

## RESEARCH NOTE

### RURAL TOURISM RESEARCH IN CHINA: 1997–2006

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This article identifies five themes in Chinese rural tourism studies, including (1) definitions of rural tourism, (2) rural tourism planning and development, (3) pragmatic challenges and solutions, and (4) policies and impacts. Further, these themes are grouped by three methodological approaches, including supply-side perspectives, policy-oriented research, and descriptive methods. The article is based on the review and synthesis of 325 research articles published between 1997 and 2006 in China. The findings contribute to an understanding of China's rural tourism industry and current state of academic research on rural tourism issues unique to China but having global significance.

Key words: China; Research methods; International tourism; Rural tourism

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#### Introduction

As globalization continues to push the frontiers of economic development, countries and regions scramble for lucrative industries and businesses to replace traditional industries, or search for new, emerging flagship industries. Often this replacement industry or new economic development presents a double-edge sword: countries are hopeful about their entry into the marketplace, yet in most cases painfully aware that this development will be uneven by necessity. Tourism, for example, is seen as a valuable industry for many emerging

destinations around the world, yet initially the focus for tourism development is those urban centers that might soon become destinations. As a result, urban dwellers usually become the first to benefit economically from tourism. For many observers, rural tourism development is required not only to distribute tourism's economic benefits equally but also to provide some industry sustainability. Of course, negative externalities such as cultural dilution and environmental degradation follow the introduction of tourism without planning in rural areas. And in emerging contexts, these negative impacts can be more apparent and have serious

consequences for rural populations struggling with development in general. Despite its promised rewards and potentially disastrous consequences, rural tourism in emerging contexts is occasionally neglected as a formal academic topic. China is not exception.

Adventure, travel, and recreational activities in rural areas have been global phenomena for millennia. In Europe, such pursuits were first recorded early in the 19th century (Lane, 1994b), while in Asia, for example in ancient China, even as “an accepted lifestyle . . . in pursuit of greater wisdom and knowledge” (Sofield & Li, 1997, p. 122) among the elite classes. Moreover, China’s traditional ghost festival, Qing Ming Festival, actually is a happy, countryside, day-trip affair for the entire country—for both rich and poor residents. With the world moving toward urbanization, a new kind of rural tourism emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, characterized in many different ways, such as agritourism or ecotourism (Lane, 1994a). Rural tourism gradually shifted from describing tourists’ activities in the rural setting into a distinctive, geography-based tourism related to human settlements or coastal-oriented tourism (Gartner, 2004; Lane, 1994b). The academic literature not only records the emergence of this type of tourism but also how it has managed to influence the tourism industry as a whole.

### Objective

The many facets of associated with this new rural tourism in China are extensive, including definition and conceptualization (Lane, 1994b) and supply and demand. The characteristics of the former focus on resources and accommodation, the latter on the motivations and preferences of rural tourists, including their activities. Other aspects include poverty, sustainability, environment, culture, community, and economy (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004), in addition to image and branding (Beeton, 2004; Cai, 2002). In addition, academic and industry leaders cannot ignore elements such as government policy and microlevel business operations (Page & Getz, 1997b). However, the abundant academic literature depicts vivid features of rural tourism in limited fashion for some regions and countries, notably Europe, North America,

Australia, and New Zealand, where rural tourism is well-established and big business (Page & Getz, 1997a, p. 9). Thus, most rural tourism literature examines the subject in the context of Western, developed nations and through wider international perspectives and diversity (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). In fact, more rural areas and populations exist in developing countries; however, except a few case studies (Briendenhann & Wickens, 2004; Liu, 2006), not much light has been shed on those countries, at least in English. Therefore, understanding more background and issues of rural tourism in the context of developing countries could contribute more substantially to exploring rural tourism in China.

Tourism researchers in China began to examine intracountry rural tourism over a decade ago. Yao (1997) wrote an essay outlining some “superficial” issues of rural tourism. An academic seminar on the subject was held in 1998 (Liu, 2006). Since then, more than 400 articles on rural tourism have appeared in Chinese academic journals. Only recently have academic inquiries into China’s rural tourism begun to appear in English journals outside China, with the notable contribution by Ying and Zhou (2007).

