

Balancing Stakeholder Interests and Sustainable Development in Rural Tourism: A Case Study of
Wulin Village, China

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex dynamics of sustainable tourism development in Wulin Village, a traditional rural settlement in China. Through an in-depth case study approach, it investigates how the diverse visions and objectives of key stakeholders have influenced the evolution of the village's tourism program since 2017. The research explores the extent to which economic priorities and power dynamics have altered the original community-focused objectives of the initiative. Findings reveal significant challenges in balancing cultural heritage preservation, tourism development, and community participation. The study highlights the tensions between authenticity and commercialization, equitable distribution of economic benefits, and the reconciliation of professional management with meaningful local involvement. It contributes to the broader understanding of sustainable rural tourism development in China, offering insights into the complexities of stakeholder interactions and the potential pitfalls of rapid tourism-driven rural transformation. The research underscores the need for more inclusive and adaptive governance models in rural tourism development.



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INTRODUCTION

Recently, there is a clear disparity between rural and urban areas in terms of development in China. Rural regions are often seen as facing numerous challenges, including population loss, education, sluggish economic growth, diminishing job prospects, the disappearance of farms, threats to historical and cultural heritage, significant demographic shifts, and a reduced quality of life (Liu, Chiang, and Ko 2023). These problems indicate that these villages prevent the seemingly inevitable rural decline, it is crucial to reform investment strategies and policy support. Tourism has been introduced into rural and ethnic areas as a universal modernization tool that can contribute to local economic and cultural development (Cornet 2015). As a result, adopting rural tourism as an alternative development approach has emerged as a preferred strategy to achieve a balance between economic, social, cultural, and environmental regeneration (Juma and Khademi-Vidra 2019; Liu et al. 2023). Tourism has been widely promoted as a strategy for rural revitalization in China, with the aim of stimulating rural development, particularly in less developed villages. Although rural tourism has many different definitions, it has two basic characteristics: it employs rural residents and involves the recycling and reassessment of existing rural infrastructure and heritage resources as tourist accommodation and attractions.

The rapid urbanization and modernization of China have also posed significant challenges to the preservation of traditional rural cultures, many of which are at risk of disappearance or assimilation. The concept of traditional villages originated with the release of the first national list at the end of 2012. Since then, the protection of traditional villages has attracted national attention and has been given legal status (Gao and Wu 2017). In China, traditional villages have long been recognized as cultural heritage by architectural, archaeological and artistic experts. In their view, the first priority is protection and preservation (Gao and Wu 2017). In China, traditional villages are defined as “villages with tangible and intangible cultural heritage of high historical, cultural, scientific, artistic, social and economic value”. In the World Heritage categories defined by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, traditional villages can be categorized as cultural landscapes, i.e., “the joint work of mankind and nature”, which “encompasses multiple manifestations of the interaction between mankind and the natural environment in which it is situated”. Meanwhile, in the Chinese government's definition, traditional villages are “persistent landscapes” that “arose from an initial social, economic, administrative, and religious need, and have developed to their present situation through connection or adaptation to the surrounding natural environment ... continues to play an active social role in today's society in a close intermingling with the traditional way of life in which the evolutionary process is still taking place, while at the same time, it is an important physical evidence of the evolutionary development of history (Zhang and Xu 2018). Traditional Village tourism, characterized by its unique architectural styles, significant historical elements, rich

cultural heritage, and ancient charm, has become a prominent feature in the rural tourism market (Feng 2002).

Like most of the villages in China, Wulin Village, located in Xintang Street, Jinjiang City, Fujian Province, stands as a quintessential example of a Minnan qiaoxiang (overseas Chinese hometown) facing these challenges and opportunities. Wulin Village not only possesses a rich tapestry of tangible and intangible cultural heritage but also serves as a spiritual home and cultural root for numerous overseas Chinese.

However, the village has encountered numerous challenges over time. The significant outflow of working-age population has led to the phenomenon of "hollow villages" - rural communities predominantly inhabited by the elderly and children. This demographic shift critically impacts tourism development by reducing the available workforce and cultural knowledge bearers. Concurrently, public facilities remain underdeveloped, and the collective village economy has nearly depleted. The village's environmental sanitation conditions are particularly concerning, primarily due to insufficient public funding and a lack of awareness about hygiene practices. For instance, there is inadequate allocation for daily sanitation maintenance, resulting in garbage accumulation in uninhabited houses and along road ditches, significantly compromising the cleanliness of public spaces. These conditions pose substantial challenges in creating a suitable environment for tourism development. In 2017, under the guidance of local government, Wulin Village initiated a tourism development program centered on cultural heritage preservation and rural tourism.

Tourism should contribute to rural areas in socioeconomic terms by generating income and employment opportunities for the local rural population, providing amenities and services to the locality, and aiding in the preservation of local cultural resources (Hall and Jenkins 1998). Although rural tourism is considered a very effective means of poverty alleviation, it has many shortcomings in practice. The current development of rural tourism worldwide faces issues such as project homogenization, management disorder, financing difficulties, talent shortages, and severe environmental pollution. Rural tourism confronts even more serious problems, such as asymmetric resource distribution and unbalanced economic development between urban and rural areas, as well as among townships. Villagers and local governments often develop "rural tourism" under the guise of ecological and culture protection to pursue their own interests and achievements while secretly damaging the rural natural ecological environment and traditional culture. The imbalance between pre-development protection and post-development protection may lead to further deterioration of the rural ecological environment (Sun et al. 2021). In the process of developing and constructing rural tourism, tourism enterprises may adjust their strategies according to local government policies but may sacrifice the rural ecological environment for short-term profit maximization and engage in false propaganda of rural

ecotourism. The strategies of tourism enterprises largely determine the implementation strategies of other stakeholders.

Hence, this study examines the tourism development process in Wulin Village, focusing on the interactions between diverse stakeholders such as government entities, villagers, and external investors. It also explores the efforts and challenges in striking a balance between cultural heritage preservation and tourism development, considering the complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors in this rural transformation.

To be specific, in the context of pursuing sustainable development and preserving traditional cultural heritage, how have the diverse visions and objectives of key stakeholders - including local government officials, Beijing Qingpu management, Jinjiang Cultural Tourism Group, and Wulin Village residents - shaped the evolution of the Wulin Village tourism program? To what extent have economic priorities and power dynamics altered its original community-focused objectives, and what does this reveal about the challenges of balancing cultural preservation, tourism development, and community participation in rural China

Literature review

Tourism projects with government participation

In the context of poverty alleviation, rural tourism development policies and practices need to encourage cooperation through collaborations between government (public sector) and non-governmental organizations (businesses, communities, and voluntary organizations), as well as bottom-up or top-down development practices. This approach aims to create new institutional and economic forms that promote tourism's contribution to local rural socioeconomic development (Bramwell 2011; Bramwell and Lane 2011). This could also be considered as collaborative governance. Collaborative governance is a common approach in rural tourism. Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2012) assert that collaborative governance can include partnerships between the state, private sector, civil society, and communities; inter-governmental collaborative structures; and private-social partnerships. Governance is "the cooperation of government organizations and non-government organizations" (Murdoch and Abram 1998). The presence of voluntary sectors (such as NGOs and resident associations) may further strengthen the "collaborative governance" approach by establishing links between local government and grassroots residents in development policy decision-making processes (Keyim 2012).

