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Overview of Rural Tourism Development in China

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Abstract Rural tourism is a form of tourism relying on rural environment, with rural unique natural scene and cultural characteristics (production pattern, life style, folk customs, and rural culture) as object, and integrating sightseeing, vacation, recreation and shopping. Rural tourism provides recreation products for urban residents, promotes national and local economy, promotes rural employment, keeps traditional culture, improves rural ecological environment, and promotes urban and rural exchange. From concept and characteristics of rural tourism, this paper made a brief overview of development background, realistic significance, influence factors, development mode, and existing problems, in the hope of providing favorable references for grasping development situation of rural tourism in China.

Key words Rural tourism, Overview, Influence factor, Development mode

1 Introduction

At the same time of rapid development of tourism economy in China, both tourism types and contents become varied. With constant increase in income and demand level, tourists are no longer satisfied with traditional urban sightseeing items. In addition to hustle and bustle urban environment, nervous and depressed rhythm of life makes urban residents generate strong desire of returning to nature. In this situation, rural tourism arises. Vast in territory, China has abundant natural scene and agricultural resources and folk customs are varied. These provide congenital conditions for development of the rural tourism. Convenient modern traffic and policy support provide postnatal guarantee for development of the rural tourism. However, due to starting late, there are still some problems in theoretical guidance, policy regulation, and operation experience. Thus, it is necessary to make overview of current development situation of China's rural tourism development.

2 Connotation of the rural tourism

2.1 Basic concept of the rural tourism Domestic and foreign scholars have slightly different opinions about definition and understanding of the rural tourism. According to Gilbert (1990), the rural tourism is a type of tourism in which farmers provide board and lodging for tourists conducting various recreational activities in typical rural environment such as farms and pastures^[1]. Bill Bramwell and Bernard Lane (1994) stated that rural tourism is a complex and multi-level concept, and it includes sports and recreational tourism, ecological tourism, and cultural and folk custom tourism in rural areas apart from agriculture-based tourist activities, such as horse riding, mountaineering, exploring, and hunting, etc^[2]. According to EU and OECD, rural tourism is defined as tourism taking place in countryside, and "countryside" is its core and unique characteristic. It is based on large space and sustainable development^[3].

Domestic scholar Xiong Kai (1999) defined rural tourism as

a type of tourism taking rural communities as activity place and rural unique production pattern, life style and rural scenery as object system^[4]; Xiao Youxing and Ming Qingzhong et al stated that rural tourism is a type of tourism with rural spatial environment as prop, rural unique production pattern, folk customs, life style, rural scene, rural residence and rural culture as objects, and using urban and rural difference to plan and combine products, and integrating sightseeing, recreation, vacation and shopping^[5]; Wu En and Cai Yunlong (2002) defined rural tourism as a type of tourism undertaken in traditional rural areas, taking rural natural environment, rural scene, rural products and rural life as attractive things, not relying too much on capital and high technologies, and using less special reception service facilities^[6]. In general, the rural tourism is a type of tourism taking place in countryside with countryside as its core aspect worth buying. Rural tourism closely connects with nature or agriculture and has small operation scale and traditional social structure and cultural characteristics.

2.2 Characteristics of the rural tourism Rural tourism has following characteristics. (i) Tourist activities take place in countryside. Rural tourist activities are generally carried out in countryside where the operation is extensive and industrialization level is low. (ii) Tourist resources are original. No matter the natural landscape, folk custom, or life style and production pattern, rural areas have great differences from urban areas. These differences become the largest aspect attracting tourists to go and promote rural areas to keep their original nature as much as possible. (iii) Tourist time is seasonal. Rural tourist resources are restricted by climatic and natural conditions, so the rural tourism is seasonal. (iv) Tourist activates have property of participation. In the process of rural tourism development and operation, there is often participation of local residents; in the implementation of tourist activities, there is participation of tourists. (v) Tourism operation is sustainable. On the one hand, rural tourism is a new operation mode developed on the basis of original agricultural production condition and resources, has little damage to original resources and production pattern, so it is sustainable; on the other hand, maintenance of original culture and ecological environment is an

essential guarantee for keeping attraction of tourist site and forces tourist sites to stick to sustainable development. Guo Huancheng and Hanfei (2010) analyzed current development situation of China's rural tourism and stated that China's rural tourism has following development characteristics: (i) It still remains at the starting stage. Tourist items are mainly agricultural tourism combined with folk custom and cultural tourism. (ii) Functions of rural tourism are mainly sightseeing and recreation. (iii) In location, rural tourism relies on economically developed cities, scenic spots, or characteristic farming region. (iv) In management, rural tourism is generally managed by agricultural department assisted with tourism department^[7].

