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## The Tourism Life Cycle Model Of Rural Development: A Case Study of Two Ethnic Villages In Southwest China

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# **The Tourism Life Cycle Model Of Rural Development: A Case Study of Two Ethnic Villages in Southwest China**

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## **Abstract**

Rural poverty is still a persistent and severe problem in the Global South. As the largest developing country in the world, China is committed to ending rural poverty by 2020. As a country strives to become the world's new superpower, it faces a harsh reality of widening urban-rural disparities in education, living standards, health care, and community services. Therefore, China presents an intriguing case of how to achieve sustainable rural development while empowering the local community to promote social justice and maintain cultural identity. Based on our fieldwork done in two ethnic villages of Chongqing Municipality in Southwest China, we explore the social, cultural, economic, and ecological impacts of rural tourism on the local communities.

**Keywords:** China, rural poverty reduction, sustainable development

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Rural poverty is still a persistent and severe problem in the Global South--a concept used to define economically and politically disadvantaged countries of the world, and most of these countries are geographically located in the southern hemisphere. Since the Global South is home to 85% of the world's current population, with 45% of people living in rural areas, the question of how to develop a sustainable approach to alleviate poverty is crucial to the region (United Nations, 2018). Inspired by innovation and diffusion models from American media scholars such as Lerner (1958), Rogers (1962), and Schramm (1964), and funded by international organizations including the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and World Bank, governments of the developing countries across Asia, Latin America, and Africa implemented a variety of projects to achieve economic takeoffs and technology advancement between the 1960s and 1980s. However, after five decades of modernization processes, rural poverty remains one of the most critical concerns among the developing countries (United Nations, 2018).

As the largest developing country in the world, China is committed to ending rural poverty by 2020 (Hsu, 2016). Although China strives to become the world's new

superpower, it faces the harsh reality of widening urban–rural disparities in education, living standards, health care, and community services. These disparities are mainly caused by unequal distributions of resources, with urban areas easily accumulating investments and talents. Rural areas, due to low income, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to education become increasingly marginalized and present a serious threat to China’s long-term sustained economic growth. A working paper published by the International Monetary Fund stated China’s Gini coefficient for income, a commonly used inequality index, reached 0.6, making China top of the list of the most unequal countries of the world (Cevik & Correa-Caro, 2015). Therefore, China presents an intriguing case of how to achieve sustainable rural development while empowering the local community to promote social justice and maintain cultural identity.

Based on our research in two ethnic villages of Chongqing Municipality in Southwest China, we explore the social, cultural, economic, and ecological impacts of rural tourism on the local communities. Applying Butler’s (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle model, this paper (a) reviews competing strategies employed in the developing countries to eliminate rural poverty, (b) outlines the tourism evolution paths of two ethnic villages in Southwest China, and (c) addresses challenges associated with sustainable rural development in the communities.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Rural Poverty Reduction in Developing Countries***

In the past decades, developing countries such as Mexico, Nigeria, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, and others worked to eradicate rural poverty by implementing massive modernization initiatives, including (a) infrastructure improvements, (b) knowledge diffusion surrounding agriculture industrialization and modern communication technology, (c) the development of village enterprises and rural ethnic tourism, and (d) surplus labor reassignment (Araujo, 2004; Ellis & Freeman, 2004; Gao & Wu, 2017; Headey & Hoddinott, 2016; Kay, 2005; Niazi, 2003; Usman & Olagunju, 2017). For example, Asian countries’ ‘Green Revolution’ approach, initiated as early as the 1960s, aiming to end rural poverty by using agricultural biotechnology to boost farm economy, has not achieved its objectives, as evidenced in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia (Headey & Hoddinott, 2016; Niazi, 2003; Scott, 1985). African countries with unsuccessful attempts to emulate the ‘Green Revolution’ model to resolve wide-spread rural poverty found that the agricultural revolution did not necessarily bring about a prosperous economic escalation in Africa because those countries have to cope with different challenges than Asian countries (Diao et al., 2010). In short, lessons from the ‘Green Revolution’ elaborated that the agriculture-first approach in rural regions is insufficiently evidenced to lift out poverty traps.

For a long time, developing countries have been struggling to design effective strategies to eliminate poverty. Although impressive progress has been made as the global population enduring extreme poverty—less than \$2 a day as defined by the World Bank—dropped from 42% in 1981 to 10% in 2019 (Kristof, 2019), sustained economic growth to permanently end poverty becomes more difficult to achieve. In 2015, the United Nations launched the Sustainable Development Goal to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, which set out an ambitious vision on global rural poverty reduction (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Despite the decline in

extreme poverty, until 2018 the World Bank reported that almost half of the world population still struggled to meet basic needs (World Bank, n.d.). Even worse, these countries consistently face increasing pressures from (a) environmental deterioration, (b) limited access to community services, (c) public health problems, (d) income and gender inequality, and (e) conflicts between rural governance and global capitalism (Rigg, 1994).

