

Original Paper

Challenges and Pathways for Rural Tourism Development in the Context of Rural Revitalization

Aimin Wang¹, ZePing Li^{2*}, & Yaokai Zhang²

¹ Carbon Neutrality Research Institute, Guangzhou Institute of Science and Technology, Guangzhou, China

² Tongren University, Tongren, China

* Yaokai Zhang, Corresponding Author

Received: January 16, 2026

Accepted: March 09, 2026

Online Published: March 23, 2026

doi:10.22158/ibes.v8n2p36

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/ibes.v8n2p36>

Abstract

The economic benefits generated by rural tourism serve as a vital driver for regional economic development. In recent years, China has progressively established and refined tourism regulations to facilitate the development and preservation of rural tourism resources, thereby safeguarding the growth of the rural tourism economy. The Report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, charting a course for the future of rural areas and creating unprecedented opportunities for the development of rural tourism. Under these circumstances, the advancement of rural tourism must adhere to the principles of environmental sustainability and green development, foster an environment conducive to urban-rural integration, leverage the advantages of digital technologies in the new era, and highlight distinctive regional features. By identifying effective development pathways amid existing challenges, rural tourism can thus become a significant force in driving rural revitalization.

Keywords

Rural Revitalization, Rural Tourism, Challenges, Development Pathways

1. Introduction

The resolution of the “Three Rural Issues” (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers)—fundamental to agricultural development and national stability—remains a persistent priority for the Party and state. Central to governmental efforts is advancing sustainable, high-efficiency agriculture, elevating farmers’ livelihoods, innovating rural economic models, and ensuring equitable distribution of development dividends across the agricultural sector. The burgeoning rural tourism industry has catalyzed

employment generation and income growth for farmers, accelerated urban-rural integration, and infused new vitality into rural economic revitalization and regional development. Propelled by national macroeconomic policies and robust local government implementation, rural tourism has proliferated with exceptional rapidity. However, concomitant challenges including redundant construction, resource inefficiency, homogeneous competition, and environmental degradation increasingly constrain the sector's sustainable advancement and impede its qualitative elevation. Within the strategic framework of Rural Revitalization, critical imperatives involve transforming tourism operational paradigms, preserving rural ecological integrity, leveraging digital networks to amplify brand competitiveness, and devising pathways to overcome development bottlenecks; this necessitates establishing comprehensive institutional mechanisms—encompassing regional cooperation and coordinated governance—fostering integrated development philosophies, cultivating collaborative regional mindsets, developing place-specific branding through contextualized approaches, strengthening industrial synergy, and optimizing resource allocation to propel rural tourism economies forward.

2. Bottlenecks in Rural Tourism Development under the Rural Revitalization Strategy

2.1 Isolated, Fragmented Operations Fail to Achieve Economies of Scale

China has now sounded the clarion call for rural revitalization, driving vigorous development in rural tourism. However, most regions advancing such initiatives have failed to integrate tourism resources within their jurisdictions, resorting instead to fragmented and isolated operations characterized by pervasive family-run workshop models. Consequently, while aggregate tourism volume has expanded rapidly, qualitative enhancement remains elusive. This fragmentation impedes the realization of scale economies and exacerbates resource wastage. Moreover, homogeneous operational approaches coupled with the overexploitation of rural tourism resources have precipitated severe environmental pollution, inflicting substantial damage upon rural ecosystems. Due to decentralized management, tourism projects within villages or regions suffer from poor coordination and inconsistent infrastructural standards, preventing industrial scaling. Individual operators typically face substantial upfront investments with inadequate follow-up funding, resulting in heightened operational risks.

2.2 Lack of Brand Distinctiveness and Severe Homogenization

A correct understanding and scientific positioning of rural tourism constitute the fundamental prerequisite for the high-quality development of rural tourism projects. Currently, some regions simplistically equate rural tourism with “viewing rural scenery, eating farmhouse meals, and staying in farmers’ houses.” If this concept prevails, rural tourism inevitably becomes reduced to mere “rural dining and lodging,” stripping it of its intrinsic character. This simplification impedes the realization of rural tourism’s comprehensive economic benefits. Furthermore, tourist experiences lose their essential cultural significance, devolving towards lower-tier tourism demands focused solely on “sightseeing, recreation, and dining.” Consequently, tourism projects within a single village, scenic area, or adjacent regions become homogenized and devoid of distinctive features. They fail to provide visitors with

novel rural experiences characterized by leisure distinctiveness, vacation participation, and high-end connotation. More critically, they are unable to present the emerging rural landscape, where modern agriculture, natural scenery, ethnic characteristics, rural culture, and historical depth blend seamlessly and complement each other.