The necessity of government involvement in tourism has been widely recognized, although the degree and manner of participation vary across countries. Firstly, due to the commercial nature of the private sector, there exists a conflict between short-term interests and long-term goals (Jenkins and Henry 1982). Tourism often generates excessive external costs while benefits are insufficient, a trend that sometimes forces governments to assume responsibility for controlling and monitoring the scope and speed of tourism development (Bramwell and Alletorp 2001). Moreover, tourism is a highly fragmented industry involving various aspects of politics, economy, and society, with numerous organizations involved, leading to constant and intertwined problems and conflicts (Qin, Wall, and Liu 2011). The government, as an administrative entity with legislative power and representing broad social interests, has the legitimacy and capacity to promote and coordinate multiple stakeholders to minimize negative impacts, lay the foundation for development, and create macro-environmental conditions (Bramwell, 2011; Ruhanen 2013).

As government involvement in tourism is amorphous and can permeate many aspects of society, ranging from deliberate legislative control to benign neglect (Choy 1993), this study explores the roles played by the government in culture heritage rural tourism development. Generally, governments shape the economic environment, provide an overall regulatory framework for tourism, and play crucial roles in planning, managing, and promoting tourism (Hall 2005; Nunkoo and Smith 2013). The initial role of government in tourism was described as a provider of infrastructure and facilities, serving "roads, sewers, and garbage" (Ruhanen, 2013). Gradually, governments began to play a leading role and assume an entrepreneurial role, such as formulating policy frameworks, developing and initiating programs, and operating and providing tourism and hospitality services. In Western societies, functions once performed by governments have largely been privatized and commercialized to reduce public debt and encourage competition (Hall and Page 1999). Correspondingly, power and resources have been transferred to the private sector, with public organizations reducing their planning, policy, and development roles while increasing their marketing, promotion, cooperation, and networking responsibilities. In reality, tourism has always been a mix of government and private operations. Protecting broader public interests is a special responsibility of the government, as competing interests may arise in tourism development, requiring active government involvement to ensure a balance between short-term benefits and long-term goals (Hall, 2005; Jenkins and Henry, 1982; Nunkoo and Smith, 2013).

The roles of national or regional government tourism organizations can sometimes be conflicting. For example, tourism organizations promote tourism in their marketing role. However, as regulators, their role may include limiting or even punishing tourism service providers (Choy, 1993). Thus, even in developed countries, the general role and degree of government

involvement vary greatly. Similarly, although governments in developing countries generally assume development and operational roles, given the differences in government hierarchies and the varying economic, social, and political importance of tourism in local development, there is no consensus on the specific roles and degree of involvement of governments, not only between countries but also within a single country.

Previous research indicates that the primary reasons or justifications for government intervention in tourism have shifted from predominantly economic considerations to broader concerns about the environmental and social consequences of tourism development (Nunkoo and Smith, 2013; White, 2002). Particularly since the 1980s, widespread support for sustainable development has driven governments to adopt sustainable development imperatives in tourism development and management as an alternative to economic development imperatives (Richard 200).

In the context of rural tourism, the necessity of sustainability can be reflected in incorporating tourism as part of overall rural development policies, thereby promoting tourism's contribution to the economic well-being, cultural integrity, and environmental management of destination communities (Richard 2005). While the management of rural tourism venues and enterprises may be delegated to local governments, Richard (2005) argues that the central government should still be responsible for integrating rural tourism with broader development strategies and managing tourism development as a mechanism for rural socio-economic revival.

One of the most severe social impacts of rural tourism is that the massive influx of tourists may lead to some local residents leaving their ancestral homes and relocating to undisturbed areas. This issue is particularly prominent in Native American communities in North America, leading to strict restrictions on tourism in these areas. Consequently, the sustainability of tourism has become a significant measure in determining whether a tourism project is worth continuing.

When discussing sustainable tourism, it is crucial to remember that it not only concerns the protection of the natural environment—i.e., ecological sustainability—but also the sustainable development of local communities, including their culture, improvement of living standards, and the economic sustainability of the tourism industry. In traditional village tourism, which primarily centers on heritage tourism, community sustainability is particularly crucial. However, a traditionally criticized problem is that when the term of sustainable development is vaguely defined to satisfy the needs of all stakeholders, it can easily become a "smokescreen" behind which businesses can hide while continuing to operate unsustainably while claiming to adhere to sustainability principles (McKenzie, 2004). When discussing the social sustainability of communities, it is important to consider the entire living environment and the level of local participation, rather than focusing solely on single indicators such as unemployment rates.

Unfortunately, in rural tourism, there has traditionally been a tendency to develop businesses with little or no strategy to address sustainability issues, especially in terms of social sustainability (Mitchell and Hall 2005).

In China's tourism industry, sustainable development is a frequently mentioned concept. However, in most cases, its definition remains vague and serves more as a promotional tool, with limited practical guidance for traditional village tourism development. Therefore, under the case of Wulin Tourism program, it is crucial to consider how to effectively incorporate sustainable development principles into the development of traditional village tourism.

In China, the development of tourism has followed a unique trajectory, shaped by the country's rapid economic growth, political structure, and cultural context.

The study of tourism in China has experienced substantial growth since the early 1980s, mirroring the country's economic reforms and opening-up policy. (Zhong et al. 2011). A distinctive feature of China's tourism development is the adoption of a "government-led" strategy (Dai et al., 2013). This approach sets China apart from many Western models of tourism development and has significant implications for how the sector evolves. Zhang, Chong, and Ap (1999) identified multiple roles played simultaneously by the Chinese government in tourism development: Operator, Regulator: Formulating and implementing Regulations, Investor, Promoter, Coordinator, Educator. To attract investment, particularly in rural areas where local governments often lack capital, the Chinese government has implemented unique governance models. Su, Wall, & Eagles (2007) identified three primary models: Leasing Model, Non-listed Shareholding Model, Public-listed Share-holding Model. Wulin tourism program belongs to Non-listed Share-holding Model, which engaged the local people into the tourism development. The Non-listed Share-holding Model establishes a joint tourism corporation with diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, park/tourism employees, and private investors. In this model, the local government involvement as both regulator and shareholder, retaining partial managerial control. Although, since the beginning of the 21st century, the central government has increasingly emphasized rural development. The ultimate goal of rural revitalization, including rural tourism development, is to improve residents' quality of life (Iorio and Corsale, 2010; Su et al., 2019), which is reflected in China's rural policies. This focus on farmers' fundamental interests aligns with the citizen-centered value orientation of public administration (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015). From a policy perspective, the central government's emphasis on rural tourism and overall rural development is clear. However, it remains unclear whether and how these policies are implemented at regional and local levels. As important stakeholders in rural tourism, the roles of governments at various levels in developing rural tourism through policy-making and implementation warrant further study. In the process of developing rural tourism, the