More recent studies have addressed the importance of exploiting non-agricultural opportunities with an emphasis on the “increasing synergy between education, enterprise, and the labor market” (Sheperd, 2013, p. 159) in rural areas to reduce impoverishment (Barnes et al., 2011; Imai et al., 2015; Wiwanitkit, 2011). The wide variety of non-agricultural activities range from farm entrepreneurship in China (Wang, 2014), family-run hotels in Iran (Hassanli et al., 2015), service and manufacturing employment in Mexico (Araujo, 2004), to government investment in rural electrification in Bangladesh (Wiwanitkit, 2011). As illustrated by Sheperd (2013), non-farm activities can significantly contribute to non-agricultural employment, which in turn will supplement sources of household income. Empirical evidence can be found in some developing countries, such as Pakistan and Morocco (Iqbal et al, 2018; le Polain de Waroux & Lambin, 2013). In practice, however, off-farm activities are not always necessarily the staple sources for income generation. In Mexico, Araujo (2004) finds that non-agricultural rural employment in the service sector may hurt the rural economy, while education and infrastructure building are more effective in poverty reduction.

## ***2.2 China’s Poverty Reduction Strategy: Rural Tourism Development***

Since rural poverty reduction became a national campaign in China in 2016, the Chinese government has been making tremendous efforts to lift millions of rural people out of poverty, including national financial support to rural regions (Wang, 2014), encouraging the rural manufacturing sector (Naminse & Zhuang, 2018), upgrading transport infrastructure (Guo et al., 2014), and exploiting rural migrant remittances (Wang, 2013). As the country’s poverty reduction initiatives make progress, China faces more challenges to sustain poverty reduction and maintain the capacity of the economic, social, human, and environmental values in rural regions. The New York Times reported that as of 2017, “more than 43 million people still live on the equivalent of fewer than 95 cents a day” in rural China (Hernández, 2017).

As a sustainable poverty reduction approach, tourism has been intensely promoted as an effective strategy for boosting the rural economy around the world (Gascon, 2015; Hassanli et al., 2016). In China, rural tourism has emerged as a relatively new strategy for rural poverty reduction (Li et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2013). Research on tourism development in Chinese ethnic communities has been popular in recent years. With the implementation of rural tourism development policy in China in the 1980s and the growing demand for tourist consumers, ethnic rural villages attract growing numbers of urban tourists to the region (Guo & Sun, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2015; Li et al., 2016). Evidence has shown that carefully planned ethnic tourism can turn a poverty-stricken community into a high-profile tourist destination in the region. For example, drawing on Butler’s (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, Kimmel et al.’s (2015) study on an ethnic village of South China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region argues that the social, economic, and ecological influences of tourism development on this village are complex, and developing a sustainable development path is an urgent call to address the challenges of cultural

preservation and ecological conservation in rural China. Similarly, studies from ethnic villages in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Yang et al., 2013), Dangjia ancient village (Guo & Sun, 2016), and Yuanjia village (Gao & Wu, 2017) in North China's Shanxi Province illustrate that although China's rural development currently has accomplished some desired outcomes, further poverty reduction objectives are more difficult to cope with. Data from Statista records that in 2019, 5.5 million Chinese rural residents were still living in poverty. The number has dropped by 95% compared with 2005 (Textor, 2021). However, personal income is not the only indicator to measure poverty. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is an international standard initiated by the United Nations to embrace three-dimensional measurements, including health, education, and living standards. According to MPI 2020, China is ranked 30th among the 107 developing countries. The major contributors to China's multidimensional poor in descending order are education, public health, and living standard (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). Furthermore, MPI incidences highlight striking differences based on regions. For example, Western China experiences significantly higher MPI poverty than Eastern China (Alkire & Shen, 2015).

### ***2.3 Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle Model***

Since Richard Butler developed a tourism evolution model known as Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) in the early 1980s, it has been one of the most widely applied models to illustrate tourist destinations' development paths on a global scale. According to Butler's (1980) TALC Model, the development of a tourism destination will experience six recognizable phases of evolution: (a) exploration phase, (b) involvement phase, (c) development phase, (d) stagnation phase, then (e) decline and rejuvenation phases (pp. 5–12). This assumption is originated from the Product Life Cycle model (PLC), which predicts that when a product/service reaches its climax, it will witness a prolonged stagnation and even decline before regeneration. Hence, the TALC model proposes an S-shaped asymptotic curve to describe the non-linear pattern of development progress in tourism destinations.

