



## Tourism development and changing rural identity in China



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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the patterns and driving factors of identity change amongst residents of Chongdu Valley, China, who have been experiencing tourism development since the mid-1990s. Employing semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this study uncovered four types of identity change in the community: (1) a transition from notions of rural hardship to notions of rural amenity; (2) a corresponding transition from a sense of rural shame to a sense of rural pride; (3) an overall rise in community identity; and (4) rural identity became less “rural.” Residents’ identity changes can be attributed to three factors: shifted government policies, improved living standards, and host-guest interaction. The findings suggest that material changes brought by tourism development can impact residents’ rural identity change.

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### Introduction

The economic and social impacts of rural tourism development have been widely acknowledged, examined, and debated (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Daugstad, 2008; Kneafsey, 2001), yet the same cannot be said of the cultural impacts of rural tourism development (Brandth & Haugen, 2011; Rogers, 2002; Tucker, 2003). For a rural tourist destination, one potential cultural challenge facing local residents is the influence of tourism development on their identity construction and transformation (Oakes, 1993). Tourism development can lead to changes in rural residents’ livelihoods, lifestyle, social networks, and living environments, which may all have impact on their perception of being a rural resident and living a rural life (Brandth & Haugen, 2011; Cassel & Pettersson, 2015). To uncover the patterns and driving factors of rural identity change that may be associated with tourism development, we conducted a case study in Chongdu Valley, a popular and developing rural tourist destination in central China.

China provides an opportune context in which to study rural identity shift because of the vast urban-rural divide that has created long-lasting socioeconomic disparities and perpetuated unfavorable images of rural residents (Knight & Song, 1999; Whyte, 2010). Although the socio-economic gap between rural and urban populations is still huge, if not expanding (Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010), residents in some rural communities have gained economic prosperity through livelihood change and income diversification (Démurger, Fournier, & Yang, 2010; Tang, Bennett, Xu, & Li, 2013; Xu & Tan, 2002). In Chongdu Valley, for instance, tourism development has changed residents’ livelihood from agriculture to tourism-related businesses and has largely increased the local living standards, which may be dramatically affecting local residents’ identity.

Although the social, economic, and political circumstances in China differ from those in other countries, a pejorative stance towards rural areas and thus disgraced rural identities are consistent across the globe (Bezemer & Headey, 2008). Further, a decline in agricultural income and the withdrawal of traditional extractive industries has led to rural restructuring

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in both developed and underdeveloped countries (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008), and tourism has become an effective strategy for poverty alleviation, industry revitalization, and economic diversification of rural households (Iorio & Corsale, 2010). Based in a site where dramatic social, economic and environmental changes have occurred alongside tourism development, this study focuses on the Chinese experience and in the process provides insights that may be cautiously generalized to rural tourist destinations in other countries.

Despite the prevalence of studies on the intersection of tourism and identity (Goulding & Domic, 2009; Rivera, 2008; Rogers, 2002; Stronza, 2008), extant literature focuses largely on the cultural factors leading to identity change, such as tourist representation, cultural commodification, and host-guest interaction (Mayes, 2010; Rogers, 2002; Santos & Yan, 2008; Stronza, 2008). Absent from these writings are the “developmental” factors that may give rise to identity change. The present research complements the existing literature by focusing on a setting where tourism development has brought significant social, economic, and environmental transformations to the local community. Such a context renders new insight to the mechanisms by which tourism development may alter residents' identity.

## Identity and tourism

The role tourism plays in identity change at a community level has been widely examined and recognized by tourism scholars. Scholars have discovered that tourism is a double-edged sword which can help (re)build as well as corrode identity. Some authors argue that tourism helps to preserve and revise local identity that otherwise might disappear (Rogers, 2002; Stronza, 2008). Other researchers believe that tourism can lead to erosion and degradation of local identity (Medina, 2003; Nunez, 1963). In addition, scholars have also identified a variety of means through which tourism can alter identity.

For instance, tourism itself can provide a platform through which identity can be managed, represented, and rebuilt (Jeong & Santos, 2004; Rogers, 2002; Santos & Yan, 2008). In such situations tourism helps generate a sense of identity, belonging, and public memory among local residents through the production of tourist sites and goods (Waite & McGuirk, 1996). In rural France, for instance, tourism development was found to offer one forum among others for local residents to engage in expressing, elaborating upon, and debating their collective pasts, presents, and futures, and thus may “help sustain the ongoing production of local identities” (Rogers, 2002, p. 477).

However, residents are not solely in control of (re)building their new identity. Their identity also depends on how tourists and other entities perceive of them. The notion that identity change can be imposed by outside forces and occurs beyond the control of local residents was prevalent in early studies of international tourism (e.g., Lanfant, Allcock, & Bruner, 1995; Nunez, 1963; Shepherd, 2002). Drawing on the asymmetrical power between underdeveloped countries and developed countries, these scholars highlighted how tourism brought western ideology, values, and markets to the underdeveloped world, leading to commodification and/or impoverishment of local history and cultures (Medina, 2003). Others presented evidence of the dominant role outsiders played in determining touristic representations of local identities (Jeong & Santos, 2004; Rivera, 2008).

Not surprisingly, then, there are scholars who believe that identity change is a bidirectional process involving the participation of both insiders and outsiders (Guerrón-Montero, 2006). For instance, Stronza (2008) discovered that Amazonian indigenous community members are active in negotiating their own identity with tourists. They have demonstrated increased pride, enhanced indigenous culture, and heightened native identity as they were involved in the tourism industry. Mayes (2010) found that culturally empowered rural residents can decide how to represent their communities in postcard production, though they remain subject to market pressures to produce what buyers want to see.

Host-guest interaction is another factor that threatens the sustainability of local cultures and identities (Smith, 1989; van den Berghe, 1994). Acculturation often occurs via the demonstration effects of tourists (McLaren, 1997). With the intrusion of tourists into host communities, local residents may adopt the lifestyle of tourists and gradually lose their own identity amongst a homogenized identity of the modern world (Stronza, 2001). In a study of ethnic minorities in southern China, Yang (2011) found that hosts-guest encounters made the locals eager to change their identity and adapt to the mainstream life of Han Chinese.

A common thread among this large body of research is the focus on cultural factors that drive identity change. New identity formation is typically grounded in the representations of local cultures, traditions, and heritages that have little to do with the socioeconomic conditions of tourist destinations. This perspective is short sighted as the impacts of tourism development are multifaceted, and material changes have had a huge influence on residents' sense of identity. Indeed, identity lives on in the “everyday practices of the contemporary world” (Cloke, 2006, p. 18). In rural areas, for instance, the increasing use of rural spaces for leisure, recreation, and tourism activities has challenged the conventional views of the rural, and thus, rural identities (Fløysand & Jakobsen, 2007; Panelli, 2006). Rural gentrification due to tourism development has blurred the distinction between rural and urban landscapes (Hines, 2010). Second home owners in some rural communities have driven local people out of the property market and reconfigured rural populations (Müller, Hall, & Keen, 2004; Panelli, 2006). And, adoption of tourism as a livelihood strategy has affected rural people's day-to-day practices, social networks, and mindsets, and thus their perception of living a rural life (Brandth & Haugen, 2011).

These examples suggested that the formation and recreation of rural identity is an ongoing process that is shaped by the social structure, landscape, livelihoods, and living standards in rural areas. While tourism scholars have invested much effort in understanding the mechanisms by which tourism alters identity, less attention has been directed to the societal, environ-

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