government plays a leading role, mostly focusing on economic priorities (Gao, Huang, and Huang, 2009), often with little concern for negative impacts on local communities' ecology and socio-culture (Li, Lai, and Feng, 2007; Yang and Wall, 2008). Li, Lai, and Feng (2007) argue that these obstacles are of a political-structural or business-operational nature, including bureaucratic top-down political command structures and official socio-cultural attitudes towards rural residents as "uncultured and rustic" or "simple-minded and stupid." Some scholars (Li, 2006; Dombroski, 2008; Yang, 2011) point out that some local communities may benefit from this top-down tourism development. However, others argue that the lack of supervision in this type of tourism planning and implementation, which often ignores local community participation (Li, Hu, and Zhang, 2010), has led to many problems, including abuse of power and corruption (Yang and Wall, 2008). In the modern Chinese top-down political command structure, this is true for all levels of government except village-level government (Qin, Wall, and Liu, 2011).

It is worth mentioning that land acquisition is an important aspect in rural tourism development, which reflects the change of power in tourism development. The main stakeholders in land acquisition for rural tourism in China are local governments, tourism developers and residents (Ma et al., in 2020).

Local governments play a leading role in rural tourism development (Wang & Wall, 2007). There are several reasons for this. The first is the socialist land system with Chinese characteristics. Secondly, China has a two-track land system. According to China's Land Management Law, all urban land is owned by the state and all rural land is owned by village collectives, but land use and transfer are restricted. To develop tourism through land acquisition, the government needs to expropriate land from residents and then sell the land use rights to developers (Guo, 2001). In addition, China's top-down administrative system, which requires the central government to make decisions and local governments at all levels to be responsible for implementing those decisions (Qin et al., 2011), reinforces the dominant position of local governments.

Local governments are the political subjects of local tourism development and hold local administrative power, but during the development of rural tourism in China, local governments lack the financial support needed to develop and build tourist destinations (Li et al., 2019), including compensation payments to residents for land acquisition and funds for subsequent project construction. These funds are sometimes provided by tourism developers, who have a strong economic base. This is significantly different from the relationship between private sector and government responsibilities in Western societies. In China, tourism developers are intertwined with government interests (Ying & Zhou 2007).

Residents are the main body of rural tourism, and their willingness to promote tourism and their promotional attitudes affect the smooth implementation of tourism programs and the stable development of rural society (Ma et al., 2019). Residents' participation in tourism is an important

factor in sustainable tourism development (Tosun 2000) However, studies have shown that residents in developing countries are in a weak position in the decision-making stage of tourism development (Li et al. 2016). In the power game of tourism development stakeholders, residents' rights are severely limited (Wang & Yotsumoto, 2019; Ying & Zhou, 2007). Land compensation in China's planned economy is much lower than the value of land under market economy conditions (Guo & Gao, 2014). Land is the most important asset for most rural residents, as it serves as both a source of income and a social security mechanism (Cai, 2016). Power distribution plays an important or even decisive role in community participation, and rural tourism development in China is the result of a power game between governments at all levels, tourism developers and local communities (Wang & Yotsumoto, 2019).

Land expropriation, which is central to the government's development and capital accumulation strategies, is often met with strong opposition from residents and leads to extreme social conflict (Sargeson, 2018), so it is also important to include this process in the change of power in the development of tourism projects.

Overall, rural tourism in China generally involves three stakeholders: local villagers, the government, and tourism operating companies. Typically, the government is the supporter, participant and supervisor of rural tourism. The government owns the land. Generally speaking, the government will support tourism enterprises with policies, provide different levels of financial support, and reward and penalize tourism enterprises for substantial and false behaviors, respectively. At the same time, the government will generally publicize policies related to rural eco-tourism, encourage local residents to actively participate in rural tourism projects, and provide incentives. In the development of rural tourism, local residents usually work for tourism enterprises by investing in rural tourism projects with assets such as land and houses. Local residents can earn income from other business activities while participating in rural ecotourism programs. The current tourism model might raised questions about the balance of power among stakeholders and the sustainability of development models need to be considered under the Wulin tourism program.

Role of Tourism Operators

Government and external enterprises typically hold dominant positions among tourism development participants due to their control over essential factors for tourism development, including policies, funding, and community resources such as land and local cultural heritage (Li et al., 2007).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gradually become a focal point for many tourism enterprises, which are expected to advance economic, social, cultural, and environmental

sustainability (Horng, Hsu & Tsai, 2018). Previous research indicates that CSR has significant potential in promoting Integrated Rural Tourism (Saxena & Ilbery, 2008). As key stakeholders, tourism enterprises can foster various dimensions of rural tourism through effective CSR activities. For instance, they can enhance the network dimension by sharing tourism-related information with other stakeholders and employing more local residents (Oliver & Ilbery, 2008; Jenkins, 2003). Moreover, when entrepreneurs consider local community interests through CSR initiatives, it promotes the empowerment dimension. Additionally, the pronounced homogenization of Chinese tourism products strongly suggests that tourism enterprises should assume responsibility for embedding local resources in the tourism development process, further advancing the embeddedness and endogeneity dimensions of rural tourism (Oliver & Jenkins, 2003; Navarro, Iglesias & Vinzon, 2017).

Despite widespread recognition of CSR's significance in international tourism, few studies have explored the specific CSR initiatives that tourism enterprises should adopt to successfully promote international tourism. Following more than three decades of rapid economic growth, Chinese tourism enterprises should assume greater social responsibility. It is noteworthy that entrepreneurs can generate not only economic benefits for communities through various forms of interest feedback but also cultural, environmental, and social advantages.

This overview underscores the growing importance of CSR in tourism development, particularly in the context of Rural Tourism in China. It highlights the potential for CSR initiatives to contribute to sustainable tourism practices and benefit local communities across multiple dimensions.

Community governance

Murphy (1985) emphasizes that "it should not be forgotten that what is being displayed is the community's home environment and that the community must act as host whether directly or indirectly involved." Indeed, local participation is one of the most crucial conditions for sustainable rural tourism development (Mitchell & Hall 2005, p. 5). Community participation can be succinctly defined as "fully considering community opinions and needs in the processes of decision-making, development, planning, management, and inspection" (Sun & Bao, 2008), or more simply, as a process of collective engagement where decisions are shared (Okazaki, 2008, p. 511).

The potential of tourism to sustain rural communities is closely related to the degree of local involvement. In recent years, community-based tourism has gained popularity as an effective approach to sustainable tourism, involving local communities and bringing them significant benefits (Xu et al., 2008; Okazaki, 2008). Stone (2002) argues that failure to involve local people

in tourism development can easily lead to the destruction of the resource base and reduce the potential for tourism to generate benefits. In his study of rural tourism in China, he concludes that widespread community support is crucial for successful tourism development. Arola and Suontausta (2005) also note that future preferences for tourism destinations will be closely related to local residents' support.