Based on this model, numerous empirical studies have been organized to evaluate the sustainability potentials of the tourism destination development, not only in the developed world such as North America and Western Europe, but also increasing research interests in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Hovinen, 1981, 2006; Ioannides, 1992; Keller, 1987; Lagiewski & Zekan, 2006; Ly, 2018; O'Hare & Barrett, 1993). Instead of questioning the applicability of the TALC model, some early studies such as Hovinen's (1981, 2006) research on Lancaster County of Pennsylvania, Keller's (1987) study on Canada's Northwest Territories, and Ioannides' (1992) investigation on Cypriot resort cycle discussed the need to incorporate some other factors, including strategic planning, outside capital, and government involvement when applying TALC as a conceptual framework. Interestingly, Butler (2006) revisited this model and found discrepancies from his earlier research: when the region's tourism moved to maturity, it may not precisely follow the phases as previously defined. Similarly, Liu et al.'s (2016) 30-year-study on China's protected area Wolong Nature Reserve, Ly's (2018) application of the TALC model in West Africa, and Corak's (2006) observation of tourism development in Croatia all confirmed that tourism destinations have their own distinct evolution stages.

In the meantime, the TALC model has been subject to considerable criticism due to its difficulty to operationalize, its inability to distinguish each developmental stage, and being hypothetical and assuming in a homogenous market (Chapman & Light, 2016; Haywood, 1986; Ma & Hassink, 2012; Singh, 2020). These claims have been supported in recent years by a number of researchers. Chapman and Light (2006), for example, in studying the lifecycle of the amusement arcades in British seaside resorts, argue that the destination is not identical, and each arcade has followed a distinct lifecycle trajectory. Singh (2020) is critical of the insufficient data supporting the efficacy of the TALC model.

Based on the development stages defined by Butler’s TALC model, this study attempts to answer the following questions: First, what are the major issues encountered by developing countries to eradicating rural poverty? Second, what is the tourism development path of the selected two ethnic villages according to Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model? Third, what are the specific challenges that confront the two villages in the process of poverty reduction due to tourism development?

### **3.0 Research Methods**

Our research settings are located at Tianjia Village of Wulong District, and Bazhu Village of Pengshui County in the Chongqing Municipality of Southwest China. Compared with Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and other coastal areas, most interior and western regions in China are underdeveloped in terms of the stages of economic development, depth, and breadth of globalization. Therefore, Southwest China is home to mostly backward lands where rural poor were concentrated in this region, and poverty had been epidemic. Table 1 shows the disposable income gap per household among different regions in China.

Table 1. *Per Capita Disposable Income Per Household (Chinese RMB) Comparison in China*

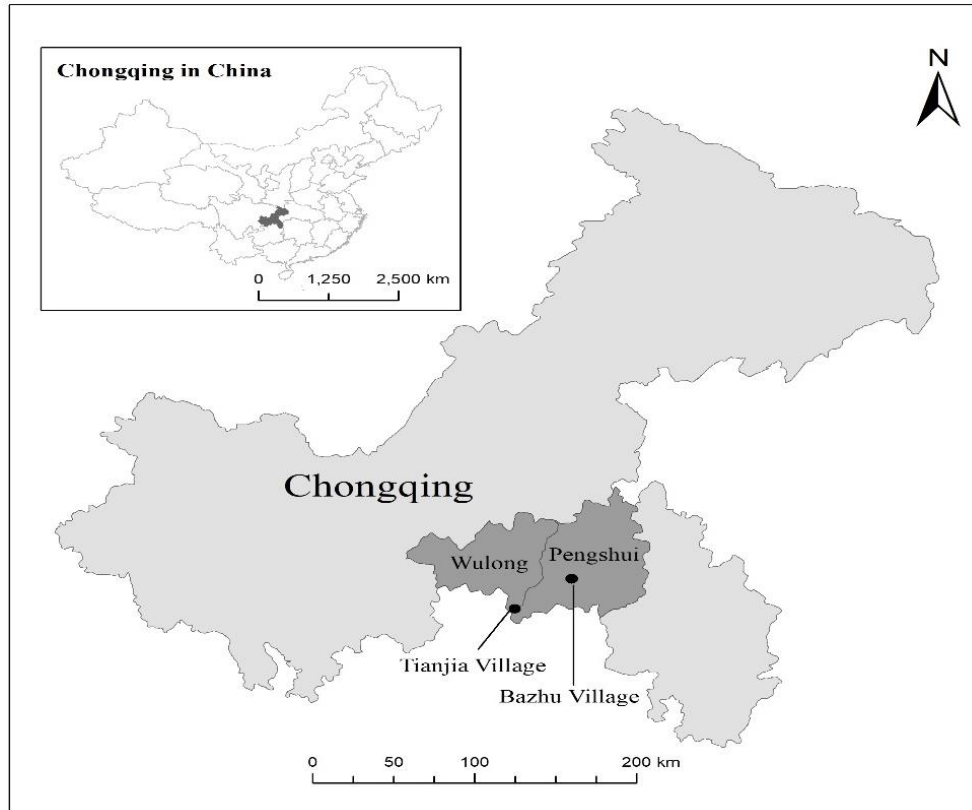
<b>Region</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
<b>East China</b>	23658.4	25954.0	28223.3	30654.7	33414
<b>Central China</b>	15263.9	16867.7	18442.1	20006.2	21833.6
<b>West China</b>	13919.0	15376.1	16868.1	18406.8	20130.3
<b>Northeast China</b>	17893.1	19604.4	21008.4	22351.5	23900.5