The objective of this article is to provide an integrated analysis of rural tourism research conducted by researchers in China over period 1997 to 2006. The article delineates the major themes of the research on which it is based, examining methodological approaches as well as implications. It also offers a platform to facilitate collaboration between tourism researchers and educators inside and outside of China. For this article, the authors reviewed 325 research articles published between 1997 and 2006 and drawn from the CNKI, a reputable database of academic journals published in China.

### Thematic Streams

Five major themes emerged from the investigation of the research articles: (1) definitions of rural tourism, (2) rural tourism planning and development, (3) pragmatic challenges and solutions, and (4) policies and impacts.

### *Definitions of Rural Tourism*

In the tourism literature published in English, a variety of terms are used to describe tourism activities in rural areas: *agritourism*, *farm tourism*, *green tourism*, *ecotourism*, and *alternative tourism* (Grefe, 1994; Lesley & Derek, 2001; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). One of the significant contributions to the definition of rural tourism is by Lane, who saw rural tourism as a continuum from countryside on the urban fringe to the remote peripheral lands (Lane, 1994). However, it is recognized that no uniform definition is universally applicable. Different forms of rural tourism have developed in different regions. Therefore, its definition varies from nation to nation (Lane, 1994; Michael, 2004; Oppermann, 1996).

A variety of definitions have been offered throughout the Chinese research community. Most of the early debates (1997–2000) focused on the applicability of existing definitions. The introduction of alternative terms—such as *agritourism*, *green tourism*, *ecotourism*, and *folklore tourism*—further contributed to definitional confusion (Gan & Chen, 2000; Wang, 1999). The term *agritourism* dominated the early stages of the discourse, primarily influenced by the convention in other Asian destination countries such as Japan and Korea (He & Li, 2002). As a result, there was a tendency to use the terms *rural tourism* and *agritourism* interchangeably. Recent debates (2001–2007) have shifted toward a localized approach, which is to identify essential elements of rural tourism and define their scopes (Liu & Lv, 2006; Wu, Cai, & Jin, 2002; Xiao, Ming, & Li, 2001). Li and Shi (2006) analyzed more than 20 conceptual definitions of China's rural tourism. After a decade of discussion, rural tourism has become conceptually mainstream, and can typically be recognized by four basic descriptive attributes.

*Spatial Location.* Rural tourism takes place in distinctively rural settings. In a developing country, the demarcation between urban and rural is more distinctive than in developed countries, especially in terms of economic disparity and spatial characteristics of landscape. Rural tourism development in China tends to flourish in three types of spatial locations: suburban destinations of metropolises, service districts of natural scenic spots,

such as national parks, and farming and minority-inhabited communities (Li, 2000; Xiao et al., 2001).

*Attraction.* Rural locations as an attraction for tourists to pursue leisure activities was first examined by Xie (1999). Subsequently, Li (2000) expanded the attraction factor to include natural scenery and traditional folklore and cultural attractions. With the rapid urbanization process and pursuit of modernity by rural residents, however, the front line of rural areas is retreating, and authenticity of rural attractions even in the remotest areas is becoming disrupted.

*Hosts.* The role of host in rural tourism is played by farmers and peasants (Gao, 2004). Researchers are united in their concern over the commercial enclave phenomenon wherein local governments and farmers alike rent out their land and facilities to urban entrepreneurs and business operators from outside of the community. Zou (2005) considered such practices as the most serious threat to local autonomy, and perhaps to some extent social and cultural sustainability. As the outsiders of the enclave take over the role of the host, locals become marginal beneficiaries of the rural tourism economy.

*Guests.* Similar to Gartner's (2004) observation that in North America, rural tourism is predominately domestic, China's rural tourism also serves the local, domestic Chinese market. Among the three spatial locations, visitors to suburban destinations of metropolises are mostly from the nearest urban centers. Service districts affiliated with natural scenic spots primarily serve domestic Chinese tourists. However, minority-inhabited communities attract more international visitors than do the two other types of locations.

