



A Review of Cultural Heritage Tourism Research on the Death Railway in Thailand

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Abstract: This article critically discusses the Death Railway in Thailand as a cultural heritage tourism landscape rather than merely as a wartime remnant or dark tourism attraction. Focusing on Kanchanaburi, it examines how the railway has been reinterpreted through museums, memorial spaces, railway journeys, visitor experience, local tourism development, and heritage governance. The discussion argues that the Death Railway's contemporary value lies in the interaction between historical memory, interpretation, development, and governance. It concludes that Thailand's future use of the Death Railway should balance tourism development with historical responsibility, stronger museum interpretation, local participation, and more inclusive remembrance of both prisoners of war and Asian labourers.

Keywords: Death Railway; Thailand-Burma Railway; cultural heritage tourism; Kanchanaburi; museum interpretation; heritage governance

1.Introduction

Thailand's tourism development has increasingly moved beyond conventional sightseeing and leisure consumption toward a stronger emphasis on cultural heritage, historical experience, and place-based identity. As one of Southeast Asia's major tourism destinations, Thailand has long relied on beaches, natural landscapes, Buddhist culture, festivals, local lifestyles, and hospitality services to attract visitors. However, the changing structure of tourism demand has encouraged destinations to develop deeper cultural

meanings and more diversified heritage products. Cultural heritage tourism requires a balance between heritage conservation, interpretation, visitor experience, and tourism development, because heritage resources may fail to achieve either their cultural value or tourism potential when these dimensions are disconnected (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). In Kanchanaburi Province, cultural heritage tourism has also been examined in relation to local identity, cultural sustainability, and quality tourist demand, indicating the province's broader relevance for heritage-based

tourism development (Dharawanij, 2020).

Within Thailand's heritage tourism system, historical sites associated with war, transportation, memory, and local identity occupy a distinctive position. They are not merely physical remains of the past, but cultural resources through which historical knowledge, public memory, and regional development are connected. The Death Railway in Kanchanaburi is a representative example of this type of heritage. As part of the Thailand–Burma Railway constructed during the Second World War, it is closely related to wartime history, forced labour, prisoners of war, Asian labourers, and transnational commemoration. At the same time, the railway, the Bridge over the River Kwai, Hellfire Pass, war cemeteries, museums, and surrounding tourism services have gradually formed a cultural heritage tourism landscape that supports Kanchanaburi's destination image and local tourism economy. Arrunnapaporn (2012) identifies the Death Railway as an atrocity heritage tourism site, showing that its tourism value is inseparable from wartime suffering, historical memory, and heritage interpretation.

The practical significance of the Death Railway lies in its dual role as both a sensitive human heritage site and a tourism development resource. On the one hand, it carries memories of suffering, loss, military occupation, and human endurance, which require respectful interpretation and careful preservation. On the other hand, it has become one of the most recognizable heritage attractions in western Thailand, contributing to museum visitation, railway tourism, guided tours, local businesses, and regional cultural branding. This dual role creates a realistic challenge for Thailand's heritage tourism development: how to

integrate the Death Railway into cultural tourism and local development while maintaining historical seriousness, interpretive accuracy, heritage authenticity, and respect for diverse memories. This concern is consistent with broader debates on cultural heritage tourism and authenticity, which emphasize that tourism development should not weaken the cultural meaning and conservation value of heritage resources (Riddhagni, 2018).

Existing studies have discussed the Death Railway from perspectives such as dark tourism, war memory, visitor experience, museum interpretation, and memorial landscapes. These studies have provided important insights into the historical and emotional meanings of the site. Nevertheless, the literature remains relatively fragmented, and many discussions still focus heavily on wartime tragedy, touristification, or international visitor memory. Husa (2023) further shows that the Thai–Burma Death Railway has been discussed in relation to dark tourism, commodification, and the politics of memory, suggesting that its tourism development cannot be separated from questions of representation and interpretation. However, less attention has been given to how the Death Railway functions within Thailand's broader cultural heritage tourism system, especially in relation to Thai local development, heritage governance, museum-based interpretation, community participation, and the balance between preservation and tourism use.