Source: China Statistical Yearbook, 2018

Tianjia Village is located at the northeast of Wulong District, which has more than 200 years of history and is currently about a 4-hour driving distance from the city of Chongqing. For centuries, local ethnic Gelao Nationalities of Tianjia Village lived in landlocked territories where access to modern facilities was difficult. Tianjia Village used to be one of the most impoverished villages in the county. Bazhu is a

village with Miao Ethnicities, found in Pengshui County of Chongqing Municipality. This village has a total of more than 60 households, and the majority of villagers belong to the Miao Ethnicity.

Figure 1. Geographic locations of the villages.



Cartographer: Jiangling Wang

This project draws primarily upon field observations, document analysis, and interviews with village administrators and residents. The two villages were selected for this case study because the first author had access to the informants needed for this study. Researchers first visited Bazhu village in the summer of 2018. To ensure that this research did not represent an isolated and non-typical experience of rural development in Southwest China, the first author did additional fieldwork in Tianjia Village at a neighboring county in the same year to strengthen the research findings. Researchers remained at the villagers' houses, communicated with the local people, and observed their work and lifestyles. Interviews and field observations were conducted on visits to Wulong District and Pengshui County. A list of subjects during the interview is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *List of Key Interview Questions*

<b>Type of Respondent</b>	<b>Subjects Discussed During Interview</b>
<b>Villagers</b>	Livelihood before tourism development Main sources of annual income before and after tourism development Annual income generated from tourism Main changes in the villages due to tourism development Perceptions of positive and negative impacts of tourism development Level of involvement in decision-making Participate in ethnic cultural activities Perceptions on ethnic cultural preservations Satisfaction with village facilities and services Attitudes toward the current status and future development of the village Main concerns for the current and future livelihood Percent of the villagers live under poverty level this year and resources/support to help poverty-stricken villagers Tourism development in the past decades starting from the 1980s Current and future plans for tourism development
<b>Village Administrators</b>	Specific strategies to preserve ethnic culture Infrastructure and livelihood improvement brought by tourism development Villager’s involvement in decision-making Issues for the current level of development and perceptions of the future

We conducted individual and group interviews with 41 individuals who represented a wide variety of social-economic status, including (a) farmers, (b) family hotel owners, (c) small business owners, (d) tourism workers, and (e) village administrators. Residents who had been living in the village for the past 6 years, 24 years or older, were invited to participate in the study because they could have clear memories and understandings of changes before and after the tourism development. The interview was designed to encourage participants to provide details of their everyday life experiences. The duration of each interview ranged from 15 minutes to 1 hour, based upon the availability of the participants, and their willingness to share stories. The audio-recorded interviews were translated into English. Among the total 41 participants, 15 were women, and 26 were men who worked as (a)



farmers, (b) factory employees, (c) tourism service workers, (d) village management staff, (e) business owners, and (f) family hotel owners. Their ages ranged from 25 to 81 years. Table 3 provides more details about the demographic profile of the participants. The secondary data mainly came from statistics and annual reports retrieved from national/local governments’ websites, for example, websites from China’s National Bureau of Statistics (stats.gov.cn), Pengshui County government (psx.gov.cn), and Wulong District government (cqwl.gov.cn). Findings from interviews, survey questionnaires, and secondary document analysis revealed the progressive evolution of the rural tourism development paths in the two villages based on Butler’s TALC model over the past decades. These primary and secondary data demonstrated social and economic progress in these regions resulting from rural tourism development and addressed challenges that community members faced for a sustainable future.

Table 3. *Demographic Profile of Participants*

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Sex</b>	Male	63%	26
	Female	39%	15
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Han	20%	8
	Gelao	32%	13
	Miao	39%	16
	Tujia	7%	3
	Other	2%	1
<b>Education</b>	Primary school or below	15%	6
	Middle School	49%	20
	High School	32%	13
	College	5%	2
	Graduate	0%	0
<b>Major Occupation</b>	*Farmer	20%	8
	Factory Employee	27%	10
	*Tourism Service Worker	37%	15
	*Village Management Staff	10%	4
	*Small Business Owner	7%	3
	*Family Hotel Owner	17%	7

\*Note: One participant may have more than one occupation. For example, many farmers are involved with tourism services, and some village managers also operate family hotels.