The discourse about rural tourism in China will continue, as dictated by the academic tradition of pursuing definitional precision. For example, Yin (2004) called for the "unification of terms in systematically studying the theories and methods of rural tourism." It remains to be seen if this is only wishful thinking.

### *Rural Planning and Development*

Characterizing the transitional nature of China's political and economic landscapes, tourism

planning for rural areas has been sanctioned by governments and businesses alike. Chinese academics make up the majority of the consulting community of tourism planners. Academic inquiries in this regard are predominately case driven, typically based on the outcome of a planning project conducted by the researchers themselves. Most of the cases describe the procedure to evaluate rural tourism resources and prescribe how a rural community should make the best use of its resources to develop a rural tourism infrastructure, therefore demonstrating a strong supply-side orientation (Pan, 1999). A few case studies approach the planning from a landscape perspective more related to design than economic development (Xiong, 1999).

The case studies of tourism planning cover a diverse spatial spectrum, ranging from a province to a village (He, 2004; Yin, 2004). The regions that generated the most cases in the past 10 years include Jilin, Shandong, Shanghai, Anhui, Shaanxi, Yunnan, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guangdong, and Shanxi provinces. More recently, rural tourism cases studies have begun to offer and debate development models. While supply-side orientation remains the focus of such studies, these models integrate the examination of the market demand and its underlying social and cultural contributing factors (Meng Li, & Liang, 2006; Zhang, 2006). Presumably, these case studies reflect the evolving practices of tourism planning in rural areas.

#### *Pragmatic Challenges and Solutions*

This subtopic accounted for more than 38% of research articles on rural tourism as of 2004 (Yin, 2004). Yet issues identified by researchers as impeding tourism development in China's rural areas were relatively small in number. Long and Zhang (2006) group these issues into six categories. Closer scrutiny of these issues led to the identification of four major challenges associated with rural tourism development as noted below.

*Urbanization of rural tourism.* Rural destinations become urbanized with standardized facilities and highly commercialized tourist activities, resulting in a superficial expression of modernity. In this category, local scenes and rural characteristics deteriorate.

*Anti-planning.* Despite vigorous planning efforts by governments and businesses, plans get shelved. The infrastructure lags behind. Developments of rural tourism are at best fragmented undertakings with little coordination.

*Resources and resource management.* Although China's rural areas face the lack of financial resources to jump-start an economy, a greater challenge is the lack of human resources to manage rural destinations, attractions, and facilities.

*Commoditization.* The rural tourism activities are highly commoditized. The contacts between tourists and locals are transactional, with the former exchanging their money for accommodation, food, and souvenirs provided by the latter. Offerings to tourists are uncharacteristic of local culture. Crude copycats are a norm.

Research articles offer few theoretical explanations of the underlying causes of these challenges. Even fewer articles offer pragmatic solutions. This analysis of these articles suggests that scholars struggled to identify "root causes" having broader ideological and social implications. In sum, this research falls short of offering specific causes and solutions.

#### *Policies and Impacts*

Research on China's rural tourism policies adopted by various levels of government has identified four orientations: (1) poverty reduction or quality-of-life improvement through tourism employment, (2) protection and conservation of rural tourism resources, (3) pursuit of a "harmonious" society, and (4) more opportunities for the leisure needs of urban residents.

Studies of rural tourism impacts are overwhelmingly positive and are eager to report the economic benefits to rural communities. However, presentations of negative impacts have begun to appear in the literature. For example, Cheng (2006) observed deterioration of ecosystems and indigenous traditions in areas with highly developed rural tourism. Outmigration of indigenous people to make room for rural tourism growth has also been addressed in some of the literature. This research coincides with the trend of outsiders taking over the role of the host, with locals then be-

coming marginal beneficiaries of the rural tourism economy (Zou, 2005). For example, one study reported that 80% of local residents have moved out of their original village, which has become a primary attraction in Lijiang (Lin et al., 2005).

### Methodological Approaches

The rural tourism research as classified in the five thematic threads is characterized by three conceptual and methodological approaches. They are (1) supply-side perspectives on rural tourism, (2) policy-oriented research, and (3) uniform descriptive methods.

