Local livelihood under different governances of tourism development in China — A case study of Huangshan mountain area

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ABSTRACT

China has considered tourism development as an important policy for reducing rural poverty. However, various governances of tourism development have affected local livelihood in different ways. Here, we assessed local livelihood under the community-based (CBT) and lease-to-operate tourism (LOT) governances in two tourism villages; the Jade and Phoenix valleys located in the World Heritage mountain area of Huangshan. We used the sustainable livelihood approach to assess the local household livelihood assets and institutional arrangements that exist in this area with respect to tourism development. Five capital assets were analyzed according to 15 indicators. Values for natural, physical, human, social, and financial capitals were generally higher for CBT. Overall value for livelihood assets was 0.89 under the CBT compared to 0.51 under the LOT indicating that CBT contributed more to livelihood improvement in the rural area. Therefore, the CBT should be promoted as a policy for poverty alleviation in China.

1. Introduction

As a sustainable development approach, tourism has exerted a tremendous effect on social development, especially in developing countries and remote areas (Ashley & Mitchell, 2005; Rogerson, 2006; O’Sullivan & Jackson, 2002; Saarinen, Rogerson, & Manwa, 2011; Mowforth & Munt, 2015.) According to the Anural Report of
the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2015), tourism has become a leading economic sector contributing to 10% of global GDP and 6% of the world’s total exports every year. This is particularly true in Gambia and Senegal in West African countries, where annual tourists were just about 75,000 to 420,000 people but their revenues from tourism development represent over 50% of total exports in these countries (Telfer & Sharpley, 2015). In China, despite achieving rapid improvement of living standard since the reform by Chinese central government in 1980s, the majority of Chinese people still live in poverty-stricken rural regions, where individual incomes are below the poverty line (Li, Geoffrey, & Stephen, 2008). In December 2015, the National Poverty Relief Office declared the new poverty line for 2800 Chinese Yuan Renminbi (RMB) per person per year or about US$2.2 per person per day, slightly higher than the World Bank’s poverty standard. Using this number (US$2.2) as a poverty line, there are still 70 million people who live below that poverty line in China (Xinhua, 2015a). Chinese President Xi Jinping described the eradication of poverty just like a “tough battle”, the government would continue to increase investment in rural areas and help to raise farmers’ incomes. Meanwhile, Xi went on to comment that economic development should not come at the cost of the environment, stressing that green protection should be accorded the same importance as one values his own eyes (Xinhua, 2015b).

As tourism development causes less damages to natural resources, China has regarded tourism as one of the most effective approaches for rural area development. Rural tourism has become more popular since 1990s in China. It has been increasing steadily since then. In 2014 alone, rural areas received more than 120 million tourists and generated more than USD47 billion (1 USD = 6.80 RMB) of revenues (China National Tourism Administration, 2016). Meanwhile, the actual investment of rural tourism is about USD 24 billion, increasing of 69% compared to 2013. Obviously, rural tourism development has become a driving force for economic development and rural poverty reduction. It was estimated that tourism has contributed directly to reducing 10% of people living below the poverty line (China National Tourism Administration, 2015). As these people live in the rural areas and with increasing interests of the central government for poverty alleviation in the rural areas, tourism development is likely to play an important role in improving their local livelihood.

Tourism development focuses on minimizing the effects on local environmental, conservation and cultural inheritance and accelerating the income-generation and community development while promoting environmental education and political awareness (Frey & George, 2010; Honey, 2008; Jimura, 2011; Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013; Xu, Barbieri, Anderson, Leung, & Rozier-Rich, 2016). As part of the campaigns to alleviate rural poverty through tourism development, the central government of China has encouraged private enterprises and local communities get involved in the tourism development. With that encouragement, multiple stakeholders with their sufficient fund could actively participate in rural tourism development, resulting in the improvement of tourism facility to a great extent. There have been emergent governance models (i.e. institutional arrangements) in order to accommodate the special characteristics of the concerned locations in the rural areas of China (Su, Geoffrey, & Paul, 2007).

These emergent types of governance model are associated with governments, private enterprises and local communities involving public, civil and private actors that employ various institutional arrangements (Raiseland, 2011) for their respective locations. Generally, multiple governments act as supervisor, directly or indirectly to monitor and/or to provide assistance in tourism development in the rural areas. However, not all governance models worked effectively in terms of local satisfaction and participation in the tourism development (Qian, Sasaki, Shivakoti, & Zhang, 2016) because of the different settings of the rural areas. Previous studies suggest that stakeholders need to collaborate in order to ensure the successful development of tourism in the rural areas as well as to maximize the tourism benefits for all parties. To understand the appropriate governance models for tourism development as a policy for poverty alleviation, assessment of local livelihood under various governance models is timely important to provide a basis for better-informed decision making. Such assessment is also important for the central government of China to support its policy on using tourism development as a significant complementary means for sustainable development of the rural areas (Gu & Ryan, 2009; Wu, 2004). Using the Huangshan mountain area (the World Heritage site) as a case study, this study assessed the local livelihood of two different but nearby locations in the Jade and Phoenix valleys, where two types of governance model were respectively adopted, the community-based and lease-to-operate tourism governance (CBT and LOT hereafter). This study aims to assess the local livelihoods and evaluate the institutional arrangements under the CBT and LOT governance through the analysis of the livelihood assets using the sustainable livelihood approach (SLA).

2. Study methods and materials

2.1. Description of CBT and LOT

Over the last three decades, rural tourism in China has become a policy tool for poverty alleviation. However, there remains little understanding about the effectiveness of the governance systems on rural tourism development and future directions of the rural tourism development (Wang et al., 2013). As described in the previous study (Qian et al., 2016), CBT is the community-based tourism governance model, under which local communities actively participate in the management of tourism in their respective communities, while LOT is the lease-to-operate tourism governance model, under which commercial company is entitled to develop the tourism in the community awarded by the government authority. Analysis of institutional arrangement and how such arrangements affect local livelihood can provide the needed information for long-term successful development of tourism in the rural poor in China. In addition, understanding how both systems performed in terms of capital assets and local satisfaction is also important for any government or authority to decide which governance system to support or to intervene as part of its campaigns to alleviate rural poverty through sustainable tourism development.

2.2. Description of the study area

For this study, Jade and Phoenix valleys were selected as case studies to represent CBT and LOT, respectively (Fig. 1). Jade valley is located in the famous East Gorge of Mountain Huangshan. It is about 6 km away from the main entrance of the Mountain Huangshan Scenic Spot. Phoenix valley is about 3.7 km away. Jade valley established its own tourism corporation on 1 August 1987, while the Phoenix valley adopted the LOT in 2000, under which operational rights for tourism development were granted to an outside investor. Administratively, the two valleys are located in the Tangkou township of Huangshan district, Huangshan City, in the Anhui Province of China. Tangkou township is situated in the south and east foothills of the Mountain Huangshan World Heritage Scenic Spot spanning 18.3 km wide from east to west and 13.0 km long from north to south. Its geographical coordinates for longitude are 118° 12’, and for north latitude 30° 07’. Tangkou Township is
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