2.3 Development background of the rural tourism Rural tourism started from western developed countries such as England and France in the middle and later periods of the 19th century. At first, it was only activity of aristocrats. Later, with development and improvement of railway and other traffic facilities, rural tourism became more and more popular. From the 1960s, America, Japan and Poland present rural tourist products. By the 1980s, the rural tourism had taken on considerable scale in European and American developed countries. Now, rural tourism has become one of the most influential tourist items in Romania and Japan. In China, the earliest rural tourism activity started in the 1970s and most rural tourism activities were political reception. Till the 1990s, real rural tourism appeared in China. In the later period of the 1980s, Shenzhen City launched "litchi festival" and "picking garden" and obtained excellent benefits. Then, a lot of regions imitate and started characteristic rural tourism items. In addition, energetic support of the state directly promotes development of the rural tourism. By now, rural tourism has become an essential type of tourism in China's tourism industry.

2.4 Functions and development significance of the rural tourism (i) Promoting national and local economic development and increasing local residents' income. Through fully and effectively developing agricultural resources, rural tourism can increase income of local government and residents, promote development of related industries, and expand labor employment. (ii) Protecting traditional rural landscape and cultural integrity. Through economic benefits brought by rural tourism, local residents consciously undertake responsibility of maintaining and keeping local landscape and cultural characteristics, to avoid homogeneity of rural areas and urban areas. (iii) Improving rural ecological environment. On the one hand, tourism economy is environment-friendly and its negative influence on environment and resource is less than other industries. On the other hand, economic benefits of rural tourism can stimulate local residents' enthusiasm for maintaining and managing environment, thus it can improve rural ecological environment. (iv) Promoting urban and rural cultural exchange. Tourists can realize importance of traditional culture and ecological environment through experiencing and getting close to nature in rural areas. Rural residents can obtain benefits from tourist activities, strengthen their sense of pride for tradition-

al culture and living environment, and learn urban knowledge and ideas. (v) Satisfying psychological demand of urban residents for "returning to nature" and improving life quality of urban residents.

3 Factors influencing development of the rural tourism

Factor influencing development of the rural tourism is a topic of both domestic and foreign scholars^[8-13]. Generally, we can divide those factors into geographical factor, resource factor, and interested parties.

3.1 Geographical factor influencing development of the rural tourism Development situation of rural tourism is closely related with its geographical location. This is manifested in three aspects. (i) Economic level of the region. Higher economic level is favorable for development of the rural tourism. He Jingming (2006) analyzed development trend of agritainment in Chengdu and the analysis indicated that development of agritainment takes on simultaneous growth with regional economy and urban residents' income^[14]. (ii) Distance from downtown. Wu Bihu (2001) surveyed visit of domestic urban residents for different destinations, the survey showed that 91% tourists take activities in the areas 15 km from downtown, and near 60% tourists take activities in the areas 50 km from downtown^[15]. (iii) Convenient traffic. Researches of Han Fei and Cai Jianming *et al* (2010) indicated that rural tourist sites having distance of 50 – 100km and 1 – 2 hour highway traffic to cities have advantage of geographical location^[16].

3.2 Resource factor influencing development of the rural tourism Resources of tourist sites are unique. It includes all natural, cultural, production and living resources. (i) Rural landscape, including natural, cultural, and historic landscape. Han Fei and Cai Jianming *et al* (2010) made GIS spatial analysis on 150 city-level folk custom tourist villages in Beijing and found that most tourist villages are located in plain area or shallow mountain areas and mainly rely on major scenic spots or river systems^[16]. (ii) Rural culture, including folk customs and farming life. Fan Miao and Li Ying (2013) surveyed tourists experiencing Xi'an culture and found that three factors (participation in folk custom festivals, experiencing farming cultural activities, and feeling historical culture) have significant correlation with willingness for revisit^[17]. (iii) Special local products. He Jingming (2006), taking Longquanyi as an example, pointed out that local rich flower and fruit resources attract numerous tourists^[14].