## **4.0 Results and Discussion**

### ***4.1 Exploration Phase: Prior to the Early 1990s***

The exploration phase is the first stage of Butler's (1980) TALC model, which states that tourist flow to the region is small, and tourism has no significant impact on the local economy (pp. 6–7). Interviews with informants and document analysis found that before the late 1980s or early 1990s, local villagers depended almost entirely on agriculture and suffered chronic poverty before tourism development. Very few tourists could access these villages due to the steep mountains and limited tourism promotion activities. During this period, there was no sign of tourism growth. However, the county-level officials started discussions of promoting ethnic tourism in the regions as the only strategy to relieve poverty since the farming conditions were poor in these mountainous villages, and there was no infrastructure and skilled farmers to explore the rural manufacturing industry. Younger villagers moved to cities as migrant workers, leaving older residents struggling with basic living necessities. Without stable non-agricultural income sources, villagers routinely fell into poverty traps.

### ***4.2 Involvement Phase: 1990s to early 2000s***

The second stage of Butler's (1980) TALC model is characterized by increasing visitors and the establishment of tourism facilities in the destination (p.7). In the early 2000s, Pengshui was designated as an ethnic Miao and Tujia Autonomous County by the Chongqing Municipal Government. The renewed focus on poverty reduction brought new perspectives on alleviation strategies, such as incorporating cultural marginalization and exclusion aspects into the calculation of poverty. Therefore, developing the local economy while preserving ethnic cultural heritage became a dominant theme in the region's development agenda. Since then, the Pengshui county government has adopted an aggressive but cautious approach to tourism development in which the majority of business development is managed by a state-owned company. However, its neighboring competitor Wulong initiated a much more ambitious campaign to advertise its tourist attractions nationally and internationally.

Wulong is rich in ethnic diversity, with 15 of China's 56 minorities represented there. It was well-known for its unique Karst landscapes and the authentic ethnic architecture village scenery. The district is located at the southeast of Chongqing, 87 miles from the city linking the downtown with a railroad and new expressways. In the early 2000s, China's most internationally known film director Yimeng Zhang produced three movie blockbusters featuring the natural beauties of Wulong, bringing immediate national fame of the region to the domestic visitors. Thus, the region became a tourism hotspot for urban populations seeking a relaxing vacation. Recent years have seen increasingly popular outdoor adventuring tourism featuring 'extreme sports' in these regions. Since 2002, Wulong has held annual international outdoor adventure sports and mountaineering competitions showcasing the picturesque settings and unusual landscape of this region to the world (Yang & Qu, 2016).

The residents of both villages are almost all ethnic minorities, and the villages are located in the region known for Gelao and Miao traditional architecture, food, and song-and-dance performances. Ethnic identities embedded in customs and rituals are promoted as attractions for tourists owing to the ethnic differences with the majority of Chinese Han Nationalities. During this period, ethnic tourism was prioritized as a primary economic driver in both regions. Growing wealth had been observed in

both villages, including building new houses, opening convenience stores, and engaging in tourism activities as a reliable new source for family income. Village-based farm accommodations emerged to host urban visitors. In short, during the involvement phase, rural tourism was an influential force to transform the former isolated and impoverished rural ethnic villages into more economically and culturally vibrant small towns. Both villages had experienced significant political, economic, and social benefits as previous literature on ethnic tourism witnessed (Chen et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2013). A village leader acknowledged that the most remarkable outcome was some migrant workers returned to their previous distant homes to seek employment in tourism.

### ***4.3 Development Phase: 2006 to Present***

The third stage of the TALC model, development phase, which suggests a tourist destination reaches its mature stage with the external capital flow for more updated infrastructure, can be easily applied to the two villages' development cycle. In the past ten years, Wulong gained many national awards to expand its carrying capacity of tourism destinations, including 'China National Geopark', and 'China National 5A Scenic Area', representing the highest quality and best-maintained tourist attractions in China. During the development phase, tourism became a pillar industry in Wulong with 36 million tourist arrivals in 2019, a 12.5% increase from 2018. Tourism revenue reached 2.4 billion USD in the same year ("Wulong Attracts 36 Million Tourists in 2019", 2020). Table 4 displays some key indicators on the economic and social development of both regions in 2018.

