



Revitalizing traditional villages through rural tourism: A case study of Yuanjia Village, Shaanxi Province, China



Jing Gao^{*}, Bihu Wu

International Center for Recreation and Tourism Research, College of Urban and Environmental Sciences, Room 3354, 2nd Yifu Building, Peking University, Beijing 100871, China

HIGHLIGHTS

- Constructed a rural tourism-based traditional village revitalization model.
- Village leader-led or elite-led rural tourism development is effective.
- Farmer cooperative is a relative fair way in rural tourism benefit distribution and community participation in China.
- Embeddedness, non-embeddedness, endogeneity, empowerment and trust are main factors in Yuanjia village revitalization.

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ABSTRACT

Increasing attention has been given to historically and culturally significant traditional villages in China in the past five years. Two key themes have been protection and usage. Rural tourism has been recognized as a key approach to rural development and poverty alleviation. Through a systematic knowledge review, this paper proposes an integrative and sustainable Rural Tourism-based Traditional Village Revitalization model to better understand the relationship between rural tourism and village revitalization. Integrated Rural Tourism and Sustainable Livelihood theory and ideology are integrated in this model. A case study of the village of Yuanjia reveals that the model's three levels (material, social and spiritual) are effective pathways for successful village revitalization. Village leader-led or elite-led development realizes endogenous and bottom-up development rather than a top-down arrangement. Farmer Cooperative is a relatively equitable means of benefit distribution and community participation in China.

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1. Introduction

Rural areas and the rural way of life have gone through a global crisis in recent years especially in developing countries; traditional agriculture and rural culture have been disappearing or undergoing assimilation through urbanization and modernization. In China, the concept of the traditional village originated in late 2012 when the first national list was released. From that time on, the effort to protect traditional villages has risen to national attention and been given legal status. By the end of 2016, there were four lists including a total of more than 4000 villages designated as national traditional villages in China. Some of these villages are World Cultural Heritage

sites and have gained worldwide attention, such as Xidi, Hongcun and Kaiping Diaolou (Zhou, Zhong, & Liu, 2015). These villages have enormous cultural, historic, artistic and architectural value. However, more and more rural people have moved to big cities to find jobs, better education and better medical services, abandoning their houses and lands and turning their villages into ghost towns. Recently, an increasing number of scholars have become interested in rural heritage and communities (Gullino & Larcher, 2013; Jimura, 2011; Sun, Cruz, Min, Liu, & Zhang, 2013; Zuo, Huang, & Ding, 2014). The Chinese government instituted a protection policy only relatively recently and now has advanced both protection and utilization policies to help preserve traditional villages.

The crisis of traditional rural villages is not unique to China: rural agriculture, landscapes and ways of life are changing rapidly due to globalization and urbanization. China nevertheless has a special political, economic and cultural context. China has public,

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: gaojing880807@163.com (J. Gao), tigerwu@urban.pku.edu.cn (B. Wu).

collective ownership of land, and a binary urban-rural household register. Citizens and farmers have no power to engage in private land transactions, resulting in restrictions on changes of land ownership. The question of how to revitalize traditional villages has become a major academic and practical topic in China. Several Chinese villages have developed a rural tourism industry for years, whether due to external or endogenous forces. What kind of rural tourism is effective for village revitalization? This paper explores an ideal approach and constructs a sustainable tourism-based traditional village revitalization model. This model offers a better understanding of the relationship between local residents and village revitalization within a rural tourism context. It provides a unified framework for guiding work from an interdisciplinary perspective. To test the model, this paper uses Yuanjia Village in Shaanxi Province as a case study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Rural tourism as an effective approach to traditional village revitalization

The worldwide recession of rural areas is a general phenomenon resulting from industrial civilization. However, in the postmodern world, rural areas have more functions than just agricultural commodity production; they are sites of recreation, tourism, leisure, specialty food production, consumption and e-commerce (Saxena et al., 2007). Among their most important functions, they are a destination for rural tourism. As Lane and Kastenholz (2015) indicated, rural tourism existed since the late nineteenth century on the European and American continents, but the 1970s and 1980s saw “a new type of rural tourism which was driven by markets, by rural people and communities, and by governments no matter their status as scenic or protected areas.” Combining rurality with tourism is a relatively effective global development path. Rural tourism brings economic revenue and jobs; governments and researchers credit it with slowing down the population loss in rural areas (Augustyn, 1998; Flisher & Felsenstein, 2000). Although it has been defined in many different ways, rural tourism has two basic features: it employs rural inhabitants, and involves recycling and revalorizing existing rural infrastructure and heritage resources as tourist accommodations and attractions (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Although Barbieri (2013) questions “the link between rural tourism and a sustainable valorized traditional countryside,” on the whole, rural tourism is still a vigorous trend throughout the world. It should not be understood merely as a type of tourism, but also as a tool for the conservation and regeneration of rural society and rural culture. In practice, the key issues are how to balance the needs and perspectives of different stakeholders and manage them equitably and efficiently.

