

# The Historical Development and Strategic Change of Wuhan Exhibition Tourism

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**Abstract:** As a new form of tourism product that emerged in the 1980s, exhibition and conference tourism has seen rapid development in China since the 1990s. The promotion of exhibition and conference tourism can enhance the reputation and popularity of a region or city, improve urban facilities, and facilitate exchanges and cooperation between regions, significantly boosting economic and social development. In this context, this paper takes Wuhan as a case study to preliminarily explore the basic connotations of exhibition and conference tourism, as well as the advantages and disadvantages, opportunities and challenges of developing such tourism in Wuhan. Based on these findings, some policy recommendations are proposed to support the vigorous development of exhibition and conference tourism in Wuhan.

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## 1.Introduction

Since the introduction of exhibition tourism to China in the 1980s, it has developed rapidly, with an annual growth rate exceeding 30%. Exhibition tourism has generated significant economic benefits for regions and enhanced their reputation. It also drives the development of related industries, playing an irreplaceable role. As more regions and cities join the increasingly competitive exhibition tourism market, exhibition tourism is receiving increasing attention and importance from the tourism industry. In light of this rapid development trend in exhibition tourism, what advantages and shortcomings does Wuhan have? What strategies should be adopted in the future to avoid falling behind and to catch up with the coastal leading cities? This article analyzes these issues and proposes some feasible strategies based on the analysis.

## 2.Literature review

Scholars both domestically and internationally have conducted extensive research on the relationship between rural financial innovation and rural economic growth. Abroad, scholar James Marconi proposed that technology has shown potential in streamlining travel processes, allowing government travelers to focus better on their work rather than the details of the travel process itself, such as booking and submitting expense reports. Scholar <sup>[1]</sup> elaborated on the importance of MICE tourism, its requirements, and the prominent position of MICE tourism in India, arguing that MICE tourism has reached a new level in the development of India's tourism industry. Scholars Mohammad Rahim Esfidani; Mansoureh Vahabzadeh; Maryam Tajalli explored the role of MICE tourism in the sustainable development of the tourism industry. <sup>[3]</sup>

Scholars in China have also conducted in-depth research on this field. Scholar Xu Ying points out that exhibition tourism is a

relatively popular form in the current development of the tourism industry, with good industrial integration and driving effects on industrial development. Due to its ability to generate significant economic and social benefits, it is hailed as the “jewel on the crown of tourism.”<sup>[4]</sup> Scholar Deng Xueli believes that developing exhibition tourism can enhance urban functions, promote and drive economic development, improve the city’s image, increase its fame, strengthen overall competitiveness, and facilitate the alignment of urban economic development with international standards, thus becoming a booster for urban development.<sup>[5]</sup>

In summary, the rapid rise of the exhibition tourism industry will bring enormous economic and social benefits to the exhibition venue, a point that has been unanimously recognized by both domestic and international academic circles. The aforementioned research provides valuable insights for the study of Wuhan’s exhibition tourism, but specific concepts still need further clarification, and the development status of Wuhan’s exhibition tourism requires further research and analysis.

### **3.Characteristics and functions of exhibition tourism**

Exhibition tourism is a form of modern tourism that integrates various activities such as conferences, exhibitions, retail, advertising, and travel. It boasts advantages like large group sizes, high-quality guests, long stays, and strong consumption power. Exhibition tourism, also known as “MICE,” stands for Meetings (Meeting), Conferences (Exhibition), Incentive Travel (Incentive), Trade Fairs (Convention), and Events (Event).<sup>[6]</sup> As the influence of exhibition tourism grows, its scope continues to expand. Chinese scholars and experts generally define exhibition tourism as: attracting a large number of tourists through various types of large-scale exhibitions, expos, trade fairs, sports events, investment promotion meetings, etc., to engage in trade negotiations, sightseeing, technical cooperation, information exchange, mutual visits, and cultural exchanges, thereby promoting the development of related industries. This is a comprehensive form of tourism service, which can be broadly or narrowly defined. Broadly: Exhibition tourism is tourism aimed at meetings and exhibitions, including conference tourism, exhibition tourism, and other forms of tourism and incentive travel for work purposes. Narrowly: Exhibition tourism involves providing services related to the tourism industry beyond the exhibition venues, in addition to hosting meetings and exhibitions, and generating certain economic benefits. The development of exhibition tourism can enhance the reputation and popularity of a region or city, promote improvements in urban facilities, facilitate inter-regional exchanges and cooperation, and significantly boost the economic and social development of the region.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### **3.1 Characteristics of exhibition tourism**

