontals" main trunk as the main tourism channel for developing regional tourism economic belts. Scholars like Li Yongheng, Li Hongfei, and Luo Qing (2020) analyzed the current situation of tourism resources and government cooperation in the southern Sichuan region, and explored high-speed railway cooperation mechanisms and urban agglomeration integration.

Chinese scholars have conducted theoretical explorations on spatial cooperation among tourism destinations in China and have established development models suitable for such cooperation through extensive empirical analysis. Taking the three major water town ancient towns in southern Jiangsu as a case study, Tao Wei and Dai Guangquan (2022) proposed the "competitive cooperation model" for adjacent regional tourism development. Building on this "competitive cooperation model," Xie Jianghong (2008) put forward the "strategic alliance" model [6]. Yin Yimei (2003) argued that in the tourism market, regional combinations, product combinations, market leadership, government leadership, and regional participation should be adopted. Yang Rongbin (2005) constructed a model of regional tourism cooperation mechanism and conducted a classification study on its development environment. From a geographical perspective, five models were proposed: point-axis development model, single nucleus radiation model, dual nucleus linkage model, core-periphery model, and network model[7].

2.2. Theoretical Research on International Regional Tourism Cooperation

Foreign theoretical analyses on regional tourism cooperation indicate that the most important aspect of cooperation is the mutual interests of the parties involved. In 1984, American scholar Freeman introduced the concept of stakeholders in his book "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach" and applied it to the research of regional tourism cooperation[8]. Subsequently, scholars like Robinson and Ritchie conducted explorations on stakeholder theory in tourism cooperation in the 1990s. As (2004) and Magnoni (2007) used the example of Laotian and Mayan cultural heritage to illustrate that collaboration among stakeholders can promote the benign interaction between heritage preservation and tourism. Philip (2008) conducted a survey on two major tourism companies in the UK and argued that tourism development should be centered around people, demonstrating the potential of establishing open spaces for partnership in tourism cooperation.

Furthermore, foreign scholars have also explored the issue of regional tourism cooperation from the perspective of communities. "Tourism: A Community Approach" by Murphy in the 1980s emphasized the importance of community factors in tourism development[9]. Western scholars first regarded community involvement in tourism as a planning approach, highlighting the participation of local governments, residents, planners, and experts as stakeholders[9]. However, research on community involvement in China is relatively behind compared to European and American countries. Despite some research achievements, the theoretical framework for community involvement in tourism development that fits the Chinese context is still lacking.

At the practical level, the research on community and people's participation in tourism planning abroad has also made great progress, and on this basis, some suggestions are put forward. For example: management skills, including information exchange, education and support; Citizen-led skills, including complementary decision-making, representative inputs (positive processes), representative outputs (negative processes) (Marien Pizam 1997).

Western scholars have taken community as a means by which it is fully involved in tourism planning and tourism decision-making so that it can play a maximum role in the actual development and management, and thus maximize its role in tourism decision-making (Inskeep1991:29). On this basis, we further realized that community is a special element in destination growth management. Community engagement is an effective form of planning and

a good way to connect people and nature, Wall notes, noting that sustainable tourism emphasizes community engagement so that communities can share the benefits equally.

3. Current Status of the Hukou Waterfall

The Hukou Waterfall is located in the central section of the Jinshan Great Gorge in the Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces, in the southern part of the Yellow River's main flow basin[10]. It is a cataract erosion waterfall and spans two provinces, with Ji County in Shanxi covering an area of 78 square kilometers and He County in Shaanxi covering over 100 square kilometers. The Hukou Waterfall is the largest golden waterfall and the second largest waterfall in China. It is situated on the Loess Plateau, and the Yellow River carries a large amount of sediment from Hekou Town to Longmen, with an average annual sediment discharge of 9.08 billion tons, accounting for 55.7% of the total sediment discharged by the Yellow River each year. Running through Togto County in Inner Mongolia, the Yellow River flows south into the Jinshan Valley due to the obstruction of the Lvliang Mountain Range. This creates a riverbed with a vertical drop of 300-400 meters, which abruptly narrows into a gorge only 20 meters wide at the Hukou section. The water then plunges down from a height of over 20 meters, resembling a massive pouring from a gigantic pot, presenting a breathtaking and magnificent sight. The Hukou Scenic Area, with an approximate area of 178 square kilometers, is located near the Hukou Waterfall. It is about 45 kilometers east of Ji County, Shanxi, 49 kilometers west of He County, Shaanxi, and is adjacent to locations such as Mafen Beach to the north, Xiaochuanwo to the south, the Yellow River Valley to the west, and Renzu Mountain to the east[10]. The Hukou Waterfall, as the main attraction of the scenic area, not only captivates visitors with its stunning and majestic scenery but also offers a geological wonder rarely seen elsewhere – the "dry-land boating" spectacle. The entire scenic area consists of four major sections: the Hukou Waterfall, Kepo Slope, Zhongshi, and Xiaochuanwo. The Yellow River Hukou Waterfall boasts a rich historical and cultural heritage. It has also left behind many geologically significant relics in its unique environment, providing valuable support for historical research and geographical development.