Okazaki (2008) points out that community participation is an effective way to increase the positive effects of tourism while reducing negative impacts, which is ultimately the goal of sustainable tourism. Fortunately, there is growing recognition of this, and in recent years, planners and entrepreneurs have begun to realize that to create sustainable tourism, host communities and their opinions must be considered (Zhang et al., 2009).

Academics have classified various forms of community participation, but Wang and Wall (2005, Xu et al., 2008) provide a sufficiently clear yet not overly simplistic model. According to their view, four basic models can be recognized:

Community participates in decision-making and benefits from tourism

Community participates in decision-making but barely benefits from tourism

Community does not participate in decision-making but benefits from tourism

Community neither participates in decision-making nor benefits from tourism

The economic disparity between tourists and hosts can potentially lead to imitation attempts and resentment, which may significantly affect the social fabric of the host community. Moreover, if tourists are unaware of local customs, their behavior may cause severe social friction within the community (Cooper et al., 2005, p. 237). In many cases, tourism merely exploits the community's culture, traditions, and social life solely to satisfy tourists. This often comes at the expense of local pride and dignity, and in the worst cases, destroys genuine authenticity. On the other hand, it is undeniable that tourism can also enhance local pride and community spirit (Cooper & Hall 2008, p. 167).

In 2000, Zhang Guangrui translated the United Nations World Tourism Organization's "Global Code of Ethics for Tourism" into Chinese, sparking a series of studies to identify stakeholders and their relationship patterns (Tao & Fuying, 2009). Liu and Bao (2005) evaluated various relationships between local governments and tourism operators, local governments and residents, tourism operators and residents, tourism operators and tourists, and tourists and residents from the perspective of ecotourism in China. Shi (2009) criticized the lack of stakeholder participation in Chinese tourism planning, leading to conflicts between stakeholders or lack of plan implementation, while Zhou (2009) found that stakeholders' changing expectations of tourism led to a lack of coordination in stakeholder development.

For these reasons, Chinese scholars increasingly recognize the necessity of liaison between stakeholders in tourism planning. For example, Liu, Ouyang, and Miao (2010) investigated the environmental attitudes of stakeholders (farmers, government staff, businesspeople, and tourists) in China's Jinyun Mountain National Nature Reserve and found that improving community participation in protected areas could alleviate conflicts between protected areas and communities.

However, most Chinese research on tourism community participation relies on introducing Western community participation models (Bao & Sun, 2007), with many scholars considering it an indispensable mechanism in the macro-system of sustainable tourism development (Liu, 2000). Generally, there are two approaches to assessing the degree of community participation: (a) participation in the decision-making process and (b) participation in tourism benefits. The former typically empowers local residents to decide on their hopes and concerns for tourism, while the latter is always through employment (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1986).

In many developing countries, community participation is used to help local residents gain economic benefits, such as encouraging locals to start small businesses or find jobs in tourism, rather than giving residents the opportunity to participate in public policy decision-making (Tosun, 2000). Wang (2006) and Bao and Sun (2007) confirm that in China, participation in tourism benefits may be more important than participation in the planning process, with local communities only participating in economic activities and rarely, if ever, in the decision-making process. On the other hand, Chen et al. (2013) and Yi (2014) demonstrated the feasibility of local residents actually participating in scenic area decision-making in China, even benefiting the status of women.

However, due to China's unique socio-economic, political, and cultural background, Chinese tourism destinations may not be able to fully adopt mainstream community participation principles. In China, the government owns the land and has the authority to designate any place for tourism development (Li, 2004). Consequently, local communities are often unaware of any planned developments before enterprises actually begin development, and communities can only passively allow developers to use their land for any state-supported projects (Ryan, Gu, and Meng, 2009).

Indeed, Bao and Sun (2007) even argue that many Chinese local governments have long believed it is natural and justified to make decisions for communities without consultation, considering community residents weak and ignorant. Other possible reasons include lack of skills, procedural justice, time, and money, with decision-makers viewing participatory planning processes as difficult, financially costly, and thus time-consuming and unproductive (Swarbrooke, 1999; Boyd, 2000; Paul, 1987).

Similarly, in other developing countries, the concept of transplanting community participation in tourism development processes has been found not easily applicable to Third World tourism destinations (Din 1997), as many developing countries face enormous operational, structural, and cultural constraints in terms of participation principles (Timothy, 1999; Tosun, 2000). Some cases of community participation in tourism in developing countries (McIntyre, Hetherington & Inskip, 1993; World Tourism Organization (WTO), 1994) have even been considered manipulative, passive, or pseudo-participation (Tosun, 2000).

Therefore, determining whether a community has positive community participation seems to largely depend on local circumstances. Based on personal experiences in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and other scholars' research findings in other regions (Li, Lai, and Feng, 2007), local rural communities consisting of small, family-style tourism enterprises may be marginalized in the tourism development process. As mentioned above, China has not yet established procedures to ensure local citizens have the opportunity to participate in public decision-making (Bao and Sun, 2007). Furthermore, local rural communities' limited capacity related to development (Scheyvens, 1999), including knowledge, expertise, capital resources, decision-making power, and implementation authority, further hinders their participation in and benefit from local tourism development processes. In China, non-governmental organizations and similar civil groups are mostly in the early stages of development; they still need to develop into formal organizations with official or semi-official status, and they still lack a certain degree of voice.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Qiaoxiang(侨乡), is commonly translated as “migrants’ home villages,” the term more precisely references the transformation of village life due to emigration.(Voss et al. 2018). Overseas Chinese hometowns should have the following characteristics: First, in terms of population, there are a large number of overseas Chinese and returned overseas Chinese in the region; second, the locals have close ties with their relatives and friends abroad; third, the local economy is developed under the influence of overseas Chinese capital, for example, there are many overseas Chinese remittances, overseas Chinese architecture, overseas Chinese- funded schools, overseas Chinese-funded enterprises, and public welfare undertakings of the overseas Chinese; and fourth, they have the characteristics of both Chinese and Western cultures(Jiang et al.,2011).

Overseas Chinese hometowns (Qiaoxiang) are not only places of emigration, but also have different social, economic and cultural characteristics from non-Overseas Chinese hometowns because of their links with overseas Chinese.(Jiang et al., 2011). As a form of regional culture, the

hometown of overseas Chinese represents a special and "unrepeatable" history, which is not only the spiritual home and cultural "root" of overseas Chinese, but also an important link between overseas Chinese and the motherland, which considered as tangible, intangible heritages for people(Yan Lijin et al., 2003).

Wulin Village is situated in the southwestern part of Xintang area in the central district of Jinjiang City, adjacent to Shishi City. The village's topography, with Shigu Mountain at its back and Wuan Stream to the east, exemplifies the "mountain-backed and water-faced" (背山面水) layout. The cultural landscape of Wulin Village is further enriched by its traditional spatial layout, which adheres to feng shui principles. The village's western side is protected by Shigu Mountain, forming a natural barrier, while Wuan Stream curves around the village, creating a "waistband water" formation. A feng shui pond in front of the village completes this traditional layout, reflecting the villagers' ancestors' philosophy of living in harmony with nature .