##### **3.1.1 Green and pollution-free**

The exhibition and tourism industry is a green sector that neither consumes energy nor resources nor generates pollution, yet it makes significant contributions to the economy. Compared to traditional industries with high pollution, high energy consumption, and low output, the exhibition and tourism industry, as an emerging tertiary sector, has enormous advantages and should be vigorously developed. Human society has achieved unparalleled brilliant accomplishments but at the cost of immense suffering. With the severity of pollution and the depletion of natural resources, people have begun to recognize the need for harmony with nature. Therefore, the green development model represented by the exhibition and tourism industry in the tertiary sector is increasingly becoming the mainstream of global economic development.

##### **3.1.2 High comprehensive benefits**

The exhibition and tourism industry is characterized by low consumption, high profitability, and high added value, with profit margins typically exceeding 30%. Hosting exhibitions generates significant economic benefits, primarily through direct economic gains from exhibitors and visitors. Additionally, developing the exhibition and tourism sector brings substantial additional revenue. During the event, a large number of participants and tourists gather, leading to extensive consumption in areas such as clothing, food, accommodation, and transportation, which creates substantial profits for the host city.

##### **3.1.3 Great influence**

Large-scale international conferences, exhibitions, expos and trade fairs are the focus of the news media lens, attracting the attention of all aspects of society, especially the upper class elites from home and abroad, greatly enhancing the visibility of the city and expanding the influence of the city.<sup>[8]</sup>

### 3.1.4 Long duration of the event

Generally, the time of a large exhibition is longer, so the duration of the exhibition tourists will be longer than the general tourists, so the pull on the local economy will be stronger than the general tourism industry.

## 3.2 The role of exhibition tourism

Exhibition tourism is a comprehensive and strongly driving emerging industry. Exhibition activities can gather huge flows of information, technology, goods, talent, and capital. As an important direction for the development of the exhibition industry, exhibition tourism has comprehensive and all-round functions and roles, which can be summarized in the following aspects.

### 3.2.1 Provide a face-to-face knowledge information communication platform

With the continuous development of information technology, the platform provided by the exhibition has the advantages of convenience, concentration, intuitiveness and speed. It is a continuation of traditional face-to-face communication and negotiation, as well as an emerging way to obtain information, which plays an irreplaceable role.

### 3.2.2 Promoting economic and trade cooperation

The exhibition and tourism economy is a driving force for the national economy. Business negotiations and transactions are one of the key components and functions of the exhibition economy. Developing the exhibition and tourism industry promotes exchanges and cooperation among various sectors and enterprises in terms of economy, technology, and trade through the establishment of exhibition platforms. At every exhibition, substantial purchase and sales contracts or letters of intent for investment, transfer, and joint ventures are signed concerning products, technologies, and achievements. These contracts or letters of intent facilitate economic and trade cooperation.

### 3.2.3 Promoting the development of related industries

Developing the exhibition and tourism industry involves hosting conferences, exhibitions, and festivals. By leveraging the interaction and diffusion of passenger flow, logistics, information flow, and capital flow, it triggers associated effects. This not only boosts the construction of urban infrastructure and other related hardware facilities but also drives the growing prosperity of industries such as catering, hotels, tourism, transportation, communication, retail, advertising, printing, and logistics. In particular, in cities with superior geographical conditions, the exhibition and tourism industry thrives due to its strong industrial linkages, significant radiation effects, and unique industrial functions. For example, Changchun's exhibition and tourism industry generated direct revenue of 1.17 billion yuan in 2008, driving related industries to generate 10.8 billion yuan in revenue, representing increases of 17.2% and 16.8% respectively over the previous year, exceeding the growth rate of the national economy.<sup>[9]</sup>