3.3 Interested parties of development of the rural tourism

Interested parties in the development of the rural tourism mainly include local government, local residents, tourism enterprises, and tourists. Yang Jun (2006) stated that local government, local residents, tourism enterprises, and tourists belong the dynamic system of rural tourism, but have different benefit pursuit, so there is certain friction objectively. If these interested parties fail to cooperate with each other, it will influence development of the rural tourism^[13]. (i) Local government. Attention, guidance,

support, and macro-control of government have great influence on development of the rural tourism. Zou Tongqian and Ma Xin *et al* (2006) held that government should play its role in transforming infrastructure, providing funds, information and policy support, regulating market order, and maintaining industrial safety, to ensure healthy development of the rural tourism^[18]. (ii) Local residents. Participation of local residents in tourist activity directly influences development of local rural tourism. Ai Linshu and Zou Dongsheng *et al* (2012) surveyed participation of residents in Shiniuzhai scenic spots of Pingjiang County in Yueyang City. Results indicated that local residents seldom participate in rural tourism. They are unwilling to maintain local landscape characteristics and environment resources, leading to gradual decline of rural characteristics, and tourists fail to obtain excellent service^[19]. (iii) Tourist enterprises, *i. e.* tourist developers and operators. Hu Wenhai (2008) stated that the maximum objective of tourist enterprises is to obtain maximum profit, so they pay little attention to benefits of local residents and resource and environment protection, while local residents have to directly undertake negative influence of tourism. If tourist operators simply consider their benefits, it will lead to imbalance in allocation of benefits of local residents. When the conflict becomes larger, it will lead to clash and consequently bring great impact to local tourism^[20]. (iv) Tourists. Motivation of tourists for rural tourism includes push force and pull force. Push force is driving force promoting tourists to travel in rural areas. Push force includes increase in economic income and free time, deterioration of environment, and change of life style, *etc.* Gu Huimin and Wu Chunlai (2003) studied influence of evolution of China's income allocation structure on domestic tourist consumption. They held that there is positive correlation between residents' tourist consumption and actual income, and growth rate of consumption is lower than the income increase, in other words, marginal consumption tends to decline, while the total consumption keeps increasing^[12]. Pull force is factor attracting tourists to go to rural areas, including healthy ecological environment, picturesque rural scenery, and profound rural culture. Tang Derong and Yang Jinxiu *et al* (2008) surveyed 497 urban tourists in Chongqing Municipality and found that curiosity of tourists, their recognition of rural reception ability and service level, and reasonableness of rural tourism price will have significantly influence willingness of tourists for rural tourism^[9].

4 Development mode of the rural tourism

According to participation methods of interested parties, Zheng Qunming and Zhong Linsheng (2004) believed that the development mode of rural tourism can be divided into: (i) "Company + farmer household" mode. In this mode, farmer households directly participate in development of rural tourism. Thus, it increases income of farmer households and enriches tourism items. At the same time, tourist companies regulate reception services to avoid damage to tourists' benefits due to bad competition. (ii) "Company + community + farmer household" mode. On the basis of "

company + farmer household" mode, this mode is added with local community (village committee, for instance) as intermediary. Tourist companies cooperate with communities firstly and organize farmer households to participate in rural tourism through communities. Companies generally do not cooperate with farmer households directly, but undertake formulation of relevant regulations and organize training of farmer households. (iii) "Government + Company + farmer travel association + travel agency" mode. Government is responsible for plan of rural tourism and construction of infrastructure, to optimize development environment; rural tourist companies are responsible for operation management and commercial operation; farmer travel association is responsible for coordinating benefits of companies and farmers and organizing villagers to participate in services; travel agency is responsible for exploiting market and organizing travelers. Such mode can fully use advantages of all links in the tourism industrial chain. (iv) Shareholding system. The state, collective and farmer households can conduct shareholding cooperative operation through converting resources of tourist sites, special technologies and labor volume. Such mode combines responsibilities, rights and benefits of residents in tourist sites, guides local residents to participate in protection of ecological resources, so as to ensure benign development of rural tourism.

