

# Feasibility Recommendations for Sustainable and Innovative Development of Rural Tourism in China

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**Abstract.** The global tourism industry has been devastated by the three-year Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, as it has been in China. In contrast to urban tourism, rural tourism has grown in popularity among city dwellers. Tourism is viewed as an effective means of achieving sustainable development within the context of global concern for sustainable development. Rural tourism is crucial to achieving sustainable economic and social revitalisation development in China, where the countryside comprises a large proportion of land and resources. Consequently, this study employs a secondary research methodology to examine the history and current status of rural tourism in China, combining the changes in travellers' tourist preferences with the relationship between sustainable development and transformative tourism after the pandemic. The findings indicate that after the COVID-19 pandemic, rural tourism development has enormous potential. For economically, culturally, and environmentally sustainable tourism, it is suggested that local governments should emphasise the importance of cultural empowerment. Local governments should coordinate and direct with the active participation of key stakeholders; entrepreneurs and villagers should utilise local culture to innovate tourism projects and provide visitors with meaningful tourism experiences that combine nature, humanity, and community. The significance of this research is to provide local governments and key tourism industry stakeholders with an analysis of the current situation and recommendations for innovative development at a crucial time in the transformation and upgradation of rural tourism.

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, sustainable development, transformative travel.

## 1. Introduction

Beginning in the ninth century, city dwellers sought solace in the picturesque countryside [1]. From the 21st century onwards, rural tourism has become a development tool, especially in marginal areas of developing countries [2]. The diversification of rural farms in the direction of tourism is seen as a driving force for rural development and regeneration [3]. Rural people use existing livelihood resources to generate additional income without significant cost inputs [4]. Despite China's late start in this field, it was and still is the world's largest agricultural society. Achieving rural socio-economic revival and diversification of income structures has been a top priority for the Chinese government to overcome [5]. In addition, tourism's efficacy in combating poverty, promoting sustainable development, and safeguarding the environment [5] is conducive to the development of sustainable strategies, conflict resolution, and resource optimisation in rural tourism. After three years of the devastating consequences of the pandemic, the rural tourism industry is confronted with new challenges and opportunities [2]. Therefore, analysing the development trends and prospects of the industry, defining the direction of development and formulating a relaunch strategy is essential to complete the sustainable transformation of rural tourism.

This paper analyses the current state and future outlook of rural tourism in China following the COVID-19 pandemic, rural tourism's long-term viability, and the close relationship between transformative travel and sustainable development. The analysis shows that the Chinese government has prioritised rural tourism development, maintaining adequate policy and financial support even during the pandemic, thus giving rural tourism great potential. While local governments have completed the initial construction and overall upgrading of physical infrastructure, social and spiritual dimensions of development still lag. Local governments need to recognise that the growth of

sustainable rural tourism is the path to genuine collective prosperity and that the participation of all stakeholders is essential to attaining sustainable tourism. This research recommends local governments provide endogenous motivation for other stakeholders through cultural empowerment. Meanwhile, entrepreneurs and villagers use local culture and identity to innovate and develop transformative tourism projects for sustainable economic, social, and cultural development within the township government's guidance and planning framework. This paper will provide local governments and rural tourism stakeholders in China with new ideas and insights.

## **2. Analysis of Rural Tourism in China**

### **2.1. Potential for Growth of Rural Tourism in China**

China's rural tourism industry began in the late 1980s, but its development remained in its infancy until 1998 [6]. China's rural tourism has developed significantly since the 21st century, exploding before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, rural tourism received 3 billion visitors, generating over RMB 800 billion (approximately US\$12.31 billion) and raising the incomes of 7 million farming households [7]. The rapid growth of rural tourism is attributable primarily to the national government's policy of promoting rural revitalisation via rural tourism. Given China's unique centralised political system, the extent of government intervention would be at a greater level to facilitate the effective implementation of policies at the national level [8]. The government, therefore, performs a crucial part in promoting rural tourism, and the policy's development objectives provide an attainable framework for the construction of rural tourism.