Historical records indicate that the settlement of Wulin Village dates back to the Hongwu period of the Ming Dynasty, reaching its zenith during the late Qing and early Republican periods. As a renowned qiaoxiang (侨乡, emigrant hometown), Wulin Village maintains significant transnational connections. As of March 2019, the Wulin community comprised 548 households with a resident population of 1,855, and 257 individuals registered in Wulin but residing elsewhere. Additionally, the village claims an overseas Chinese population of approximately 15,000. This figure, while substantial, requires further investigation to understand the varied nature of these diaspora connections, ranging from first-generation emigrants to descendants with more tenuous ties to the village.

This unique demographic structure, characterized by a significant diaspora population alongside a stable local community, has profoundly influenced the village's socio-economic fabric and cultural characteristics. It presents both opportunities and challenges for cultural preservation and economic development initiatives. Wulin Village hosts a diverse array of cultural heritage. In terms of tangible cultural heritage, the village features over 90 well-maintained buildings constructed with remittances from overseas Chinese emigrants. These structures, often referred to as "overseas Chinese architecture," include local red-brick buildings, Roman and Gothic-style architecture, as well as residential complexes that blend Chinese and Western elements. These edifices not only document Wulin Village's historical evolution but also exemplify the unique cultural fusion characteristic of Minnan qiaoxiang (emigrant hometowns).

Regarding intangible cultural heritage, Wulin Village has maintained traditional customs and skills such as the "Qexiang " (incense cutting) activity, Nanyin performances, and tomb construction and washing techniques, some of which have histories spanning over a century.

Moreover, while clan traditions remain strong, the outmigration of many villagers for work or emigrated overseas has led to a "hollow village" phenomenon around 2000s, threatening the continuity of these traditions.

At that time Wulin village collective economy is almost empty, public utilities are not comprehensively developed, the village public environment is poorly sanitized, and villagers' collective welfare is low. This makes the development of overseas Chinese communities unsustainable.

Under the context of rural revitalization and community in China, the local government in Quanzhou, has also entered into a quest for sustainable rural development. In 2016, under the leadership of the village secretary at the time, Wulin Community improved its basic sanitation, and with the help of the central government's campaign on "traditional villages", Wulin Community was successfully selected as one of the fourth batch of traditional villages on the national list. At the same time, in 2017, Wulin Community became a key village for the local government to plan for its protection and development. So far, it has formed a traditional village combining daily life of residents and tourist area. Due to the long history and extremely high architectural value of Wulin village, as well as the patriotic overseas Chinese spirit which is of great educational and symbolic significance, it makes it a great advantage as an emerging tourism project. It not only can be used as cultural heritage tourism, traditional rural tourism, and even due to re-construction, he still has the qualities of leisure tourism. It is also the epitome and case study of the redevelopment of Minnan Overseas Chinese Village.

Research question

Most of the current development of traditional Chinese villages combines rural ecotourism with heritage tourism. Heritage tourism is a significant sub-category within the tourism. The comprehensive definition of 'heritage' is adopted, which encompasses the interconnected forms of tangible, intangible, and natural heritage, with the aim of highlighting significant connections to a common history at a particular tourism destination.(Ahmad 2006). National and local governments usually intervene and take over the development rights of traditional villages. Therefore, many stakeholders are often involved in the development and operation of traditional villages. And this study mainly involves focusing on three stakeholders, i.e., residents of traditional villages, the government and tourism operators. And different stakeholders have different attitudes towards ecotourism. Based on this, the study aims to investigate the complex dynamics of sustainable tourism development in Wulin Village, a traditional rural settlement in China. The primary research questions are:

How have the diverse visions and objectives of key stakeholders (local government officials, Beijing Qingpu management, Jinjiang Cultural Tourism Group, and Wulin Village residents) influenced the evolution of the Wulin Village tourism program since its inception in 2017?

To what extent have economic priorities and power dynamics altered the original community-focused objectives of the tourism initiative?

What challenges does the Wulin Village case study reveal about balancing cultural heritage preservation, tourism development, and community participation in rural China?

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

The research conducted in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, including local residents, government staff, tourism developers, expatriate families, and groups of overseas Chinese, during two field visits to the Wulin community in July-August 2023 and December-January 2024 and one online interviews. The interviews aimed to gather first-hand information about the spatial layout of the Wulin community, governmental planning, community governance, the use and capitalization of natural and humanistic resources, and the connection with overseas Chinese.

The thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews will provide a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and experiences of various stakeholders involved in the development of the Wulin community. The identified themes will shed light on the complex interrelationships between governmental planning, community governance, resource capitalization, and the connection with overseas Chinese, which will contribute to answering the research question on how the principles of ecotourism are acknowledged, implemented, or ignored by different stakeholders.

The study will also analyze various documents, including local history records, the master plan for the development of Wulin traditional village, the master plan for the development of tourism in Wulin traditional village in Xintang Street of Jinjiang, and the oral history of the Overseas Chinese. Additionally, a special survey will be conducted on the exhibition part in the Overseas Chinese Museum to ensure the possibility of the survey results. The document analysis will provide a historical and contextual background for understanding the development of the Wulin community and its connection with overseas Chinese. The analysis of the master plans will reveal the official policies and strategies for tourism development in Wulin, which will help to assess how the principles of ecotourism are acknowledged and implemented at the governmental level.

Data Collection Tools

Qualitative data on stakeholders' perceptions, concerns and practices of sustainable rural tourism were collected through field research, including participatory and non-participatory observations of local people's daily routines and lives, and the infrastructure of rural tourism areas.

The study conducted interviews with stakeholders inside and outside the village through face-to-face meetings and online meetings. In the participants included villagers (emigrants), external investors in tourism enterprises in the village, village leaders/cadres, local government officials, and others. Based on the continuous comparison of the groups' perceptions and practices of rural tourism activities, their patterns of actions in managing the village's rural tourism development in terms of the development of rural tourism projects, the provision and management of rural tourism products and services, and the formulation and implementation of policies and regulations on the development of rural tourism resources have been developed. In addition, it became evident how their actions influenced and shaped the process of rural tourism development in the villages.

The analysis of raw data employed open coding, memoing, and constant comparative analysis techniques. The data analysis process encompassed both on-site and off-site components.

On-site Data Analysis

On-site data analysis included data storage, processing, and preliminary analysis. For field observations, the researcher captured photographs and recorded notes during the day, composing field study diaries in the evening. Photos and notes were categorized according to research question themes and formulated into field study memos. These memos were subsequently coded alongside memos from the second round of data processing.