#### *Supply-Side Perspective on Rural Tourism*

Most articles from 1997 to 2000 took the supply-side view in examining rural tourism activities. Among Chinese scholars, it is seen as a common and useful perspective to discuss rural tourism within the framework of supply-demand pairings in the tourism system (Lesley & Derek, 2001; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). In China, researchers tend to focus on the planning and allocation of rural resources to develop a viable tourism economy, and designing products and services afforded by these resources. For example, visitor accommodations from the supply-side perspective are rarely discussed. The consumers of rural tourism have not been the focus on such research for some time. More recent examples in the literature take account of the demand-side perspective by using descriptive statistics from consumer surveys; however, the findings still retain the supply-side orientation (see Wang, Luo, & Hao, 2006).

The reasons for such a strong supply-side view of rural tourism are many. Scholars who have an academic background in geography are the mainstream academic community on rural tourism in China. The supply-side orientation from these researchers is composed of two different perspectives: resource based and accommodation oriented. The former embodies the influence of geography, emphasis on resources, and planning and development because most of the authors are affiliated with geography (Aronsson, 1994; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). The latter reflects the perspective of hospitality and management, almost always

from the accommodation perspective (Greffé, 1994; Hummelbrunner & Miglbauer, 1994).

The supply-side orientation predominates in academic journals of tourism geography and planning, accounting for more than 90% of academic articles in rural tourism written before 2004 in China (Yin, 2004). In sum, geography has contributed much to rural tourism research in China and continues to maintain a strong influence over the direction of these studies. However, because this research is so strongly related to the geographic academic domain, it sometimes appears to lack topical diversity. Most research characterized by the plain description of resources, or resource-based planning practices has tended to be somewhat idealistic without considering market demand (Shui, Chen, & Wang, 2005; Xu, 2003; Yang, 2003; Zhang & Chen, 2003; Zhao, 2004). Recently, however, a few articles based on the theories of sociology and economics have contributed insights in rural tourism studies in China (see Chi & Cui, 2006; Huang, 2003; Li, 2002; Peng, 2005; Zhou & Lu, 2006).

Yet another reason that planning prevails is that it fulfills the demands of the industry and policy makers. Planning for rural tourism is not unique to China. Developing countries tend to use planning as a useful tool in the development of rural tourism (Liu, 2006; Turnock, 1990). The strong planning demand and awareness in China of rural tourism contribute to the need to reach out to academic planners and policy makers for better information. Zhang and Chen (2003) observed that China was experiencing countrywide tourism "fever" during the 1990s. Numerous man-made tourist attractions were being constructed, regardless of market demand and the availability of resources. The failure of such attractions taught the policy makers and industry a lesson: planning should be conducted before any actual development begins.

The idea that the plan should come before development is a well-accepted precept in the tourism industry. However, the reason for its acceptance might be more complex. On the one hand, booming domestic tourism demands an efficient support system. Domestic tourism is quite new to China. In 1984, when the central government disclosed its first official record of domestic tourism traffic, the Chinese domestic traveler made fewer

than 2,000 million person trips (Cai & Knutson, 1998). This number rose to 1.212 billion in only 21 years, and contributed approximately US\$68.6 billion, making up 68.8% of China's total receipts in tourism (China National Tourism Administration, 2005). A significant contribution to the growth of domestic tourism was from day trips and weekend outings to suburban areas by urban residents (Wu & Cai, 2006). However, the infrastructure, transportation, accommodations, related small businesses, and policy did not catch up with the increasing development. Thus, the physical plans for transportation, land use, resource development, product design, and landscape design are the focus of this planning phase by policy makers and industry. Conversely, the planning process is also a training process for local tourism administration, developers, investors, and small business tourism owners.