Therefore, the Death Railway needs to be reconsidered not only as a dark tourism site or wartime remnant, but as a cultural heritage tourism landscape embedded in Thailand's local development, public memory, museum interpretation, and heritage governance. This article offers a critical and

integrative discussion of the Death Railway in this broader context. It aims to clarify how the site has been transformed into a cultural heritage tourism resource, how its meanings are mediated through museums and memorial spaces, and how Thailand may balance historical responsibility, local tourism development, and sustainable heritage governance.

2.Literature Review

The Death Railway in Thailand requires an interpretive lens that is broader than any single category of dark tourism, war heritage, or railway heritage. Cultural heritage tourism provides an important starting point because it emphasizes the relationship between heritage conservation, visitor experience, cultural meaning, and local development (Garrod & Fyall, 2000). Heritage tourism is also shaped by the meanings that visitors attach to a place, rather than by the physical existence of historical remains alone (Poria et al., 2003). This perspective is particularly useful for understanding the Death Railway, because its contemporary significance is produced through the interaction of wartime memory, museum interpretation, visitor movement, local tourism development, and public recognition. At the same time, the railway is closely associated with death, forced labour, prisoners of war, Asian labourers, military occupation, and transnational commemoration. Dark tourism and war-related heritage perspectives therefore remain necessary for understanding why the site attracts visitors and why its interpretation requires ethical care (Stone, 2006). However, the Death Railway cannot be reduced to dark tourism, since historically sensitive sites may also serve educational, commemorative, cultural, and developmental functions

when they are interpreted responsibly (Light, 2017).

In this article, the Death Railway is understood as a railway-based cultural heritage landscape rather than a railway line in a narrow physical sense. It includes the remaining sections of the Thailand–Burma Railway, the Bridge over the River Kwai, Hellfire Pass, war cemeteries, memorial museums, railway journeys, guided tours, and surrounding tourism services. This broader definition is necessary because visitors rarely encounter the Death Railway as an isolated historical object. They experience it through a network of material traces, museum narratives, commemorative spaces, scenic routes, and local tourism practices. The Death Railway has been identified as a significant atrocity heritage tourism site in Southeast Asia, and its cultural value is closely connected with historical suffering and heritage interpretation (Arrunnapaporn, 2012). The interpretation and development of new tourism destinations along the Death Railway have also been linked to cultural significance, community participation, and public understanding, which further supports the need to view the railway as a cultural heritage landscape rather than as a single attraction (Arrunnapaporn, 2011).

Different strands of discussion illuminate different dimensions of this heritage landscape. Studies of historical memory highlight the railway as a material witness to the Second World War and to the suffering of prisoners of war and Asian labourers (Arrunnapaporn, 2012). Studies of museum and memorial interpretation show that the meaning of the railway is shaped through exhibitions, photographs, artefacts, walking trails, cemeteries, guided narratives, and memorial spaces. Kanchanaburi's Thai–Burma Railway attractions have also been criticized for

containing disputed narratives and for sometimes simplifying or distorting history in order to develop dark tourism potential (Lennon, 2018). This concern resonates with broader dark heritage research, where visitor experience, emotional engagement, and interpretive framing influence how people understand places associated with death and suffering (Biran et al., 2011). At the same time, the Death Railway has become a recognizable tourism resource for Kanchanaburi, supporting railway rides, museum visitation, guided tours, local businesses, and regional destination branding. This tourism function brings economic and educational possibilities, but it also raises questions of staged authenticity, simplified storytelling, and selective representation when heritage is transformed into visitor-oriented products (Chhabra et al., 2003). The touristification and commodification of the Thai–Burma Death Railway have therefore become inseparable from the politics of remembrance and interpretation (Husa, 2023).

What needs to be emphasized is not simply that the literature is fragmented, but that the Death Railway can be misunderstood when one perspective dominates all others. A dark tourism perspective explains the attraction of suffering, but it does not fully account for the site's role in education, local identity, and Thai cultural tourism development. International prisoner-of-war memory is central to the railway's global significance, but it should not obscure Asian labour memory or Thai local participation. Tourism development is important for Kanchanaburi, but it must remain connected to authenticity, interpretation, and heritage responsibility. Stakeholder collaboration is especially important for heritage management when conservation needs, tourism use, community interests,

and institutional responsibilities overlap (Aas et al., 2005). The Death Railway therefore needs to be read as a complex cultural heritage tourism landscape in which memory, interpretation, development, and governance are inseparable.