For interviews, data was stored using a digital recorder with the interviewee's consent. The researcher posed open-ended questions such as "How do you obtain economic benefits from the Wulin tourism area?" Utilizing theoretical sensitivity, the researcher immediately processed answers, categorizing information according to research themes. Processed answers often generated new questions, guiding the researcher to subsequent informants.

Off-site Data Processing and Analysis

Off-site data processing and analysis involved data transcription, translation, coding, and memoing. All raw data was translated from Chinese to English, then coded and memoed to summarize answer patterns for specific research questions and categorize these patterns.

The research aimed to address the following questions:

a) Who are the main stakeholders in this rural tourism destination? b) How are these villages managing and developing this rural tourism destination? c) How do different stakeholders' understandings of the scenic area's development shape its changes? d) Are there conflicts or issues in the development of the rural tourism destination? If so, what are these contradictions and problems? f) How are these problems being resolved?

Through iterative coding, memoing, and constant comparison, the participants in rural tourism governance activities and their action patterns gradually emerged.

This methodological approach demonstrates a rigorous qualitative analysis process, incorporating both on-site and off-site components to ensure comprehensive data interpretation in the context of rural tourism research.

Coding Process

The study employed a two-stage coding process, utilizing both open and focused coding techniques to analyze the data collected from Wulin Village.

1. Initial Open Coding: Open coding resulted in the identification of 6 main categories and 24 subcategories, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories and Subcategories Derived from Open Coding

Categories	Subcategories
Stakeholder Identification	Local residents, Government officials, Tourism developers, Overseas Chinese, External investors
Tourism Development Processes	Project planning, Resource utilization, Infrastructure development, Marketing strategies
Governance and Management	Community participation, Policy implementation, Decision-making processes, Conflict resolution
Economic Impacts	Local income generation, Employment opportunities, Investment distribution, Economic disparities
Socio-Cultural Changes	Cultural preservation, Community cohesion, Identity transformation, Host-guest interactions
Environmental Considerations	Natural resource management, Ecological preservation, Sustainable practices, Environmental impacts

2. Focused Coding: Selective coding was employed to determine themes relevant to each research question, resulting in five sets of themes, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes Identified Through Selective Coding

Research Questions	Themes
Who are the main stakeholders in this rural tourism destination?	Diversity of stakeholders, Power dynamics, Stakeholder interests and motivations
How are these villages managing and developing this rural tourism destination?	Governance structures, Development strategies, Resource allocation, Community involvement
How do different stakeholders' understandings of the scenic area's development shape its changes?	Divergent visions, Negotiation processes, Adaptation and compromise, Impact of stakeholder perspectives on development trajectory
Are there conflicts or issues in the development of the rural tourism destination? If so, what are these contradictions and problems?	Economic benefit distribution, Cultural authenticity vs. commercialization, Environmental preservation vs. development, Community participation challenges
How are these problems being resolved?	Conflict resolution mechanisms, Policy adjustments, Stakeholder dialogue, Adaptive management practices

This coding process allowed for a systematic analysis of the data collected from Wulin Village, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. The open coding provided a broad categorization of the data, while the focused coding allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the specific issues and dynamics at play in Wulin's rural tourism development.

Through this iterative coding process, the research was able to capture the complexities of stakeholder interactions, development processes, and the various challenges and opportunities presented by rural tourism in Wulin Village. This approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the local context while addressing the broader research questions about rural tourism development in China.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The Role of Community

Despite the numerous transformative reforms in rural China—from the land reforms of the early 1950s to the communalization movement post-1958, and the new rural economic reforms since the 1980s—which have significantly altered rural society, land ownership, and agricultural production methods, the traditional clan relationships and socio-cultural structures in Chinese rural communities have remained relatively stable. These enduring features have contributed to the relatively strong cohesion of Chinese rural communities, enabling them to present a united front when negotiating with government and external capital interests. In examining the role of the community in the development of rural cultural tourism, this paper consider the village committee as a proxy for the entire community in Wulin Village. Because Wulin village's historical development, wherein a significant portion of the population resides overseas, leaving primarily women, children, and the elderly in the village. Consequently, local affairs are often managed collectively by institutions such as the village committee and the Old Folk Association. This governance structure was evident during the land acquisition process for Wulin Village's development, where the village committee and street director were dispatched to the Philippines to negotiate with the overseas village association.

In the land acquisition process for Wulin Village, kinship relations played a crucial role. During the relocation phase, difficulties in accurately conveying development policies to overseas Chinese led to an impasse in land acquisition. To resolve these issues, representatives from the village committee and street office made multiple trips to the Philippines to negotiate with the local overseas Chinese association. These negotiations strategically utilized clan relationships in a culturally significant manner. Village Secretary Cai recounted a pivotal moment: "When negotiations reached a critical point and both sides were at an impasse, I fortified myself with a few drinks, asked the government officials to rest, and stayed behind to explain to the villagers. I assured them they could raise any questions on the spot, after all, we are all family."

However, the power wielded by Wulin Village in tourism development and operation, like other Chinese villages, does not necessarily guarantee favorable outcomes. In fact, the ideal of "community participation" in tourism development, at least in contemporary rural China, seems to exist primarily in literature. In Wulin Village's tourism development process, the community's voice has been relatively weak. For instance, during the development phase, a shareholding system was introduced, establishing the Wulin Scenic Area Operation Company and the Wulin Investment Company. The equity is jointly owned by the New Town Street Investment Company (established in the name of the village collective), Beijing Qingpu Operation Company, and Jinjiang Cultural Tourism Group (a state-owned enterprise). This investment structure was designed to ensure fair benefits for various stakeholders upon future profitability. The village secretary explained that using the street office's name instead of the original village name to establish the company was a strategic decision: "Initially, people expressed concerns about the operational methods and seemingly unplanned expenditures. To mitigate financial risks, the village negotiated with the government for the street office to provide initial funding."

Consequently, the village collective's shares lack clear beneficiaries, and there are ongoing disputes over equity. The village secretary has even indicated the possibility of legal action, highlighting the continuing tensions and negotiations surrounding benefit distribution. Thus, the shareholding system may not achieve its initial objectives. In the current operational process, although channels for community participation exist, they are not given due importance. For example, individual villagers wishing to conduct business within the scenic area cannot afford the high rental fees and are forced to operate on the outskirts. Their businesses often overlap with those introduced by the scenic area. Additionally, pre-existing rules require village leaders' approval for villagers to obtain business licenses from the industrial and commercial bureau, even for businesses outside the scenic area. This creates significant barriers and burdens for villagers engaging in business activities. As one local shop owner explained, "The rent for shops within the scenic area is too high for us ordinary villagers. We can only set up stalls on the roads in the

buffer zone allocated to us outside the scenic area, but the locations assigned to us are not ideal—exposed to wind in winter and lacking shade in summer. The scenic area staff also prohibit us from soliciting customers, making it very difficult to conduct business."