Finally, rural tourism resources have been "discovered" by international tourists, especially in remote areas. China's rural tourism resources are rich in its vast and diverse territory, its 5,000-year history, and its ethnic diversity (Shen, 2003). The country's peripheral and remote rural regions have been molded by the independent cultures of 55 ethnic minorities, including the Mongolians in the north, the Inner-Asian peoples scattered along the Old Silk Road, the Tibetans, and the many groups in southwest China (Gormsen, 1995). For most Chinese domestic tourists, the remote ethnic areas represent poverty and inconvenient travel and accommodations. But the exotic, ethnic cultures with the beautiful rural scenery have provided a primary attraction for overseas visitors (Sofield & Li, 1997). Guilin City and Yangshuo Town of Guangxi Province are renowned destinations for both domestic and international tourists. But until the advent of international tourism, especially young backpackers rushing into Yangshuo in the early 1990s, the province was still unknown to the Chinese public. The "discovery" of Yangshuo so shocked the industry and academia that they named it the "Yangshuo Effect" (Wang, 1999). The phrase became a euphemism for the process of re-discovering rural resources after they had been encountered by international tourists. A similar effect has been noted in Lijiang, Yunnan Province and Bala River, Guizhou Province (Shi, 2005).

### *Policy-Oriented Research*

The topics of research articles are highly influenced by the Chinese central government's policies and actions. Rural tourism as an academic discourse started immediately after the designation of 1998 as the "Year of Small-Town and Rural Tours" by the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA). The number of articles peaked in 2006, which was designated as the "Year of Touring Rural Villages." Since 2004, the political decrees on pressing rural issues by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party have brought waves of academic articles supporting those decrees. Some of these articles bear the titles that use the same wording or closely mirror the meaning of these decrees (see Shi, 2006; Sun, 2006).

### *Descriptive Methods*

Descriptive methods are used in most rural tourism research articles. They are predominately descriptive, based on observational data, and utilize personal experiences in consulting such as tourism planning projects. Research methodology has become one of the greatest challenges to the Chinese tourism research community. For example, the journal *Tourism Tribune*, the top refereed academic Chinese tourism journal, did not institute a formal system of citations and references until 2000.

There are other challenges in addition to the lack of rigorous methodology. Yin (2004) analyzed the research methods in Chinese tourism research using seven categories: qualitative description, quantitative analysis, comparative analysis, quantitative methods, comparative analysis, conceptual analysis, and literature analysis. After an examination of 60 articles on rural tourism published from 1997 to 2003, Yin found that only 2% of the articles used quantitative methods, while qualitative description contributed 76%. In addition, the comparative analysis and literature analysis were used only 8% of the time, and conceptual analysis contributed 6%. In the Chinese tourism research community, some academics suggest that too many research articles only superficially ceased to depend on personal observation and experience (descriptive or qualitative methods), thus failing to

advance theory or quantitative methods. Because such descriptive methods can be labor intensive and time consuming, it has also been suggested by some scholars that quantitative methods will become more prevalent as the pace of Chinese tourism development quickens (He, 2004). However, many research articles marked with quantitative methods are also failing to incorporate a testable hypothesis before employing a theoretical model or data analysis. Fortunately, the question is open to the entire tourism academic community for continued debate in China. Many Chinese tourism scholars now call for more rigorous quantitative methodologies in academic research (Bao & Zhang, 2004).

### Conclusions

As tourism grows in China, so will rural tourism. For many visitors, simple, bucolic, rural Chinese landscape still exists. However, this new rural tourism development must be sustainable and equitable, ensuring an enjoyable experience for visitors and a high quality of life for residents. Careful planning and management of local resources should support these goals. Economic leakage and environmental degradation remains a serious issue for rural tourism development. However, the academic community in China should make rural tourism a focus, inasmuch as many academics are also practitioners that are commissioned by government to make municipal, provincial, and regional plans. Finally, more NGOs and international foundations should recognize tourism employment as an important method of combating poverty and increasing living standards.

In conclusion, the findings contribute to the understanding of China's rural tourism industry and current state of academic research on issues that are specific to China but bear global significance. The contribution of the study at the same time is the limitation of the study. More research efforts should be done to verify the generalization of these issues and challenges from China to other developing countries and emerging destinations, even to the scope of the state of rural tourism in other countries.

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