Throughout the pandemic, the central government maintained a supportive policy, and local governments' funding and supportive policies increased steadily. The central and local governments coordinated their efforts to promote rural tourism and development. Local governments have greater autonomy over rural tourism and can be directly involved in rural tourism development as managers and service providers [8]. Local governments make appropriate policy adjustments based on local environmental, cultural, and folkloric characteristics, so it is not possible to generalise its development. However, based on the three-goal orientations of the central government and its state agencies, namely the "New socialist countryside, Beautiful countryside and Smart tourism", it can be seen that rural tourism in China has now accomplished an overall improvement in rural infrastructure, public services, general environmental conditions, and tourism accessibility [8]. Current policies focus on transformation and quality improvement, emphasising innovative thinking and approaches, encouraging the excavation of rural cultural connotations and the development of distinctive cultural industry towns, characteristic cultural industry villages, and intangible cultural exhibitions in line with the concept of cultural heritage, which will also be the future direction of policy support for rural tourism in China [6].

Most of the literature presented for local governments stresses the importance of government financial support for tourism [8]. However, as rural tourism has become more widespread across the country, it is leading to several problems. For instance, businesses and villagers have historically relied on local government funding rather than focusing on developing travel products and services that attract tourists, resulting in local governments being overwhelmed when central government budget allocations and state funding for specific forms of rural tourism are depleted [6]. Although, funding has become a pressing issue in rural tourism development in China, particularly in the poor central and western regions [6]. However, no government can afford to invest in perpetuity when the funds do not yield benefits in the long term. Relying solely on physical factors such as infrastructure and government funding to advance rural tourism is not a sustainable strategy. Therefore, after the physical elements, such as infrastructure, have been built, rural tourism's social and cultural aspects need to be developed in tandem with the central government's call for cultural and tourism integration.

## **2.2. Transformative Travel and Sustainable Rural Tourism**

Rural tourism offers a potential tool for preserving and revitalising agrarian societies and cultures [9]. Rural tourism, as a sustainable form of tourism, targets to meet the requirements of current villagers' livelihoods and tourists' travels while still meeting the demands of future generations [10]. It is an intrinsic choice for tourism development in less-developed regions. New economic activities can increase the local populace's income without displacing the dominant traditional activities [10]. The need for sustainability in rural tourism can be expressed in terms of promoting the economic development of the destination society, having tourism projects, products, or business models that generate sustainable economic benefits, promoting the continuation and transmission of local cultural heritage, folklore, and distinctive ways of life, and safeguarding the ecosystem.

In addition, Wolfe et al. highlight the strong and growing link between transformative tourism and sustainability [11]. Transformational tourism is when travellers employ travel as a means of self-fulfilment, growth and development, and they seek an experience that provides insight into the world [12]. Experienced travellers are eager to immerse themselves in real-world settings, experience genuineness, and contribute meaningfully to the local communities they visit [13]. The higher level of travellers' pursuit of travel is also expressed in their environmental practices, ethical behaviours, and other sustainability behaviours during their travels. In short, the travellers' pursuit of travel styles and local contributions in transformative travel coincides with the demands for economic, cultural and ecological conservation in sustainable countryside processes.

## **2.3. The COVID-19 Pandemic Creates Rural Tourism Opportunities**

China's urban and rural tourism has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic since late 2019 [14]. China's strict quarantine and restriction policies and long-standing concerns about health factors have changed travellers' travel preferences and needs. Several studies have revealed that the pandemic has generated higher health and leisure demand among travellers, providing significant market potential for rural tourism [14]. From the perspective of various stakeholders, investors prefer leisure and rural tourism projects; tourism experts consider health tourism to be a crucial future development in response to social needs in the post-COVID-19 period; and travellers favour peripheral tours close to nature due to the dual demands of privacy and personal safety [14]. Meanwhile, owing to the rural government's previous tourism infrastructure in the countryside has changed tourists' perceptions of the rural environment and accessibility to tourism, increasing interest in rural tourism.

Existing literature on post-pandemic rural tourism has focused on recovery measures, including infrastructure development, financial support and public-private partnerships, which are mainly officially led measures [14]. Research on rural tourism has focused more on rural development strategies than on identifying innovative development opportunities based on the current state of tourism development and trends. Therefore, a prediction and awareness of the best period for the transformation of rural tourism would help local governments and other stakeholders to occupy the tourism niche and establish a brand image in advance.

## **3. Recommendations**

### **3.1. Cultural Empowerment for Rural Tourism**

A village requires progress on three levels to achieve further growth: physical, social, and spiritual. From the social and spiritual levels, cultural tourism integration helps to disseminate culture through visualised and sizable marketable products while enriching tourism and increasing the tourist experience, shaping the core competitiveness of the destination's characteristics [15].