Consequently, many villagers feel they have not significantly benefited from the scenic area's development. Although early government negotiations and Beijing Qingpu established unwritten rules to provide free guidance and preferential treatment to villagers willing to engage in business within the scenic area, these provisions have not been fully implemented. Instead, Beijing Qingpu seems more focused on regulating vendor behavior, which contradicts the original intentions of the livelihood project. Currently, villagers are establishing other forms of collective economy, such as developing homestay industries, in hopes of achieving better economic returns.

In terms of preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage, Wulin Village has emphasized protection alongside economic development during both the development and operational phases. This approach has particularly attracted overseas Chinese with deep emotional connections to their hometown. The community has been relatively well-involved in the planning and development process, as evidenced by village council and Old Folk Association(laorenhui) discussions on renovating the feng shui pond, preserving temples and ancestral halls, and respecting and maintaining local customs. However, in subsequent operations, attempts to increase the frequency of certain traditional custom performances to attract tourists led to dissatisfaction, spearheaded by the village secretary. However, in subsequent operations by tourism company, attempts to increase the frequency of certain traditional custom performances to attract tourists led to villagers dissatisfaction, spearheaded by the village secretary.

Consequently, in later operations, many customs are now consulted with local residents before being implemented. Another notable instance of community resistance occurred when the retired village secretary participated in a petition, motivated by low compensation for village

cadres and unfulfilled promises to build a provincial-level village kindergarten. This case illustrates that the current community still lacks effective channels to express grievances, compelling even those who once held local positions of power to resort to traditional forms of protest.

Although local community interests have not been fully realized, almost all villagers acknowledge that the government-led and Qingpu-operated scenic area has indeed developed well. While economic benefits may not have met initial expectations, villagers express pride in the increased recognition of Wulin Village and appreciate the improved local infrastructure. It is evident that the villagers' primary aspiration is to enhance their income through scenic area development while preserving traditional customs. Achieving this vision, in fact, requires robust government and operational company involvement to develop and manage the area in ways that attract tourists. Overemphasizing the local community's absolute dominance in rural tourism development might lead communities to deviate from the true meaning of community participation principles (Ying and Zhou 2007). This could potentially hinder the application of external professional knowledge and planning, ultimately limiting the community's ability to further develop tourism in areas such as fundraising, scenic area development, and regional cooperation.

The Role of Government

When examining the interrelationships between rural cultural tourism development in China and other stakeholders, it is crucial to avoid perceiving the government as a monolithic entity with uniform priorities. The political, socioeconomic, and cultural significance of a particular tourism destination can vary considerably across different levels of governmental administration. Indeed, China's bureaucratic structure operates within a vertical hierarchical system where governmental authority and responsibilities are not always clearly delineated. This allows government entities

to selectively intervene in rural cultural tourism development based on their specific interests and needs within certain parameters. However, this institutional framework can, to some extent, exacerbate conflicts of interest between local communities and governmental bodies, raising pertinent questions: How should the roles of various levels of government in tourism development be defined? In which domains and to what extent should official institutions participate in tourism management? Can the government simultaneously protect village interests while accommodating divergent departmental perspectives on scenic area development?

The socioeconomic significance of a destination from the government's perspective rarely aligns with the self-centered prioritization of interests by local communities. This discrepancy may widen as higher levels of governmental administration become more involved. For instance, the aforementioned requirement for villagers to submit detailed project proposals for businesses both within and outside the scenic area, coupled with the need for approval from scenic area leadership for businesses in the surrounding areas, is perceived as highly inequitable by the villagers. However, a government official elucidated the rationale behind these policies:

"We have invested over 1 billion yuan in this scenic area. We need to ensure a balanced number of similar businesses to prevent malicious competition. Our goal is unified management. Typically, villagers tend to focus on short-term benefits and may not consider the overall development of the scenic area. We have observed instances of tourist exploitation in places like Gulangyu in Fujian, which is why we prohibit villagers from soliciting customers. This is to ensure the sustainable development of the scenic area. We aspire to achieve effective village self-governance and believe it can improve, but in the initial stages, we must implement reasonable planning."

From the villagers' perspective, the government has not fulfilled its promises of economic development. They find it exceedingly difficult to operate their own businesses here. Regulations that appear reasonable on paper actually impinge upon their interests. Although government officials point out that many villagers are employed in entry-level positions such as tour guides and security personnel within the scenic area, this is merely a preferential choice under equal conditions. Simultaneously, government officials believe that they have indeed stimulated the village's economic development, citing examples such as the establishment of stalls for villagers, even if the villagers do not fully appreciate this approach. Many officials view these issues as necessary points of friction in the scenic area's development process.

Regarding collective economic income for villagers, besides the previously mentioned unresolved equity ownership, disputes have arisen between the government and villagers over parking lot revenue. Villagers contend that considering the project's extensive use of public facilities and the inconvenience they endure, their 10% share of parking lot revenue is disproportionately low. However, from the government officials' perspective, 10% of parking lot revenue allocated for village public expenditure is sufficient, given that the village did not participate in the construction of the parking facilities. This illustrates how divergent understandings of the various resources involved in tourism development, viewed from different perspectives, can lead to substantial disagreements. One villager expressed their frustration: "The tourism project utilizes a large portion of our public infrastructure and frequently disrupts our daily lives, yet we receive only a small fraction of the parking lot revenue. This feels unfair."

Due to the absence of a clear prior agreement on income distribution, tensions have continued to escalate. Recently, some villagers have resorted to more confrontational methods to express their dissatisfaction. For instance, there have been incidents where villagers blocked major road intersections in protest.

Furthermore, changes in government leadership can impede the development of the scenic area and lead to constant shifts in development objectives. Between 2017 and 2020, Wulin experienced four changes in leadership teams due to promotions, complicating the project's evolution. The frequent leadership transitions, coupled with extended construction periods and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in inconsistent implementation of the initial design, particularly in areas related to livelihoods and green spaces. The original conceptual design for the Wulin Village tourism project envisioned an urban resort area with extensive green spaces, positioning Wulin as a livelihood project. However, as the project progressed, compromises and challenges emerged between the original design and actual construction. For example, some planned green spaces could not be realized due to technical limitations in underground pipeline construction, as the construction did not strictly adhere to the initial blueprints. Additionally, some areas initially designated as green spaces were repurposed for commercial use, such as restaurants. Economic priorities gradually became more apparent. A project planner recounted a frustrating moment when Qingpu management requested government officials to prevent villagers from selling goods during the initial opening of the scenic area, stating, "Qingpu sometimes seems to forget the project's original intention in pursuit of economic benefits. Livelihood issues are crucial." As the project developed, the livelihood aspect of the Wulin tourism project appeared to diminish, and economic conflicts between villagers and the government became increasingly evident. Although early government negotiations and Beijing Qingpu established unwritten rules to provide free guidance and

preferential treatment to villagers willing to conduct business within the scenic area, these provisions were not fully implemented. Instead, Beijing Qingpu seemed more focused on regulating vendor behavior, contradicting the original intentions of the livelihood project, and the government appeared to allow this situation to persist. Simultaneously, the project's initial design aimed to balance multiple objectives: cultural preservation, improving local residents' lives, and providing high-quality leisure options for professionals in the semiconductor industry. However, as the project progressed, it noticeably shifted towards emphasizing commercial and tourism elements.