4. Theoretical Framework for Cross-provincial Regional Tourism Cooperation

4.1. Current Situation in Shaanxi Province, Hukou Waterfall

The Hukou Waterfall in Yichuan County, Shaanxi, is a magnificent main waterfall with a golden color. The rushing Yellow River flows down the riverbed, creating a 20 to 30-meter-wide "dragon trough" resembling a pot mouth, called the "Deng of Nine Rivers." According to legend, these two islands were originally a single mountain and a single river. During the flood control work by Yu the Great, the islands were split in two, allowing the river to flow smoothly. Over thousands of years, the waterfall has been flowing upstream, creating a "Ten-Mile Dragon Trough" with a width between 30 to 50 meters and a depth of 10 to 20 meters. From a distance, it resembles a massive dragon, with Hukou as its head, the "Ten-Mile Dragon Trough" as its body, and Mengmen as its tail.

Yichuan County, Shaanxi, has its own official website where tourists can access real-time information about the scenic area, ticketing, and other operations. The official website recommends transportation routes to the scenic area from Beijing, Taiyuan in Shanxi, Xi'an, and Yan'an, serving as axes of growth, catering to different transportation options such as self-driving, air travel, high-speed trains, and regular trains. The website provides detailed introductions, matching the different choices, and indicating city names at each station and which exit to take on the expressway or which subway line to board, along with approximate

travel times. Based on the recommended hub-and-spoke routes, the website expands and recommends nearby attractions to visitors.

Under the red revolutionary background in Yan'an, Shaanxi launched a large-scale immersive symphony performance called "The Great Chorus of the Yellow River" in 2017, showcasing the unique natural beauty of the Hukou Waterfall. Through visual, auditory, and sensory presentations, the performance highlights the Yellow River culture, including folk customs and the revolutionary spirit, showcasing the excellence and inheritance of red culture and the revolutionary spirit.

4.2. Current Situation in Shanxi Province, Hukou Waterfall

The Hukou Waterfall exhibits different scenery in each season. It presents eight natural landscapes: Thunder Over Dry Fields, Ten-Mile Dragon Trough, Inverted Ice, Rain in Clear Sky, Mountain Leaping from Sea, Neon Playing with Water, Dry-Land Boating, and Smoke in the Lake. These landscapes showcase the ethnic music, the spirit of China moving forward, and the brilliance of the Yellow River culture, making it known as the "Heart of the Yellow River and Soul of the Nation."

Ji County in Shanxi has also established an official website for the Hukou Waterfall, organizing visitor tours into two categories: general tours and themed tours. The management strictly follows the relevant regulations of the "Tourism Management Measures," focusing on the protection of ecological resources within the scenic area. They provide visitors with the best tour routes according to their actual situations. The half-day, one-day, and two-day itineraries mainly cover attractions such as the Ten-Mile Dragon Trough, Three-Way Falls, Two-Way Falls, the Core Waterfall, and Kepo Slope. Visitors can watch performances and participate in authentic local and military experiences at the visitor center in these tour routes. The official website also showcases the unique features of Ji County, such as characteristic Sausage Noodles, Yellow River Carp, and Jizhou Stir-Fry, providing visitors with more choices and a better experience. It allows visitors to maximize their time and enjoy the highlights of Shanxi's scenery and cultural experiences centered around the Hukou Waterfall.

Furthermore, Shanxi Tourism Development Commission has launched a new tourism package called "One Group, Two Areas, Three Circles, and Three Routes." One of the "Three Circles" focuses on the development of high-quality urban circles in the north, south, and southeastern part of Shanxi. The southern circle, relying on transportation arteries such as West Yu Expressway and Yunfeng Expressway, forms a tourism route for the southern Shanxi tourism circle, linking attractions such as the Hukou Waterfall, Wulao Peaks, and Guandi Temple, connecting Linfen and Yuncheng. The promotion of Shanxi's tourism attraction and the integration of tourist sites within Shanxi are emphasized.