2.3 Substandard Service Quality, Poor Comprehensive Experience, and Low-Grade Tourism Projects

Rural residents are deep participants and direct beneficiaries in the rural tourism industry. Their overall quality directly impacts the grade of rural tourism projects, and their service quality is a critical factor influencing tourist experiences. The increasingly severe hollowing-out of rural areas has led to the exodus of young and middle-aged adults seeking work elsewhere. Consequently, those remaining to participate in rural tourism service projects are predominantly older females with relatively lower educational attainment. Lacking formal training, they often struggle to fully meet the demands of tourist reception and rural tourism service requirements. This results in tourists being unable to fully appreciate rural life, leading to a subpar comprehensive experience. Furthermore, due to the absence of high-level training programs and professional guidance for rural tourism projects, basic services—such as sanitation, transportation, and safety—remain at a low standard. Project organization and management levels are similarly inadequate, capable only of providing tourists with fundamental tourism services and basic living amenities. This systemic limitation fails to enhance the overall experience and fails to add value to rural tourism projects.

2.4 Unfavorable Macroeconomic Conditions Intensify Development Pressure on Rural Tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an economic slowdown in China and globally, significantly impacting the tourism industry and travel-related services. With sustained declines in macroeconomic growth rates, employment, incomes, and travel behavior have been substantially affected, abruptly increasing development pressure on the rural tourism sector. Furthermore, since entering the new era, the state has placed increasing emphasis on ecological and environmental protection. However, some rural tourism operations persist in a single-minded pursuit of economic benefits, neglecting environmental concerns in tourism development. This approach fails to align with the optimal operating philosophy balancing economic and ecological benefits. Consequently, these operations face rigorous oversight and even penalties from environmental protection authorities, leading to rising environmental compliance costs and an increase in overall operational expenditures. The persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic has also necessitated greater investment in sanitation, medical facilities, and other infrastructure for rural tourism, thereby increasing initial capital outlays. Simultaneously, the persistent decline in tourist numbers has resulted in reduced tourism revenue, leading to prolonged payback periods for rural tourism projects.

3. Advantages and Opportunities for Rural Tourism Development under Rural Revitalization

3.1 Policy Support and Government Prioritization

Many local Party committees and governments regard developing rural tourism as an effective pathway

to address the “Three Rural Issues” (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers) and alleviate rural poverty. Furthermore, they treat rural tourism development as a public welfare undertaking, continuously introducing policies to encourage urban and rural residents to spend leisure time in beautiful villages engaging in healthy recreation and culturally enriching activities, thereby fostering social harmony. For instance, Guizhou Province emphasizes in its 14th Five-Year Plan for Culture and Tourism Development: “Prioritize the development of clusters of tourism-oriented villages specializing in leisure vacations and wellness retreats, with substantially increased resource allocation for rural tourism infrastructure.”

3.2 Clarified Land Rights and Responsibilities Coupled with Improved Rural Infrastructure Create Conditions for China’s Rural Tourism Development

In 2016, the central government introduced the policy on the “Separation of Rural Land Rights” (ownership, contract rights, and management rights). This framework maintains overall stability and consistency among the three rights while allowing flexible functional operation, thereby creating new policy impetus and development opportunities for rural tourism. In recent years, both central and local governments have concentrated fiscal resources on upgrading rural infrastructure. Improvements in rural roads, internet connectivity, water supply, electricity grids, and related facilities have significantly transformed agricultural production conditions and substantially elevated farmers’ quality of life. These advancements provide robust foundational support for the development of leisure agriculture and rural tourism. Take Hefeng Township in Kaiyang County, Guizhou Province, as an illustrative case. Endowed with abundant tourism resources, the township established an economic cooperative following the land rights reform. Through consolidated land contracting, it aggressively introduced leisure agriculture projects, driving the sustainable development of rural tourism while creating employment and income-generating opportunities for surplus rural labor. Presently, Hefeng Township hosts eco-agriculture ventures including selenium-enriched tea plantations, selenium-enriched loquat bases, and selenium-enriched vineyards. It has preliminarily established an organic and pollution-free agricultural product aggregation hub centered on selenium-enriched produce, attracting substantial tourist inflows both intra- and inter-provincially. The synergistic integration of diversified agricultural industries and picturesque rural landscapes generates dual economic and tourism benefits for villagers, creating a compound economic effect.