### 3.2.4 Increase the number of jobs

The economic model of exhibition tourism can absorb urban unemployed individuals, increase employment opportunities, alleviate urban employment pressure, and promote the city's employment function. The power to absorb employment comes from a tiered team of exhibition enterprises, with core companies at the forefront, supported by some exhibition management departments, industry associations, educational institutions, and related support industries. According to estimates, the 1996 Hannover World Expo in Germany created 100,000 job opportunities, generated profits of 14.5 billion marks, and collected 4.5 billion marks in taxes; in Hong Kong, one year's worth of exhibition activities can provide over 9,000 job opportunities for residents. At the same time, related enterprises along the exhibition industry chain also offer more job opportunities.<sup>[10]</sup>

### 3.2.5 Improve the visibility of the city

The connotation of exhibition tourism is rich and its scope broad, with diverse forms of organization. Developing the exhibition tourism industry can further enhance a city's international reputation and appeal through the successful operation of various exhibitions, especially large-scale renowned ones. This is one of the most effective ways and channels to showcase the city's charm and image, expand its influence, and attract external investment. It also facilitates the coordinated development of other industries.

Due to the inherent nature and characteristics of exhibition tourism, it generates significant economic benefits. By hosting various forms and scales of exhibitions, expos, trade fairs, and business negotiations, it drives the development of other related industries in the city, such as accommodation, catering, and social services, thereby promoting urban economic growth

and increasing employment. Exhibition tourism not only brings about positive economic effects but also plays a role in advancing other aspects of urban development.

## **4. Analysis of the development of exhibition and tourism in Wuhan**

### **4.1 Advantages of Wuhan exhibition and tourism**

#### **4.1.1 Wuhan's unique geographical advantages**

Wuhan is located in the heart of China and has been known as the “Thoroughfare of Nine Provinces” since ancient times, boasting an extremely prominent geographical advantage. Wuhan sits in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, on the eastern part of the Jiangnan Plain. Its shape resembles a colorful butterfly flying from west to east. The Yangtze River converges with its largest tributary, the Han River, here, dividing Wuhan into three parts: Hankou, Hanshui, and Wuchang, commonly known as the Three Towns of Wuhan. The terrain of Wuhan is mainly flat, with hills as a supplement, and there are numerous lakes and ponds within the city, earning it the nickname of “City of a Hundred Lakes.” In the economic geography of China, Wuhan holds a superior central position, akin to the celestial point on a Go board, and is hailed as the “heart” of China's economic geography, which facilitates the convergence of people and the development of exhibition and tourism industries.<sup>[11]</sup>

#### **4.1.2 Convenient transportation conditions in Wuhan**

Transportation is a critical factor influencing the development of a city or region. Wuhan boasts a railway network that can reach across the country, with distances to major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Xi'an all within 1,000 kilometers. After the high-speed rail connection, these cities can be reached daily. Wuhan serves as the central hub for shipping in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River and is a designated national water-rail intermodal transport main hub port. It is also the only comprehensive airport in Central China, making it the largest and most advanced aviation port in the region. As the regional economy develops and evolves, Wuhan's advantageous geographical position is becoming increasingly prominent, which will provide significant support for its development as an advanced city for exhibitions and tourism.

#### **4.1.3 Abundant tourism resources**

Wuhan, as an ancient city with a history of thousands of years, boasts abundant natural and cultural tourism resources. With a history spanning 3,500 years, Wuhan is a historic and cultural city in China and one of the birthplaces of Chu culture. Known as an “Excellent Tourist City of China,” Wuhan hosts the Wuhan International Tourism Festival. The city is home to 408 scenic spots and historical sites, including 123 revolutionary memorial sites. Wuhan's natural scenery is unique, with distinct seasons and a rare number of 166 lakes and numerous mountains in a metropolis. The cultural landscape of Wuhan is rich in Chu culture. Rivers crisscross the city, interwoven with lakes and ports, featuring over a hundred hills and 186 lakes, which cover one-fifth of the city's total area, forming a distinctive riverside and lakeside ecological environment. Li Bai once wrote the poem “Blowing the jade flute at Yellow Crane Tower, plum blossoms fall in May in the river city,” hence Wuhan has been known as the River City since ancient times. Wuhan is the site of the Wuchang Uprising during the Xinhai Revolution and is also a renowned educational and scientific city in China, ranking third in the number of universities nationwide. Wuhan's high-tech industry, automotive industry, and trade and commerce play significant roles domestically. It is a key node city in the “Belt and Road” development strategy and the gateway to the Yangtze River Three Gorges Tourism Route. The city is home to three national 5A-level scenic areas: Yellow Crane Tower, East Lake Ecological Tourism Area, and Mulan Cultural Ecological Tourism Area. Wuhan is renowned for its plum blossoms, cherry blossoms, lotus flowers, and azaleas. Events such as the WTA Wuhan Open Tennis Tournament, Wuhan Garden Expo, Han Show, Wanda World Movie Park, Wuhan Happy Valley, and Polar Ocean World are all must-see urban tourism and cultural highlights in Wuhan, making it highly attractive for hosting various exhibitions and events. Therefore, a large number of tourism resources in Wuhan have laid the foundation for the development of exhibition tourism.<sup>[12]</sup>