In 2013, Tianjia Village was designated as a National Traditional Village of China. The efforts to protect traditional villages started in the early 2010s, and until 2018, China officially acknowledged more than 6,500 villages as 'traditional villages' ("Analyzing Chinese Traditional Village with Big Data", 2018). These traditional villages are mostly located in remote rural areas, rich in ethnic culture heritages, but disappearing quickly due to the rapid urbanization and industrialization. In reality, lack of financial resources made village preservation even more difficult. Since the Tianjia Village has been listed as a 'traditional village', coupled with the national poverty alleviation campaign, the village has witnessed a rapid increase of holiday tourists. To help regenerate the community, the local government turned the villages into an ethnic tourist destination by building new roads, deploying modern communication networks, and restoring traditional architecture. The tourism marketing of Tianjia Village highlights its uniqueness in cultural identity as the city's only surviving Gelao ethnic community, thereby immensely expanding its national fame. Besides, the township invited nationally well-known anthropologists and architects to the village to restore the architecture of historic buildings, including the villagers' residential houses and a community center. To preserve the historical Gelao Architecture, wood is only allowed as a construction material. In the past, many wooden houses were damaged but there were no funds to rebuild them. The government-sponsored renovation of the ethnic architecture symbolized the appreciation and value of ethnic villagers' cultural identity, which helped conservation of the endangering Gelao culture. The village has become a popular ethnic rural tourism destination in the region, and now it attracts tourists from nearby cities regularly after several years of development.

Table 4. *Some Indicators on National Economic and Social Development in 2018*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Pengshui County</b>	<b>Wulong District</b>
Population	701,500	411,487
Urbanization Rate (Percentage)	36.83%	44.17%
Per Capita Disposable Income of Urban Households (Chinese RMB)	29124	35290
Per Capita Disposable Income of Rural Households (Chinese RMB)	11144	12871
Added Value of Tertiary Industry (Chinese RMB)	7610.36 Million	9094.82 Million
Tertiary Industry Percentage of GDP	44.7%	54.6%
Television Penetration Rate (Percentage)	95.6%	96%
Mobile Phone Users (Percentage)	527,600 (75%)	397,000 (96%)
Number of Hospitals and Clinics	420	341
Number of Schools	148	150
*Engel's Coefficient of urban households	38.91%	34.3%
*Engel's Coefficient of rural households	43.46%	36.7%

Source: Wulong District and Pengshui County Government 2018 Annual Statistical Report

\*Note: Engel's Coefficient is an indicator to analyze a region's economic status. A higher value of the Engel's Coefficient corresponds to a lower income level. The United Nations defines that 30–40 percent of the Engel's Coefficient represents a well-to-do standard of living. 40–50 percent presents a moderately well-off standard of living (Chong & Feng, 2017).

One village leader noted that “the revitalization efforts came in at a critical time. Otherwise, the only Gelao community in Chongqing city will vanish. Once the village disappears, the culture will be gone.” According to him, one challenge to a community-based tourism development approach is to embrace the interests of diverse social groups, including women, senior citizens, and people with disabilities. To help the vulnerable group share the benefits of rural development, the village organized workshops to teach women to make batik cloth, a cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO. Ranging from traditional accommodation and scenic tourism to showcasing ethnic culture and art crafts, the latter of which can offer opportunities to bring new revenue streams to the local household.

In Pengshui, interview results suggested that the year 2008 was a turning point for Bazhu Village. A state-owned tourism development company and the county government invested billions of Chinese Yuan in infrastructure development, such as roads, telecommunications, and tourist-related facilities, for instance, a visitor

information center and a historical Miao Architecture & Culture Museum. One powerful indicator to measure poverty elimination is income growth per capita. During this period, there were a few sources of income in the Bazhu village for local residents, which included income from (a) agriculture, (b) animal husbandry, (c) economic forests, (d) fruit trees, (e) rural tourism, (f) service trade, and (g) remittance from migrant workers. A newly built Ayi River National Park brought employment opportunities to the local villagers. For example, the park and the nearby Miao Architecture & Culture Museum employ villagers to perform Miao ethnic dances and reception ceremony at the tourism sites. Some villagers sell homemade handicrafts, fruits, and indigenous food at the performing sites.

Because of the small size of each village, nearly 80% of the villagers were involved in local tourism as (a) a guesthouse or restaurant owner, (b) a cook, (c) a vendor, or (d) a performer to create diverse income sources for residents. The interview started with a question of how much your household earned from engaging with tourism last year. The result indicated that 46% of the villagers accumulated revenues within a range of 3,000 to 10,000 Chinese Yuan. Seven percent of the villagers, operating family hotels, convenience stores, and restaurants, were able to obtain 30,000 Chinese Yuan. In Bazhu, the village administration recently hired a college graduate to promote village tourism. He managed a website to post photos of the farmers' guest rooms for accommodations, gradually increasing the visibility of the village to the outside world. Village leaders stated that local villagers more actively participated in tourism-related services than any other agricultural activities because they could quickly accrue lucrative incomes.

We asked villagers what the most impressive achievement was in the community for the past ten years. Most of them highlighted the importance of transport infrastructure and its positive influences on their social mobility. In the past, villagers had to climb mountains to a nearby market to exchange essential living items. Children also commuted on the dangerous journey between school and home. A paved road running through the village connecting the village to the outside world is a strong symbol of rural modernization. They also told us that a new clinic and a new middle school were built in this community.