Extensive research concerning tourism and villages, especially rural tourism already exists. By measuring the attitudes of local residents and their perceptions and involvement, tourism's effects on local communities can be analyzed (Lindberg, Dellaert, & Rassing, 1999; Wang & Pfister, 2008; Williams & Lawson, 2001). Visitor satisfaction with the tourism experience has also been researched (Devesa, Laguna, & Palacios, 2010; Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012). From the marketing perspective, rural Destination Management Organizations, brands, images and marketing strategies are the major issues to explore (Adeyinka-Ojo, Khoo-Lattimore, & Nair, 2014; Chen, Lin, & Kuo, 2013; Haven-Tang & Sedgley, 2014; Zhou, 2014). The sustainability of rural tourism planning and management has received increasing attention. Many studies have developed sustainability indicators that include social, economic and environmental dimensions (Blancas, Lozano-Oyola, González, Guerrero, & Caballero, 2011). In addition,

the institutional dimension has been a consideration. As for sustainable village revitalization, the needs of different must be addressed. The most effective method is community participation or community-based action. A good partnership between village residents and outside developers would lead to sustainable dialogue for the growth of tourism (Hwang, Stewart, & Ko, 2012). Effective collective action can enhance community solidarity, identity and empowerment and strengthen locals' position in negotiations with outsiders, making it a popular approach in developed countries. In the United States, another powerful force for revitalizing rural communities is university-community partnerships (Grunwell & Ha, 2014). No matter which approach to tourism development is used to revitalize villages, local villagers' rights must be taken into account as they live there and influence the social environment.

In China, traditional villages have been long recognized by architectural, archaeological and artistic specialists as cultural relics. In their view, the first task is protection and preservation. National and local governments have usually intervened and taken over development rights, designating villages as tourism attractions and collecting tickets. Local villagers have received little benefit and in most cases had no decision-making power. The famous World Cultural Heritage villages of Xidi and Hongcun are typical examples (Ying & Zhou, 2007). A new communal approach for tourism development in rural China was developed in these two villages. The classic idea of community participation in tourism in a Western context can be examined from at least two perspectives: the decision-making and benefit-sharing processes (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1986). However, in the Chinese collective context, sustainability can mean participation in benefit sharing by stakeholders rather than participation in decision making in present national social stage. These two standards could both be realized in the near future. The trend has already begun in China, along with the development of rural tourism development and the increase in leisure demands. The government is also aware of the values of traditional villages and the problems they face, and thus encourages locals to develop rural tourism. That is to say, if a traditional village does not diversify from a sole dependence on agriculture to a wider range of socioeconomic activities, it will rapidly decay. Based on diversified spatial distributions and village types, many research interests and efforts have been made concerning traditional villages in recent years. In both theory and practice, rural tourism is explicitly an approach to traditional village revitalization. However, what is the right pathway and procedure at the local level? No coordinated research efforts have been made, and integration is needed.

2.2. Integrated rural tourism (IRT)

As rural tourism facilitates the development of lagging regions, a more integrated and territorial approach that also considers the sustainability of rural tourism is needed. The concept of Integrated Rural Tourism (IRT) was derived from EU research projects carried out after 2000. It is theorized as tourism explicitly linked to the economic, social, cultural, natural and human structures of the localities in which it takes place. It integrates tourism into local level. As both a theory and an approach, IRT leads to more sustainable tourism than other forms of tourism because it can create powerful network connections between social, cultural, economic and environmental resources. IRT builds practical ways of thinking about improving linkages between tourism and local and regional resources, activities, products and communities in light of changing trends in tourism demands (Saxena et al., 2007). To conceptualize this notion, seven dimensions of integration have been identified: scale, sustainability, networking, endogeneity, embeddedness,

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