#### **4.1.4 Rapid economic development**

Wuhan is the largest city in central China, economically prosperous and commercially thriving, ranking eighth in GDP nationwide, surpassing many coastal economically developed cities. Since the central government proposed the “Rise of

Central China” strategy, the six provinces in central China have integrated their resources and developed collaboratively, with Wuhan becoming the “Central Hub,” leading the rise of the region. In 2010, the State Council clarified that Wuhan’s city status had been changed from “an important central city in China” to “a central city in China.” Whether in industry, commerce, finance, or foreign investment, Wuhan has achieved remarkable development results. Wuhan is a significant industrial base in China, with a complete industrial system including steel, automobiles, optoelectronics, chemicals, metallurgy, textiles, shipbuilding, manufacturing, and pharmaceuticals. Wuhan has four pure commercial listed companies: WuShang Group, ZhongShang Group, and ZhongBai Group (the first three forming WuShang Union), as well as HanShang Group. WuShang Group, which went public in 1992, was one of the earliest commercial enterprises to list on the stock market. Wuhan is one of the first cities in China to open up along the Yangtze River and is the preferred city for foreign investment in central and western China. Wuhan is a city that possesses all three elements of financial markets, financial institutions, and financial products. In 2014, Wuhan’s regional GDP (GDP) reached 1,006.948 billion yuan, entering the “trillion-yuan GDP club” of Chinese cities, ranking first in Central China and third among 15 sub-provincial cities. Given that the exhibition industry requires a high level of comprehensive urban strength, it can be said that a thriving economic foundation and superior geographical conditions are favorable conditions for Wuhan’s development of exhibition tourism.

#### **4.1.5 Wuhan exhibition industry has a good momentum of development**

Since the 1980s, the exhibition industry has rapidly developed in Wuhan, showing strong momentum. Currently, Wuhan’s exhibition tourism has reached a certain scale and level of development. The role of exhibition tourism in the city’s national economy is continuously increasing. Wuhan’s exhibition tourism has gained growing recognition and influence both domestically and internationally. It has successfully hosted various types of exhibition tourism activities multiple times, making it a “star city” for exhibition tourism in central China.

### **4.2 Disadvantages of Wuhan exhibition and tourism**

#### **4.2.1 Late start**

Wuhan’s exhibition and tourism industry started late, lagging far behind developed countries and regions in this field. Even compared to coastal cities like Beijing and Shanghai, there is a significant gap. Compared to these areas, Wuhan’s exhibition and tourism industry exhibits prominent issues such as small scale, low quality, poor efficiency, and chaotic management. In Wuhan, various exhibitions of different sizes and types abound. These events vary greatly in scale but generally remain scattered and weak. The inconsistency in the size of these activities, coupled with a lack of effective management and coordination, has led to their decreasing scale and influence. This is extremely detrimental to Wuhan’s future efforts to vigorously develop its exhibition and tourism industry and establish an independent brand for exhibition tourism.

#### **4.2.2 Lack of high-quality exhibition employees**

Currently, in developed countries and regions as well as coastal cities in China, there are already relatively professional exhibition and tourism industry practitioners who provide specialized services for large domestic and international conferences. As a result, the development of the exhibition and tourism industry in these areas is stable and rapid. However, although Wuhan has many universities and a strong talent pool, very few institutions specifically offer programs in exhibitions and tourism. While there are numerous professionals, those with specialized and systematic education in this field are few and far between. Therefore, it is difficult to meet the needs of large-scale high-end exhibition organizations and receptions, gradually losing this market segment and thereby affecting the rapid development of Wuhan’s exhibition and tourism industry and the improvement of organizational service levels. If this continues, it will inevitably impact the entire industry’s development.