4.3. Core-periphery Theory

The planning of tourism resources that span multiple administrative regions is meant to ensure the ecological security of the scenic area and maximize the coordination and integration of the entire area, regardless of geographic limitations and for better development and utilization. The development of any economic activity requires a certain theoretical basis. In the process of developing regional tourism resources across administrative regions, the core-periphery theory and hub-and-spoke theory provide good explanations from the perspective of regional economics and organizational studies for the cooperation of tourism resources across administrative regions[10].

In 1966, Friedman published his book "Regional Development Policy" based on his studies of the evolution of regional development characteristics in Venezuela, systematically proposing the core-periphery theoretical model[11]. Friedman believed that a country consists of a central area and a peripheral area. The central area is composed of one or more cities and its

surrounding regions. The boundary is determined by the relationship between the core and the periphery. Based on the core-periphery theory, the theory indicates the imbalanced development of the "core" and "periphery" in regional economic development. In general, the core takes a dominant position while the periphery relies on the development of the core.

The core-periphery theory provides a fundamental theoretical basis for spatial collaboration and research in tourism-related fields. It combines this spatial relationship with the stages of economic development, integrating with other regional economic theories such as growth pole theory and hub-and-spoke theory[11]. It provides a series of theoretical tools for regional planners.

Due to its geographical location and administrative division, Hukou Waterfall is managed separately by two regions, each with its own planning and management approach for tourism resources. However, the core waterfall remains the most attractive subjective attraction for tourists in both provinces. Surrounding attractions such as the Mount Renzushan Ecological and Cultural Area, Caijiachuan Forest Park, Jinpingshan Park, and Shizitan Heritage Park have shorter visit durations, as most tourists allocate the majority of their time to the core waterfall. The development of different attractions within Hukou Waterfall is uneven, and the surrounding tourism areas exhibit a dispersed distribution despite being abundant. There is a weak complementarity between Hukou Waterfall and its surrounding tourism areas, with minimal integration, resulting in low attractiveness for visitors[12].

Moreover, due to the differences in geographical location, regional development and other factors, the economic basis of the two places is different. Due to the rich tourism resources in Shaanxi Province, Yichuan County formed a relatively "developed area" in the process of developing Hukou Waterfall, which is due to the huge benefits Yichuan County gets from Hukou Waterfall scenery area. Although Yichuan County is located in the center of the "core-edge" system, it still cannot break away from the relatively "underdeveloped" Jixian County in planning and development. For a common tourism resource, whether it is the protection of ecological environment, or the development and promotion, it is a common problem faced by the two regions. Tourists come from all directions to visit Hukou Waterfall, as the core of tourism, Yan 'an City, Xi 'an City, Taiyuan City as the point, the Yellow River as the axis, the integration of various scenic spots, Shaanxi and Shanxi characteristics of the tourist areas of the two layers of the extension formed by the point and surface, layer by layer to promote the structure, forming a unified tourism whole.

5. Issues after the Successful Application for 5A Status

5.1. Development Approach of the Scenic Area

Due to the influence of the natural environment, the Hukou Waterfall is managed and developed separately by Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces. This means that when tourists visit the core waterfall area, they cannot cross to the other side of the waterfall; they can only view the main waterfall from their respective provincial areas. This greatly impacts the tourist experience. If visitors want to see the entire Hukou Waterfall, they need to re-purchase tickets and travel a distance of about 4.5 kilometers, causing inconvenience. The division of a complete scenic area into two parts gives the impression of two separate entities without any connection[14].

5.2. Limited Diversity of Scenic Area Products

Most visitors to the Hukou Waterfall focus solely on the main waterfall, overlooking other attractions and the unique culture of the two provinces. As visitors' awareness and experiences evolve, they no longer settle for simple admiration but seek to participate in tourism projects with local characteristics.

5.3. Discrepancies in Ticket Pricing

Although ticket prices are uniformly set, some large travel agencies lower prices to attract more tourists. This intensifies unhealthy competition, with agencies offering larger discounts than others, leading to a vicious cycle of damaging the interests of all parties and the Hukou Waterfall itself. Some local residents even sell tickets at lower prices. This is detrimental to the sustainable and healthy development of the scenic area.

5.4. Lack of Unified Planning

The Hukou Waterfall was designated as a 5A scenic area in 2022. However, there are still only two provinces involved, each with its own unique features. As a result, the main features on either side of the Hukou Waterfall are blurry and lack consistency, minimizing the complementary nature between the waterfall and the surrounding eco-tourism areas. The integration of the two provinces is limited, affecting the attractiveness of the scenic area. Shanxi uses the slogan "China's Second Largest Waterfall," while Shaanxi adopts the slogan "The World's Largest Golden Waterfall"[13]. Such inconsistent slogans have a significant impact on increasing the visibility of the scenic area, reducing its promotional effectiveness. Both Shanxi and Shaanxi have separate official websites for the Hukou Waterfall, each promoting only their own portion of the waterfall.