3. Analytical Logic

The analytical logic of this article follows the title's central concern: the Death Railway is discussed as a cultural heritage tourism phenomenon in Thailand. Rather than treating the railway as a single historical relic, a purely dark tourism attraction, or an isolated war memorial, the discussion places it within the wider relationship between heritage memory, tourism interpretation, local development, and cultural governance. The logic begins with the historical origin of the railway as a wartime infrastructure and then examines how this difficult past has been reorganized through museums, memorial spaces, railway journeys, and tourism services in Kanchanaburi. It then considers the tension between heritage protection and tourism development, especially the risk that historical suffering may be simplified when it becomes part of visitor consumption. On this basis, the article moves toward a more integrated understanding of the Death Railway as a dynamic cultural heritage tourism system, in which memory, interpretation, development, and governance are closely connected.

4. Results

The Death Railway in Thailand has moved far beyond its original status as a wartime railway remnant. In the historical sense, it was a military infrastructure project produced under the conditions of the Second World War, forced labour, prisoners of war, Asian labourers, and wartime occupation. Yet in contemporary Kanchanaburi, its

meaning is no longer confined to the railway track itself. The Death Railway is now encountered through a wider cultural heritage landscape composed of the Bridge over the River Kwai, Hellfire Pass, war cemeteries, museums, memorial trails, railway journeys, guided narratives, and surrounding tourism services. These elements do not simply preserve the past; they reorganize the past into a visible, visitable, and interpretable heritage system. The railway's contemporary value therefore comes not only from what remains physically, but also from how those remains are connected to memory, education, tourism experience, and local identity.

This transformation reveals that the Death Railway has become a cultural heritage tourism landscape rather than a single historical object. The bridge provides strong symbolic visibility, Hellfire Pass gives the memory of labour and suffering a powerful spatial form, the cemeteries anchor the site in commemoration, and museums translate fragmented historical traces into organized public knowledge. Railway journeys and guided tours further turn the route into an embodied visitor experience. Through these interconnected spaces, tourists do not simply observe an old railway; they enter a constructed field of memory in which war history, landscape, mobility, and interpretation overlap. This is why the Death Railway cannot be fully understood as only a dark tourism attraction. It is also a human heritage site, a museum-based educational resource, a local tourism asset, and a symbolic landscape of Kanchanaburi.

Museum and memorial interpretation is central to this process. The historical meaning of the Death Railway is not self-evident to visitors. Without explanation, a bridge may appear only as a landmark, a railway

journey may become only a scenic experience, and a former cutting such as Hellfire Pass may be reduced to a dramatic landscape. Museums, memorial centres, cemeteries, interpretive panels, photographs, artefacts, walking routes, and guide narratives give historical depth to these spaces. They explain who built the railway, under what conditions it was constructed, why it became associated with suffering, and how different groups remember it today. In this sense, interpretation is not a secondary supplement to the site. It is the mechanism through which the Death Railway becomes meaningful as heritage.

At the same time, the cultural tourism development of the Death Railway also creates a clear tension between heritage protection and tourism consumption. For Kanchanaburi, the Death Railway has obvious tourism value. It supports railway tourism, museum visitation, guided tours, local transport, accommodation, restaurants, souvenirs, and regional destination branding. It also helps distinguish Kanchanaburi from other Thai destinations that are more strongly associated with beaches, temples, shopping, or leisure travel. However, this development value is inseparable from a sensitive historical foundation. If tourism interpretation becomes too simplified, the site may be consumed as a visual attraction rather than understood as a place of wartime memory. If commercial packaging becomes too dominant, the difficult history of forced labour, death, and unequal remembrance may be weakened. The central issue is therefore not whether the Death Railway should be developed for tourism, but how it can be developed without reducing historical suffering into spectacle or entertainment.