3.3 Diversified Lifestyle Aspirations and Substantial Market Potential in Rural Tourism

Over the four decades of reform and opening-up, China’s rapid economic development has significantly elevated living standards and transformed consumption patterns. Citizens have progressed from merely pursuing subsistence to seeking integrated fulfillment of material and spiritual needs. Travel has emerged as a primary means for urban and rural residents to alleviate stress and enrich leisure experiences, with rural tourism increasingly becoming a preferred avenue for high-quality living pursuits. Empirical data indicates that in 2020, rural tourism in China recorded over 2 billion visits, accounting for more than 30% of total domestic trips. This demonstrates the sector’s robust expansion

and evolution into a distinctive industrial and consumption paradigm. The COVID-19 pandemic exerted a dual impact on tourism: while causing temporary stagnation in the broader travel market due to persistent domestic and international health risks, it simultaneously catalyzed unprecedented demand for proximate rural tourism. The latter's advantages—provincial accessibility, enhanced safety, and cost efficiency—drove exceptional market enthusiasm. Contrary to expectations, rural tourism budgets expanded rather than contracted, revealing substantial latent demand within this segment.

3.4 Rich Agrarian Heritage and Advantageous Conditions for Rural Tourism Development

China's profound agricultural heritage, historically shaped by dynastic policies of prioritizing agriculture over commerce, has cultivated a diverse agrarian culture; its vast territorial expanse encompasses heterogeneous natural environments yielding multifaceted rural landscapes, abundant agricultural products, and ethnic pluralism, collectively establishing mature developmental conditions for rural tourism marked by substantial latent demand and boundless commercial prospects. Empirical evidence confirms that rural tourism development not only absorbs surplus rural labor, leverages existing resources while unlocking latent resource potential, optimizes urban-rural industrial structures, extends agricultural value chains, and stimulates synergistic growth across processing, transportation, and service sectors—facilitating diversified rural employment and expanded income channels—but also promotes cross-regional urban-rural exchange, bidirectional talent mobility, and complementary resource allocation, thereby strengthening urban support for rural development and industrial reciprocity to agriculture to achieve coordinated industry-agriculture development and integrated urban-rural progress.

4. Path Selection for Rural Tourism Development under Rural Revitalization

4.1 Establishing an Integrated Development Philosophy and Fostering Regional Collaboration

The extent of regional cooperation, urban-rural integration, and industrial coordination constitutes a critical metric for evaluating socioeconomic progress. Guided by the Rural Revitalization Strategy, proactive establishment of an “all-for-one tourism” development model—characterized by synergistic “rural tourism +” and “+ rural tourism” integrations—must comprehensively span economic, cultural, ecological, and social spheres to dismantle sectoral barriers and transcend fragmented developmental paradigms. This necessitates steadfast commitment to innovative rural tourism pathways grounded in cross-sectoral interoperability, cultural inclusiveness, resource complementarity, ecological co-construction, and information sharing. Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic as a global public health emergency has profoundly disrupted livelihoods and economic systems while highlighting the indispensable role of public service infrastructure. Functioning as a dynamic social relational network, public services position rural tourism as a critical nexus connecting essential sectors including sanitation, transportation, catering, and accommodation, thereby serving as a diagnostic window into regional capacities for social security provision, public governance efficacy, inter-jurisdictional collaboration, and integrated development maturity.

4.2 Adapt Measures to Local Conditions and Build Regional Brands

Creating distinctive local characteristics and developing brands tailored to local conditions remains a formidable challenge in rural tourism planning for many regions, where substantial efforts have yielded little progress. The core issue lies in the failure to conduct in-depth segmentation of the regional cultural resources underpinning rural tourism assets, as well as the inability to organically integrate cultural resources with natural landscapes. In some areas, attractions are simplistically and rigidly categorized into types such as “red cultural tourism” or “landscape cultural tourism,” offering only superficial differentiation and cursory introductions of local features without substantive refinement. Consequently, these efforts fail to garner genuine, heartfelt recognition from visitors. Taking red cultural tourism as an example, modern photography techniques could be leveraged—in conjunction with local topography, geographical features, and transportation networks—to produce immersive videos. Alternatively, digital information technology could be employed to create dedicated websites that reconstruct historical revolutionary routes and scenarios, allowing visitors to authentically grasp the arduousness and brutality of past struggles. This approach fosters a deeper appreciation for the hard-won nature of revolutionary achievements, inspiring greater reverence for the present and a renewed commitment to the future. The development of rural tourism requires both the boldness to “bring in” advanced experiences from leading regions—absorbing and adapting them—and the courage to “go global” by building regional brands that resonate beyond local boundaries. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that visitors derive spiritual enjoyment, meaningful reflection, and tangible enrichment from their rural tourism experiences.