### **4.3 Historical opportunities for the development of exhibition and tourism in Wuhan**

#### **4.3.1 Wuhan Municipal Government attaches great importance to the development of exhibition tourism**

In recent years, the Wuhan municipal government has increasingly emphasized the development of the exhibition and tourism industry. This is because developing this sector can significantly improve the urban environment, enhance city infrastructure, promote green urban economies, and boost Wuhan’s overall image. The government’s emphasis means more policy support and resource allocation, which will inject a strong boost into Wuhan’s developing exhibition and tourism economy. This is



sure to increase investors' confidence in investing in the exhibition and tourism industry, presenting a significant positive development for Wuhan's exhibition and tourism sector.

### **4.3.2 The implementation of the western development and central rise strategies has provided a market for the exhibition tourism industry in Wuhan.**

Wuhan, as the leading city in the rise of Central China and a transit hub for the large-scale development of western China, is increasingly prominent. The market for exhibition and tourism it generates is also growing. Various large and medium-sized academic conferences, trade fairs, research visits, and government work meetings, both domestically and internationally, provide excellent markets and conditions for Wuhan to further develop its exhibition and tourism industry.<sup>[13]</sup>

## **4.4 Challenges of Wuhan exhibition and tourism**

### **4.4.1 Competition from surrounding areas and cities**

As a "sunshine-type" industry, the competition for market share in the exhibition and tourism sector is exceptionally fierce. In Wuhan, the capital city of central China, its biggest rival is Changsha. Changsha, also a provincial capital in central China, boasts a rich cultural heritage and renowned tourist attractions. Although the current level of development in Changsha's exhibition economy is not high, various policies and activities aimed at its growth are continuously being implemented. Moreover, despite the proximity of the two cities, Changsha's housing and land prices are much lower than those in Wuhan, giving Changsha a significant advantage in venue leasing and supporting facilities, making it more attractive to investors. Additionally, Changsha has a powerful promotional machine represented by Hunan TV, whose programs have a large following among young people, further enhancing its promotional edge. Therefore, competition from neighboring cities will pose a significant challenge to Wuhan.

### **4.4.2 Low level of urban construction**

Wuhan City has long pursued extensive development in its urbanization process, lacking scientific and effective overall planning. The utilization rate of composite urban construction is low, which hinders the concentrated use of urban resources and affects the city's overall landscape. During the urbanization process, there has been a long-term emphasis on surface projects over underground ones, and primary facilities over supporting ones, leading to a series of urban problems. Various engineering facilities have been repeatedly demolished and rebuilt, causing large-scale urban flooding every year when rainfall is excessive, triggering Wuhan's "sea-viewing" mode. All these issues not only make the city operate at high social costs but also damage the city's overall image and weaken Wuhan's competitiveness.

## **5.Improvement of development strategies for exhibition tourism in Wuhan**

### **5.1 Increase publicity efforts and improve publicity efficiency**

The twenty-first century has entered the age of visual economy, where the old adage "good wine needs no bush" is no longer applicable. The key now lies in how to quickly and effectively capture people's attention. Advertising methods must be diversified and modernized, not only through traditional media such as print, television, and radio, but also through the emerging internet. Most attendees at trade shows are high-end individuals and young people, who have a strong ability to embrace new things. In this "Internet+" era, they primarily obtain information from the internet, making it an increasingly competitive battleground. As the wise man once said, "If you don't occupy the territory of propaganda, your enemies will." Therefore, propaganda is extremely important.