During the development process, the protection of cultural and natural heritage remained a significant concern, particularly regarding the preservation of ancient and famous trees. The involvement of Tsinghua Tongheng Planning & Design Institute and Deputy Mayor Huang Shaowei personally ensured that an ancient tree, which had been protected by the village secretary since 2014, was properly safeguarded during construction. This demonstrates the government's continued emphasis on cultural and ecological protection in project development.

Pursuing higher levels of direct administrative control may not necessarily be a prudent approach for the development of rural cultural tourism in China. As different leadership teams change, the project's original intentions may undergo substantial transformations, introducing significant instability factors for local residents and the entire tourism project.

The Role of External Capital

The concept of "external capital" is relatively broad and ambiguous. In this context, external capital primarily encompasses two categories: firstly, small-scale tourism enterprises from outside the area, such as small restaurants, guesthouses, and souvenir shops; secondly, large-

scale capital from external sources, whose primary investment objective is to control or at least influence the overall development and operation of rural cultural tourism. This analysis will focus on the latter, specifically the tourism operation investment companies introduced by the government.

Although external capital rarely directly competes with local communities for tourism development and operational rights, it often operates behind the scenes. Objectively, it serves as a catalyst in the government's pursuit of power over tourism development zones, often positioning itself in opposition to local villagers' interests. During interviews with Wulin Village residents, they frequently conflated the operating company with the government, indicating a perceived alignment of these entities. Simultaneously, when dealing with external capital, governments typically do not treat the transfer of tourism development rights as an isolated case, as evidenced by examples from other tourism projects. Contracts usually include various additional conditions, such as investments in remote, low-profit projects. These additional conditions increase the operational costs for tourism operating companies, consequently creating significant pressure to generate revenue from tourism projects. Given that the tourism industry is characterized by long investment cycles, situations where local villagers' interests are sacrificed to increase revenue can easily occur. As a result, local communities bear a greater risk of having their interests compromised.

Regardless, it would be irresponsible to hastily conclude whether external capital plays a positive or negative role in the development of rural cultural tourism in China without conducting comprehensive research and investigation. In the economic operation of the scenic area, Beijing Qingpu believes they have already implemented highly professional planning. From their perspective, avoiding homogenization among businesses within the scenic area and providing unified training and standardization for businesses in the surrounding areas are necessary to significantly impact the long-term development and profitability of the scenic area. They also

point out that as long as villagers are willing, their company will provide free business training, including assistance with the aforementioned business project proposals.

In the Wulin project, Beijing Qingpu Company, responsible for daily operations, has achieved remarkable success in tourism promotion. They strategically utilized social media, celebrity endorsements, and official media channels to effectively enhance the village's visibility and attract tourists, particularly young visitors. High-profile photoshoots featuring celebrities and renowned magazines in Wulin Village, which made traditional accessories like hairpins and flowers sought-after tourist commodities, serve as clear evidence of their successful marketing efforts. According to a Qingpu public relations representative, "Although we initially lacked experience in promotional writing, through the joint efforts of our company and official media channels, each of our WeChat articles now consistently receives over 100,000 views."

Notably, the positioning of the Wulin project has evolved throughout its development process. Initially, Wulin Village was planned to cater to high-spending, high-quality groups, specifically the foreign talent introduced to the chip technology park. Consequently, the operating company, Beijing Qingpu, positioned the village as a high-end leisure resort. For instance, the average nightly rate for hotels operated by Qingpu is approximately 2,000 yuan, significantly higher than the average disposable income in Jinjiang (65,005 yuan per capita annual income for urban residents in 2023). This pricing strategy is comparable to that of China's first-tier cities, disregarding tourists with average consumption capabilities. However, as the chip industrial park's development has not met expectations, and the overall positioning of Wulin Village has shifted towards a combination of cultural and rural tourism for ordinary citizens, Beijing Qingpu has maintained its high pricing, deviating from the original intention of balancing local demand with high-end products.

Despite efforts to solicit villagers' opinions on cultural matters, there have been instances where local residents felt their traditions were distorted or disrespected. This indicates a need for more

in-depth cultural training for the management team to enhance their cultural sensitivity. As one villager pointed out, "Sometimes it feels like our customs are just for show, rather than being respected."

In the Wulin project, external capital has consistently adhered to the principle of economic prioritization. As their power within the scenic area increased in the later stages, they altered some principles that should have benefited and respected the villagers. However, external capital has also brought significant development to Wulin

Results:

CONCLUSION

The development of rural cultural tourism in China, as exemplified by the Wulin Village project, reveals a complex interplay of stakeholder interests and objectives. This study's findings contribute to our understanding of the challenges inherent in balancing cultural heritage preservation, economic development, and community participation within the context of China's rural tourism initiatives.

Firstly, the evolution of the Wulin Village tourism program since 2017 demonstrates how diverse stakeholder visions can significantly impact project outcomes. The initial conception as a high-end resort for foreign professionals has transformed into a more general cultural and rural tourism destination. This shift reflects the dynamic nature of tourism development and the need for adaptive management strategies. Concurrently, the government has repositioned the Wulin project from a livelihood-focused initiative to a conventional commercial tourism venture. The frequent changes in leadership and inconsistent implementation of the original design highlight the importance of continuity and clear communication in long-term project planning. Additionally,

villagers' expectations for economic benefits from the tourism project have become increasingly explicit.

Secondly, as external capital and government entities have gained increasing power in the tourism development and operation process, there has been a gradual shift from a livelihood project to a more commercially-driven enterprise. This transition underscores the tension between economic growth and whole community and community members' benefits. The maintenance of high pricing strategies, disparities in benefit distribution, and strict regulations on local small businesses indicate a power imbalance favoring external capital and government interests over those of the local community. The drawbacks of top-down approaches to tourism development in rural areas have become apparent, necessitating more inclusive governance models.

Lastly, the Wulin Village case study illuminates several critical challenges in balancing cultural heritage preservation, tourism development, and community participation. The tension between authenticity and commercialization, the struggle to equitably distribute economic benefits while maintaining cultural integrity, and the difficulty in reconciling professional management with meaningful community participation are all significant issues.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice in rural cultural tourism development in China and potentially other developing countries. They suggest a need for more flexible and inclusive planning processes that can accommodate diverse stakeholder interests while prioritizing long-term sustainability over short-term economic gains. Future research could explore innovative governance models that better balance professional expertise with local knowledge and interests.

In conclusion, while the Wulin Village project has brought economic development and increased visibility to the area, it also serves as a cautionary tale about the potential pitfalls of rural tourism development when community interests are not adequately prioritized. As China continues to develop its rural areas through tourism, policymakers and developers must strive for more

equitable and sustainable approaches that genuinely empower local communities while preserving their unique cultural heritage.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LIST OF SYMBOLS

PREFACE