(v) "Farmer household + farmer household" mode. Usually, few residents in tourist sites initially developed rural tourism and made success, so as to bring other farmer households to join ranks of tourist reception. Such mode has low operation risks and residents have high enthusiasm for participation. Folk customs are kept intact. Thus, this is most popular rural tourism form. However, due to limitation of management level and investment amount, it is difficult to form large-scale tourism industry^[21].

According to difference of travel items, Huang Jin (2002) divided rural tourism of China into four major modes. (i) Rural scenery mode. This mode is most popular at present. In this mode, tourists are mainly to appreciate rural scenery. (ii) Regional customs and cultural mode. This mode combines original natural ecology, picturesque natural mountains and rivers, cultural and ecological landscape, characteristic historical culture and original rural customs together, thus this mode has strong ecological and cultural color. Tourists are mainly to experience folk customs and local culture. (iii) Traveling agriculture development mode. This mode mainly takes advantage of agricultural sightseeing characteristic, rural community landscape, and scientific and technological landscape to attract tourists. Typical regions are Sunqiao in Shanghai and Zhangjiagang in Jiangsu. (iv) Resident lodging traveling mode. This mode is mainly to satisfy urban residents' desire for traditional life through providing residence and farming activities^[22].

According to difference in support objects, Zou Tongqian and Ma Xin *et al* (2006) divided China's rural tourism development mode into urban relying type and scenic spot relying type. (i) Urban relying type. Typical examples are agritainment in Chengdu

and folk village in Beijing. Major characteristics are developing weekend travel relying urban market. (ii) Scenic spot relying mode. "Village travel" in Guizhou is a typical example. This tourism mode usually combines traditional cultural tourism and village landscape, has profound national style, and cultural features are very outstanding^[18].

Besides, according to leaders of rural tourism development, You Haitao and Ma Bo *et al* (2012) divided rural tourism into farmer household self development oriented agritainment mode and government oriented scenic spot mode^[23]. The former is embryonic form of domestic rural tourism development and the location and investment capital play a decisive role in tourism development; the latter has large scale, and scenic spot is exquisite, but it may lead to loss of rural culture and marginalization of local residents' benefits.

5 Existing problems and recommendations for development of rural tourism

5.1 Existing problems in development of rural tourism

(i) Deviation in cognition. This is mainly manifested in two aspects: (1) weak cognition about nature and characteristic of rural tourism. Not understanding that "countryside" is core aspect worth buying leads to lack of protection of characteristics of local culture and urban trend of landscape. Or too much cultural landscape is built and rural tourism is turned to cultural tourism. (2) Lack of cognition about input and output of rural tourism development. There are two extreme situations. One is blindly optimistic. Before full survey is made for tourism resource and tourism market, project is implemented. The other is pessimistic about profit and it is excessively conservative in investment and development. (ii) Development strategy. Firstly, it lacks overall planning. When developing rural tourism, many areas fail to make overall arrangement and planning for development of rural tourism resources. As a result, there are problems of repeated construction, single form, mutual competition, and low benefit. Secondly, there is drawback in marketing method. In China, much rural tourism is independently managed by farmer households. Due to lack of funds and specialized talents, rural tourism operators fail to undertake overall market survey and the promotion method is simple. The promotion method is mainly delivering leaflets, name cards or brochures. Rural tourism operators are not enthusiastic for active publicity and participation in collective promotion. (iii) Infrastructure problem. At present, infrastructure construction is difficult to suit demands of tourists. Long Maoxing and Zhang Heqing (2006) stated that a big problem restricting rural tourism development is backward infrastructure^[24]. Zhu Hua (2006) surveyed Hongsha Village in Sansheng Township of Chengdu City and found that roads between farmer houses are narrow, sewage treatment facility is backward, water supply system is not perfect, rural electric network has weak power supply capability and landscape type is repeated, and these problems restrict large-scale development of rural tourism in Hongsha Village^[25]. (iv) Management and oper-