6. Optimization Strategy of Regional Tourism Cooperation

6.1. Establishing a Pedestrian Bridge Spanning the Yellow River to View the Waterfall

To effectively integrate and utilize the Hukou Waterfall tourism resources, the two provinces should jointly construct a floating bridge spanning the Yellow River. The construction of the bridge should ensure stability, safety, and harmony with the natural conditions of the Hukou Waterfall. It should be strategically located to allow for convenient transportation, providing visitors with the opportunity to appreciate the magnificent scenery of the Hukou Waterfall from both sides of the river, and experience the local culture and customs of the Shanxi and Shaanxi regions. The floating bridge serves multiple purposes: it facilitates transportation between the two riverbanks, enabling visitors to have a comprehensive and multi-dimensional view of the Hukou Waterfall and gain a deeper understanding of the local culture. During flood seasons, the floating bridge also serves as a means of protection to ensure the safety of residents and tourists. Additionally, the bridge can connect other significant attractions in the vicinity, forming a circular tourism route and promoting a unified and holistic tourism experience.

6.2. Establishment of a Joint Management Office for Hukou Waterfall in Shanxi and Shaanxi

To resolve conflicts and differences, prioritize long-term and sustainable tourism development, overcome local protectionism and self-interest, and take into account the local conditions, it is recommended to establish a joint management office for the Hukou Waterfall, which includes representatives from Yichuan County in Shaanxi and Ji County in Shanxi. The office should strictly enforce regulations on ticket pricing discrepancies. It should go beyond the existing administrative boundaries and management fragmentation, adopt innovative thinking, and explore a new interactive operational mechanism to protect and develop the Hukou Waterfall to its fullest potential.

6.3. Diversify the Development of the Hukou Waterfall

To enhance the tourist experience, activities other than viewing the waterfall from the riverbank should be introduced. In Shaanxi, the large-scale symphony performance "The Great Chorus of the Yellow River" should be presented to allow visitors to delve into the Yellow River

culture from visual, auditory, and sensory perspectives. This cultural event showcases the local folk customs and the spirit of revolution and salvation. In Shanxi, similar models can be explored, including traditional folk dance performances, local song festivals, and other cultural experiences that highlight the uniqueness of the region. These diversified activities promote the transmission of local cultural values and provide tourists with more comprehensive and engaging experiences[14].

According to different seasons, specific themed events can be organized to attract more visitors. The government's role should be maximized by actively adjusting the product mix, seizing opportunities, utilizing the cultural resources of the scenic area, improving the product structure, and integrating it with the development of the "Internet Plus" model to generate various new tourism products. For example, the Hukou Waterfall Cultural Festival, Hukou Cultural Exchange Festival, Hukou Waterfall Photography Festival, and Hukou Fishing Festival can be developed and promoted.

Efforts should also be made to enhance the interpretation of geological and cultural aspects surrounding the Hukou Waterfall. Well-trained interpreters can provide informative presentations to visitors, introducing not only the waterfall but also the surrounding landscapes and cultural heritage.

6.4. Building the Shanxi-Shaanxi Hukou Brand and Strengthening Promotion of Attractions along the Hub-and-Spoke Route

To shape the overall tourism image of the Shanxi-Shaanxi region and enhance promotion, it is recommended to package and design tourism resources within the Shanxi-Shaanxi Yellow River region as a unified whole[15]. This will create an exclusive branding for the Hukou Waterfall and contribute to the formation of a Yellow River tourism belt with the Yellow River culture as the main theme. By boosting overall tourism competitiveness, this strategy promotes the implementation of the hub-and-spoke development model. Simultaneously, Shanxi and Shaanxi should collaborate in the establishment of marketing goals. The main cities of Shanxi and Shaanxi should serve as primary markets, and the major attractions within the provinces, centered around the Hukou Waterfall, should be collectively promoted and highlighted. The primary secondary market extends northward, targeting key markets such as Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei. Along the hub-and-spoke route, attractions in various provinces also become choices for tourists visiting the Hukou Waterfall. For example, attractions like the Jiulong Gorge in Hebei and the Kongshan Scenic Area can be recommended to visitors. These attractions along the hub-and-spoke route are showcased and promoted on the current Hukou Waterfall official website. While promoting the Shanxi-Shaanxi Hukou brand, it is also necessary to provide a comprehensive overview of the attractions along the hub-and-spoke route.

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