Table 5 lists some positive and negative effects of rural tourism development on the community based on the interview and survey results.

The results reflected the overwhelmingly positive impacts of tourism development on poverty reduction in the community. It should be noted that a small number of informants—approximately 20% of them—mostly farmers, experienced some negative impacts, such as inflation of local consumer goods/services, and degraded quality of service due to over-tourism. In terms of environmental impacts, villagers spoke highly of the upgraded facilities in the community, “Exercise equipment and a basketball court were built in the community. Children now have more spaces to play around”. Moreover, villagers are quite satisfied with the current quality of life. One small business owner in Bazhu Village stated that,

our village used to be dirty with a lot of flies and mosquitos. Now because visitors flock to the tourist destinations, the county leaders want to showcase a clean community, so we received better service. For example, the waste company will come to collect trash more frequently than before.

Table 5. *Residents Responses on Rural Tourism Development Impacts on the Community*

<b>Positive Impacts</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Negative Impacts</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Reduction of poverty	100%	Raises prices for goods	14%
Creates jobs for local residents	100%	Harms the environment	7%
Helps the community obtain services	88%	Used natural resources needed by local residents	12%
Money spent by tourists remains in my community	59%	Causes a rise in crime rates	7%
Upgraded infrastructure (e.g., new roads, new buildings, new schools)	100%	Harms moral standards	2%
Cleaner environment	93%	Causes traffic jam or too crowded	20%
Helps stimulate local culture and crafts	95%	Erodes indigenous culture	0%

Note: Respondents (N=41) can choose multiple answers.

One interesting finding from Bazhu Village during our fieldwork was that the construction of a new highway from the downtown city to the nearby Ayi River National Park negatively affected its family hotel businesses because this highway cut around their village, giving tourists a quicker and more efficient way to get to the tourism site and bypassing the village. Farm homestay business shifted to villages close to the tourism sites. Family hotel owners at Bazhu lost business, and consequently, a few villagers closed their guesthouses and moved away. During the interviews, residents generally agreed that the new road indeed hurt their business, and voiced concerns about how to sustain tourism in the village. They hoped that the local government would provide some solutions to bring tourism back to the village.

Overall, results from interviews and field observations in this study are consistent with previous literature, in which a few case studies documented that Chinese rural tourism development has been a key driver to combat poverty in ethnic communities (Chen et al., 2017; Kimmel et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2012). Local residents benefit economically from the development, which will help to maintain cultural identities. However, the complexities of sustainable development made it difficult to design new mechanisms to cope with emerging threats. For instance, while villagers' household income grows, its ecosystem destructs. In China, rural industry causes

severe water pollution and land contamination, at the cost of approximately 6.5% GDP annually (Guskte, 2016).

#### **4.4 What is Next after Development Stage?**

From 2008 until today, although the two villages have developed tourism experience for more than ten years, their current status is still in the development phase based on the TALC model. The villages have not reached the later stages outlined by Butler's (1980) TALC Model, namely the consolidation (tourism emerges as the main source of economic revenue), stagnation (tourism reaches peak), decline (tourism destination loses attraction), and rejuvenation (tourism revitalizes after complete renovation) (pp. 7–12). In remote areas, tourism development can be an effective instrument to combat poverty, but it might be a short-term strategy. For now, both villages are still struggling on the road to be a more viable and dynamic community. The majority of villagers and leaders we interviewed were optimistic about the positive social, economic, and ecological impacts of tourism growth. However, one observation from the interview was villagers' heavy dependence on the village administrators' guidance for their future viability. In China, the pro-poor tourism initiative does not originate from the villagers. Instead, the local government is predominantly involved with all phases of planning. When asked about villagers' participation in the tourism decision-making process, they seemed to struggle with concepts such as 'stakeholders', 'decision-making', and 'community involvement'. Apparently, villagers' participation in decision-making is limited, partially due to the hierarchical power structure and political context in China.

As development further intensifies competition among nearby villages, some of the questions remained unanswered for a sustainable future: How tourism in rural ethnic villages can avoid stagnation and decline after the development stage? How are village residents able to learn new skills or strategies to provide unique travel experiences to potential visitors? Since ethnic tourism has been enthusiastically promoted everywhere in China, how can local villagers make their business stand out in the competition? How can rural villages achieve sustainable tourism development to attract local young and competent residents to stop migration towards cities?