This tension also exposes the need for a stronger Thai-centered heritage

governance perspective. Much attention has been given to international memory, Allied prisoner-of-war narratives, dark tourism, and visitor experience, but the Death Railway is also a Thai heritage and tourism space. Its preservation, interpretation, operation, and future recognition take place within Thai local society, Thai tourism development, and Thai cultural heritage governance. Local government, museums, tour guides, residents, tourism businesses, educational institutions, and community stakeholders all shape how the site is maintained and presented. Yet these local actors are often less visible than international memory groups in discussions of the railway. Similarly, Asian labourers and local memories remain less prominent than Allied prisoner-of-war narratives, even though they are essential to the historical meaning of the railway.

Seen in this way, the Death Railway is best understood as a dynamic cultural heritage tourism system. Its contemporary value is formed through the interaction of four dimensions: historical memory, heritage interpretation, local development, and governance. Memory gives the site its moral and historical foundation; interpretation transforms that memory into public understanding; development connects the site to Kanchanaburi's tourism economy and destination identity; and governance determines whether these elements can be balanced responsibly. This logic leads to the Memory–Interpretation–Development–Governance framework proposed in the following section.

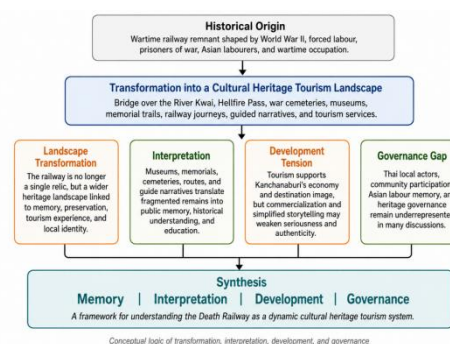


Figure 1. Conceptual Logic of the Death Railway as a Dynamic Cultural Heritage Tourism System

Based on these findings, a further practical implication is that the Death Railway should not only be managed as a tourism attraction, but also actively interpreted as a shared historical memory involving multiple groups. Current tourism practices often make the Bridge over the River Kwai highly visible as a landmark, while the experiences of Asian labourers, including Chinese, Malay, Javanese, Thai, Burmese, and other local workers, remain comparatively underrepresented in public interpretation. This imbalance may lead visitors to consume the site mainly through photography, souvenirs, and brief sightseeing, without developing a deeper understanding of the human suffering and multi-ethnic labour history behind the railway. Therefore, Thailand's Death Railway heritage tourism needs a more inclusive interpretation framework. Museums, memorial centres, local authorities, tour operators, and guides should work together to develop clearer historical explanation guidelines that include both Allied prisoners of war and Asian labourers. Such guidelines do not need to turn every tour into a lengthy historical lecture, but they should ensure that even short guide narratives explain the basic historical background, the diversity of labour groups, the human cost of construction, and the ethical meaning of remembrance. At the same time, future heritage work should place

greater value on Asian-language sources, Chinese-language materials, local oral histories, and family memories, because these materials may help recover historical voices that have been less visible in English-language and prisoner-of-war-centred narratives. In this sense, the future development of the Death Railway should move beyond symbolic consumption and toward responsible historical education, allowing tourism to become a medium for more inclusive remembrance rather than a process that further simplifies the past.

5. Conclusion

The Death Railway has gradually moved from a wartime railway remnant into a complex cultural heritage tourism landscape shaped by historical memory, museum interpretation, visitor experience, and local development. Its significance cannot be reduced either to a dark tourism attraction or to a conventional tourism resource, because its tourism value is inseparable from the difficult history of forced labour, wartime suffering, and unequal remembrance. The central issue is therefore how this heritage can be interpreted and developed without weakening its historical seriousness. In Kanchanaburi, museums, memorial spaces, railway journeys, and guided narratives have already made the Death Railway part of the local tourism system, but its future value depends on stronger interpretive responsibility, more inclusive memory representation, and more coordinated heritage governance. A balanced approach should allow the site to support cultural tourism and local development while also preserving its function as a place of remembrance, education, and human reflection. In this sense, the Death Railway provides an important case for understanding how historically sensitive heritage can be

integrated into Thailand's cultural tourism development without losing its moral and historical depth.

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