ation problem. Firstly, it is manifested in lack of management personnel. In China, there are few specialized management personnel for rural tourism, and many management personnel of rural tourism are local residents. Deng Zhuopeng (2012) surveyed Yanfeng Town in Haikou City of Hainan Province and found that there was only 6 people having senior middle school or above education in the whole Bianhai Village of the Yanfeng Town. Rural tourism management personnel and workers have low quality. As a result, rural tourism remains in extensive operation, chaotic management and the service is difficult to improve. Secondly, both the management system and policies and regulations are not imperfect. At present, China has no definite laws and regulations about rural tourism, so relevant departments have no rules to follow. Consequently, operators are random in operation of tourist items. Besides, farming, forestry, animal husbandry, sideline production and fishery lack unified management institution to coordinate, so the management is usually chaotic and inefficient. Finally, the management effort is inadequate. Management personnel lack effective management of tourism area, leading to poor sanitation condition, serious illegal building and construction, and too many industrial and commercial units. (v) Other problems. There are also some other problems, such as similar tourism products, low taste, and superficial cultural connotation, and chaotic market competition, heavy natural and ecological environment burden, separate regional distribution and organizational form, insufficient investment, and uneven benefit distribution.

5.2 Recommendations for development of rural tourism In line with existing problems in rural tourism development^[24, 27, 28], we came up with following recommendations.

(i) In the cognition and understanding of rural tourism. It is recommended to improve cognition of local government, tourist enterprises and local residents for rural tourism. Besides, it is recommended to maintain and protect countryside of tourist sites, to prevent them from becoming excessive urbanization and commercialization, and fully understand and bring into play tourism function of agriculture. (ii) In survey and planning. Before developing tourism products, it is required to make thorough survey for resources in the tourist sites, source of tourists, and market size, to seek an optimum development mode. In planning, it is recommended to make overall planning before development, to avoid unordered and repeated construction. Besides, it is recommended to arrange product orientation and give prominence to characteristics of tourist site. (iii) In government support and infrastructure construction. It is recommended to bring into full play guidance and support functions of government. Government should provide proper policy preference, to improve enthusiasm of enterprises and farmers for developing rural tourism. Besides, government and tourist enterprises may actively undertake infrastructure construction, to improve level and tourist source of tourist sites. (iv) In product design and mode innovation. It is recommended to take full advantage of original resources of rural areas, explore core tourism products, give prominence to difference of products, and

raise attraction of tourist sites. For example, it is recommended to develop folk products or enhance cultural connotation of hardware facilities, or expand new rural tourism mode. Wang Yuncai and Xu Chunxia *et al.* (2005) proposed five development modes: theme agricultural garden development mode combining agriculture and tourism, rural theme museum development mode passing on local heritage, rural folk custom experience and theme cultural village development mode, modern commercial recreation and enterprise manor development mode, and agricultural industrialized development and industrial manor development mode^[29]. (v) In marketing. In the marketing process of rural tourism products, it is recommended to use flexible marketing method to keep attraction to tourists. Based on influence factor theory, Li Yan (2008) proposed building marketing and service network of rural tourism, to realize smooth information and ensure sufficient flow of tourists^[30]. Besides, it is required to pay attention to building tourism brands. Individual farmers can realize scale effect through group cooperation and establish tourism brands. (vi) In management. Firstly, the state should enhance management of rural tourism. Zhou Lingqiang and Huang Zuhui (2004) stated that China should make clear of industrial management department, determine management responsibility, set up management provisions, service rules, quality standard, and business license system, provide guidance in specific management, and provide public services for training, information, propaganda, promotion, and consultation, to create excellent operating environment for further development of rural tourism^[31]. Also, it is recommended to strengthen management of personnel in tourist sites. In addition, it is recommended to enhance training of tourism workers and improve their service level. It is proposed to strengthen tourism education of local farmers and build harmonious and friend tourism environment. Finally, it is required to enhance environment management of the tourist sites. It is recommended to protect and improve rural ecological environment, improve local sanitation situation, protect and maintain rural characteristics.

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