4.3 Strengthening Industrial Coordination and Optimizing Resource Allocation

China’s vast territory and abundant resources endow it with diverse and plentiful rural tourism assets. Nevertheless, resource wastage and underutilization persist in some regions, while others grapple with simultaneous issues of overdevelopment and underdevelopment. Additionally, rural tourism often suffers from weak integration with other industries, imbalanced resource allocation, and low social returns. It is imperative to steadfastly uphold the principles of green and sustainable development. By anchoring initiatives in rural agriculture and deeply integrating natural landscapes with eco-agriculture—while harmonizing cultural elements with management practices—stakeholders can refine resource allocation strategies through operational experimentation and accumulated experience. This approach minimizes construction costs, elevates tourism service quality, and ultimately enhances the economic, ecological, and social benefits of rural tourism. In terms of industrial coordination, efforts must focus on fostering synergistic development between rural tourism and related sectors such as transportation, modern cultivation and breeding industries, and agricultural processing. While advancing cross-industry collaboration, continuous emphasis should be placed on professional training for rural tourism practitioners. Upgrading workforce competencies and optimizing labor structures will enable tourists to engage in hands-on participation—such as agricultural production and processing activities—during their visits. This immersive engagement allows visitors to fully savor the rural

tourism experience and appreciate the charm of countryside living and eco-agricultural practices.

5. Conclusion

Rural tourism stands as a vital catalyst for implementing the rural revitalization strategy—a sunrise industry rooted in rural natural resources, enriched by historical and cultural heritage, and aligned with green and sustainable development principles. While the rural revitalization strategy charts the course and presents opportunities for rural tourism, it also introduces potential risks and formidable challenges. The development of rural tourism necessitates scientific planning to avert resource wastage from improper development and prevent ecological disasters caused by irrational or excessive exploitation. Concerted efforts must focus on cultivating distinctive regional brands, striving to achieve “one county, one brand; one township, one unique feature.” Throughout its development, rural tourism must prioritize industrial coordination, urban-rural synergy, and regional collaboration. Neighboring areas should form integrated units for unified planning, rejecting fragmented approaches and isolated operations. Resources should be consolidated and regional strengths harnessed to forge unique regional brands, while infrastructure development should adhere to uniform standards. Collaborative decision-making should establish institutional safeguards for rural tourism. Extending the agricultural industry chain will enhance economic and social returns, fostering a shared framework for large-scale industrial development. Furthermore, an environment of broad public participation should be cultivated, coupled with innovative benefit-sharing mechanisms. This ensures that all stakeholders—developers, operators, and visitors—can realize social value through rural tourism, experiencing nostalgic sentiments and pastoral charm. Ultimately, rural tourism must evolve into a significant catalyst propelling rural revitalization forward.

References

- Zhang, Z. G. (2021). A century review of the rural land system in the sinicization of marxism. *Regional Economic Review*, 2021(06), 15-23.
- Li, X. Q., & Hu, Z. Y. (2022). Spatial distribution characteristics and influencing factors of key rural tourism villages in southwest China. *Journal of Southwest China Normal University (Natural Science Edition)*, 47(01), 53-61.
- Zhang, H., & Yang, S. J. (2022). How to succeed in rural community building? A case study of Yuanjia Village in Guanzhong. *Journal of Northwest A&F University (Social Science Edition)*, 22(01), 15-22.
- Luo, S. F., Meng, S. Y., & Huang, Y. L. (2021). Spatio-temporal coupling of ecosystem with tourism and rural social development system in ethnic areas. *Ecological Economy*, 37(12), 135-144.
- Qian, N. (2022). From poverty alleviation to rural revitalization: Historical investigation and realistic reflection on contemporary China’s rural transformation. *Journal of Northwest Normal University (Social Sciences)*, 59(01), 30-40.

Zhang, H. M., & Wu, Y. Y. (2021). Analysis on the path of urban-rural integrated development to ensure China's food security. *Dongyue Tribune*, 42(11), 84-91.