In this paper, cultural empowerment refers to tourism driven by distinctive local culture and heritage, such as local knowledge, handicrafts, ancient techniques, authentic cuisine, historical sites, etc. [16]. Cultural diversity and differences are the primary attractions for visitors. For example, rural

villages in the Wuyi Mountain area, the home of tea in southern China, can use the local tea and mountain culture to create tourism and cultural experience products with regional characteristics, such as tea picking, tea making, and tea tasting. Rural cultural empowerment can also be achieved through several innovative development models, such as developing unique artistic products, developing creative cultural and tourism routes, building experiential folklore museums, holding special festival fairs, Etc. Furthermore, through cultural empowerment, even economically disadvantaged farmers can gain additional income from tourism development in the simplest way possible, achieving a long-term collective income boost. Evidence shows that traditional local knowledge and skills can be successfully used in the tourism industry to enhance tourists' impressions of the local area by creating participatory tourism experiences [4]. Local governments promote and educate villagers through local crafts and historical stories to achieve lower costs, improve villagers' spare time skills, increase general income, and pass on and transmit culture. In conclusion, the attractiveness of the countryside lies in its unique cultural heritage features, and rural culture offers the possibility of achieving rural revitalisation.

### **3.2. A Rural Version of Transformative Travel**

Transformational travel transforms rural tourism customer segment and enhances the quality of its programs and services. Similarly, rural travel provides more opportunities for travellers. In fact, the experience of transformative travel can be as simple as travelling alone to an unfamiliar place or interacting with people of a very different culture [12]. The sense of travel experience and value sought by the transformative traveller is not proportional to the cost of the trip. Compared to city travel, the countryside offers the most convenient way for travellers to experience an alternative life, with its diverse local culture, low travel cost, and short travel distances. Local entrepreneurs and villagers allow travellers to stay in locally owned and operated accommodations, use local transport, take them into the heart of the community and give them a more lived-in experience. When this happens, travellers begin to think differently, ultimately influencing their thinking and behaviour [12]. In summary, the development of rural travel goes hand in hand with transformative travel. Locals provide a sustainable way for travellers to travel, and travellers with in-depth experiences will become promoters of rural tourism, conservationists, and purveyors of folklore and culture.

### **3.3. Rural Tourism with Universal Participation**

The endogenous dynamics generated by local participants in rural tourism development are crucial for sustainable development [9]. Endogenous dynamics are distinguished from the physical dimension of tourism development, which is social and spiritual. In China, central and local governments usually intervene and take over development rights, with the participation rights of enterprises and local villagers often excluded. However, sustainable development aims to achieve sustainability for the collective benefit. Therefore, an integrated development policy with the backing or involvement of all stakeholders is the ideal choice of policy for sustainable transformation for local government [17]. Consequently, this research recommends that while local governments play a guiding, planning and management role, they should also give more autonomy to enterprises and local people, allowing other stakeholders to focus more on the quality of tourism products and services and build unique destination brands within the framework of tourism development planning and operations designated by the township government, thereby achieving economic sustainability, leading to social and cultural sustainability.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study explores the changes in rural tourism development before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, analyses the prospect of rural tourism, and examines the close connection between sustainability and transformative travel. The findings indicate that the pandemic has facilitated the popularity of the rural tourism industry. The long-standing pandemic isolation policy changed

travellers' travel preferences, and they became more interested in rural tourism with its natural beauty and traditional culture. And, as tourism becomes more common, more experienced travellers seek a higher level of travel experience (known as 'transformative travel') that embraces a sense of responsibility for the destination's environmental, social and cultural sustainability. Travellers' quest aligns with the core philosophy of sustainable rural tourism, so the development of transformative travel programmes that offer travellers a more profound experience in rural tourism will likely be a direction and a breakthrough in developing sustainable rural tourism.

As secondary data collection is the research methodology for this paper, the information is derived from previous studies. In addition, rural tourism development in China varies widely, and this study can only make theoretical and general suggestions. Hence, future research could involve the collection of primary data from field surveys, such as selecting representative villages for fieldwork on development changes before and after COVID-19; or collecting data on rural travellers' acceptance of transformative sustainable travel in villages, etc. These future surveys will aid in refining and bolstering the credibility of the development concepts used to inform this paper.

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