### **5.2 Improve the level of urban construction in Wuhan**

The tourism and travel industry is a high-end service sector; only by building a first-class city can it have top-notch appeal. Wuhan City, with its confluence of two rivers and well-developed water systems, numerous lakes within the city, advanced transportation, and gentle terrain, possesses the conditions for becoming a first-class city. In future urban development plans, the principle of "planning before construction, underground before above-ground, supporting facilities before main structures" should be followed. For already developed urban areas, special funds should be allocated to specifically address "urban ills," focusing on improving drainage systems to rejuvenate the city.<sup>[14]</sup>

### **5.3 Pay attention to personnel training**

Large-scale exhibition organization activities, especially international-level ones, have high requirements for the staff

involved, so it is essential to focus on cultivating highly qualified and professional exhibition talents. Wuhan has numerous universities with abundant educational resources, and this advantage should be leveraged to strengthen cooperation between schools and enterprises, particularly close and friendly collaboration with universities that offer exhibition-related majors. This collaboration can provide internship and part-time job opportunities for students, promoting the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experience, and enhancing students' comprehensive abilities. The goal is to nurture more outstanding talents for Wuhan's exhibition and tourism industry.

#### **5.4 Strengthen the position of exhibition tourism in Wuhan's national economy**

The exhibition and tourism industry is a vital component of modern service sectors, with significant industrial linkages and evident spillover effects. It plays a substantial role in driving and promoting the overall national economic development, often referred to as the "barometer" and "booster" of the national economy. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen the position of the exhibition and tourism industry in Wuhan's national economy in the new era. This can be seen from the increasing support and efforts provided by both the central government and local governments at all levels.

In 2005, the Ministry of Commerce actively promoted legislation for the exhibition economy, soliciting opinions from experts on China's first "Guidelines for the Development of the Exhibition Industry" and taking measures to support key exhibition enterprises and foster well-known exhibition brands. In December 2011, the Ministry of Commerce issued the "Guidelines for Promoting the Development of Exhibition Tourism during the 12th Five-Year Plan Period," which was the first medium-to-long-term guiding document in China's exhibition industry development process. Additionally, at the local level, governments across the country also placed great emphasis on the role of exhibition tourism in the national economy. For example, in 2010, Fujian Province formulated a development plan for exhibition tourism, and in 2011, Beijing released the "Beijing Exhibition Tourism Development Plan for the 12th Five-Year Plan Period."<sup>[15]</sup>

Relatively speaking, the development of exhibition tourism in Wuhan is not satisfactory, so we must constantly strengthen the position of exhibition tourism in Wuhan's national economy. Only in this way can we accelerate the development and realize "overtaking on the curve".

#### **5.5 Lower market access barriers and simplify the government approval system**

Wuhan should formulate relevant policies to lower the entry barriers for private exhibition companies, allowing them to label themselves as organizers in domestically planned exhibitions without relying on state-owned exhibition enterprises. This would significantly boost the enthusiasm of private exhibition companies. Data shows that in Shanghai, private exhibition companies account for as high as 70% to 80%, with their operations spanning the entire exhibition industry chain. In Guangdong, nearly 90% of companies with exhibition qualifications are private enterprises, and in Wuhan, the proportion of private exhibition companies has also exceeded half. Therefore, easing restrictions on private exhibition companies will greatly promote the development of Wuhan's exhibition industry.

The Wuhan municipal government should streamline administrative approval procedures for the exhibition industry, which will greatly promote the development of Wuhan's exhibition sector. For example, on November 21, 2012, the General Office of the State Council issued a reply regarding matters concerning the approval procedures for hosting international economic and trade exhibitions and economic and technical exhibitions within China, reducing the relevant procedures for hosting international exhibitions within the country. The implementation of this measure has yielded excellent results.

### **6. Conclusions**

Throughout the development of the world economy, it is an inevitable trend to develop the service industry represented by the exhibition tourism industry. From abroad to China, from the central government to all levels of local governments, they are accelerating industrial transformation and increasing the proportion of the tertiary industry in the national economy.

Wuhan should seize this opportunity to accelerate the development of its exhibition and tourism industry. Wuhan has significant advantages in location, economy, and hardware and software, including convenient transportation and abundant tourism resources. However, it also faces disadvantages such as a late start and a lack of specialized talent. The Wuhan municipal government's emphasis on the development of the exhibition industry and tourism, along with the implementation of the Western Development and Central Rise strategies, provide market opportunities for Wuhan's exhibition and tourism

sector. At the same time, there are challenges from competition in surrounding areas and the level of urban development. Wuhan needs to make efforts in multiple areas, integrating the development of exhibition tourism with the improvement of urban structure and functions, aiming to establish Wuhan as an excellent national exhibition and tourism city.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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