## **5.0 Conclusion**

Utilizing Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle Model, this research explores the evolution paths of rural tourism development of two ethnic villages in Southwest China. This article provides a new example to test whether or not the tourism destination of the two ethnic villages in Southwest China will follow the development and decline paths proposed by Butler's TALC model. This study found that the time frame of both villages' tourism development paralleled with China's deepening economic reform and globalization process. The exploration stage of both villages started in the early 1980s when China was set on a course of national development toward modernization. Rural tourism was identified as a quick solution for residents suffering from constant low living conditions: It employs local residents and involves revitalizing existing rural infrastructure and cultural resources to attract visitors. Therefore, rural tourism development can have considerable cultural, social, and ecological impacts on the local communities during the transformation process (Chen, 2014). However, both villages still faced substantial challenges in the involvement stage during their modernization process due to the lack of physical infrastructure (e.g., transportation), human capacities (e.g., skilled

workers or knowledgeable community leaders), and capital (e.g., investments), any of which could jeopardize or possibly derail the villages' development progress. In December 2001, following more than a decade of difficult negotiations, China finally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), marking the country's renewed efforts with global economic integration. During the development stage, tremendous efforts and investments were devoted by the city government to transform Wulong and Pengshui into international tourist destinations. For example, in 2007, one of the four major attractions in Wulong, the Three Natural Bridges, was designated as World Culture Heritage Site, adding international recognition to its portfolio. The consolidation stage of the TALC model has not occurred at both villages since they are still in the phase of further exploring nearby tourism resources and constructing facilities.

The first research question in this study aims to summarize common problems that developing countries face in poverty reduction. The study of the two ethnic villages' poverty reduction experiences reflects similar challenges that many developing countries confront in eliminating rural poverty: traditional rural villages vanished due to urbanization. Young residents migrated to large cities for better education and employment opportunities, leaving the elderly and children at home. Ellis and Freeman (2004) indicate that "migration is a central feature of the livelihoods of the majority of households in low-income countries" (p. 5). From interactions with local villagers, we found both villages are short of human resources to meet the demand for sustainable tourism development. The remaining residents in the villages are mostly the elderly and their grandchildren, or insufficiently educated farmers who do not possess skills or knowledge to become migrant workers in cities. Without young and educated villagers, there would not be sufficient people available to sustain local tourism. Consequently, the shortage of human capital creates vulnerabilities for sustainable development in these villages. Based on our field observations, this is the most significant threat to develop a sustainable development path for both villages.

Rural tourism development in China is resource-dependent because it heavily depends on policy support and massive investment in infrastructure. Accordingly, the concept of power is central to study the roots of poverty. The power to control, distribute, and allocate resources directly leads to the uneven development of tourism destinations. As a result, equal access to resources among farmers, including (a) capital, (b) technology, (c) knowledge, and (d) markets, directly impacts the outcome of poverty reduction. In China, national and regional governments are the key players in tourism development since they are in charge of resource distribution. Therefore, another key challenge that emerged from this top-down tourism-oriented poverty reduction is that one-dimensional policy assistance and institutional governance in promoting local rural tourism development would not produce long-term sustainable development. In a multicultural community, poverty reduction efforts should focus more on promoting social cohesion towards establishing a more equitable and knowledgeable society. This observation is echoed in Africa, a land with predominately agriculture-based countries, the poverty reduction model relying particularly on government policy and private investment fails to raise agricultural productivity, but even worsen rural poverty (Cungura & Hanlon, 2012). A similar situation can be found in Latin America. According to Kay (2006), the leading factor of rural poverty is the structural problem, which gives rise to unequal distribution of resources. Poverty is interlinked with multiple variables not only limited to access to physical, financial, and human resources. Poverty reduction requires an equitable environment to distribute resources, which allows villagers to participate in



community decisions actively and achieve self-empowerment. Clearly, strategies primarily depending on countries' sporadic capital investment in rural regions could hardly meet the agenda.

The year 2020 marks the deadline for ending extreme poverty in China when the Chinese leadership made a promise to the world to remove all poverty-stricken people from the list (Yang & Liu, 2020). The proposal is ambitious, but the challenges are real. Haider et al.'s (2018) work on enduring rural poverty traps reveals that persistent poverty arises from intertwined (a) political, (b) economic, (c) social, (d) cultural, (e) environmental, and (f) historical factors. In reviewing primary theoretical explanations of poverty, Bradshaw (2007) suggests that individual failure, cultural discrimination, political–social–economic instability, and regional dividedness are major causes of poverty. Shubin (2010) argues that cultural exclusion is a powerful indicator in rural poverty studies that will jeopardize economically disadvantaged and culturally marginalized farmers to access resources, consequently minimizing their capabilities to be lifted out of poverty. Therefore, future poverty reduction efforts should be explored in the following directions:

1. Educational efforts to help farmers access to market, technology, and information system.
2. Quality of rural governance that ensures equal/active participation from local citizens in community development decisions.
3. Based on the MPI framework, a multi-dimensional poverty reduction approach is strongly encouraged to provide a supportive environment for social inclusion and empowerment, especially targeting women and elderly demographics.

Our case study of two rural ethnic villages in Southwest China contributes to the rich literature of the global poverty reduction landscape, hoping to help formulate more effective and sophisticated strategies to tackle poverty in developing countries.

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