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## Rural Destination revitalization in Shennongjia Forestry District: A Tourism Poverty Alleviation Perspective

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## **Rural Destination revitalization in Shennongjia Forestry District: A Tourism Poverty Alleviation Perspective**

*(Work in Progress)*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Tourism development is an important way to eliminate poverty. Existing research in this area has been mostly based on western experiences; In this context, there is a lack of research on how to promote rural revitalization through tourism, especially in these poverty-stricken areas. This study fills this research gap by selecting and evaluating the developing process of Shennongjia Forestry District in China. Tourism is considered a way to mitigate poverty in the region, and make a great effort and ultimately revive the economy and culture of the region. Shennongjia Forestry District illustrates the importance of initial conditions and how the government attaches great importance to the development of the region and poverty alleviation policies can help mitigate shortfalls in those initial conditions. We summarize many successful practices in Shennongjia Forestry District in different phases, especially the application of e-commerce in tourism poverty alleviation, and concluded that by addressing the needs of tourists and providing proper products, and a number of poverty alleviation measures have really worked. Study results also showed that the development of tourism has driven the development of other industries, and the construction of government support network has indeed had a profound impact on poverty alleviation. This requires the participation of local communities to jointly advance tourism development.

*Keywords:* Rural revitalization; tourism development; poverty alleviation; Shennongjia Forestry District; China.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Rural destinations are experiencing a global crisis, particularly in developing countries. More and more rural dwellers have abandoned their houses and lands, moving to larger cities to strive for better jobs, higher educations, and more reliable medical services (Deng, Lu & Zhao, 2020). As a result, hometowns have become hollow villages; traditional agriculture and daily life is now disappearing or undergoing homogenization through urbanization and economic concentration. Critical issues remain unresolved, such as how to revitalize rural destinations. This calls for attention by both academics and industry (Yachin & Ioannides, 2020; Gao & Wu, 2017).

Tourism development is usually considered to be an effective means to balance the adverse effects of economic restructuring, especially in rural areas (Gao & Cheng, 2020; Müller & Jansson, 2007). A successful tourism project can advance the transformation of economic development at a low environmental cost. This usually requires rich resources (natural or cultural), adventure experiences, superior locations, and an economic base (Ma & Hassink, 2013).

Past research has studied the development of destinations under the complete market economy system; however, fewer studies have examined the development of destinations in incomplete market economy systems (Halkier, et al., 2019). China is a representative of the typical incomplete market economy system, with many villages and uneven development conditions. The Chinese government has recently advocated developing rural tourism to realize a national strategy to alleviate poverty (Zhang & Zhang, 2020). This has advanced the process of rural revitalization in China. To emphasize universality, Shennongjia Forestry District in China was selected for the study. This work can shed light on rural tourism development in other different regions.

Therefore, this study explains the emergence and prosperity of Shennongjia Forestry District in China during the past 8 years, assessing how tourism lifted the poor people out of poverty and produced regional effects. This study contributes to the emerging path creation research agenda by developing a fuller understanding of this process (Deng, Lu & Zhao, 2020). To achieve this goal, the following research questions were considered: how do Shennongjia Forestry District alleviate poverty

through the development of tourism? What is the way to advance rural revitalization? What experiences can Shennongjia Forestry District be used for reference by other regions?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The worldwide degradation of rural areas has been a general situation because of urbanism. A traditional village would rapidly decay if it does not diversify from a sole dependence on agriculture to a wider range of socio-economic activities (Gao & Wu, 2017; De Souza, 2017). The shrinkage of rural areas can lead to the population loss of the rural area, in terms of population density. This emphasizes the necessities and urgencies of exploring a rural economic transformation mode (Gao & Cheng, 2020). Involving tourism into rurality may be a relatively effective worldwide development path. Rural tourism can boost market economies and create relevant jobs; then governments and researchers credit it with keeping back the Floating population in rural areas (Flisher & Felsenstein, 2000). This encouraging more cultural exchange between downtown area and countryside area, and enhancing the traditional values of rural life, as well as contributing to the Economic Diversification (Yachin & Ioannides, 2020; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Cánovesetal, 2004). Thus, rural tourism should not, however, be understood merely as a type of tourism. It is also a tool to conserve and regenerate rural societies and local life-styles. Rural restructuring supported by tourism has gradually become an effective pillar for promoting economic integration and revitalizing other rural business activities (Tu, et al., 2018). However, some studies have speculated that an over-reliance on tourism may lead to problems (Gao, et al, 2014; Schmallegger & Carson; 2010).

As mentioned above, tourism can provide a solution to economic transformation in rural areas, especially when other industries are depressed (Halkier, et al., 2019). However, the transition from the old rural economy to a new economic paradigm is not a simple process. Rather, it involves pilot projects, learning and summarizations, novel findings, creative policies, feedbacks and re-adjustments. In addition, the geographical distribution of the transition alters the background of every process. As a result, policymakers should consider self-supply with the existing endowments, labors, and the market to infuse the actions to the advancing active processes, local and global (Mutana & Mukwada, 2019; Mackinnon, et al., 2018).

Therefore, to address sustainable rural development, research should be focused more on mechanism and course rather than on local resources (Randelli, Romei, & Tortora, 2014). In practice, the key issues involve balancing the needs and perspectives of different stakeholders and managing them equitably and efficiently. However, issues remain concerning how stakeholders form partnerships in different regions, development stages, and levels; and the factors that should be considered and need to be addressed.

## METHODS AND CASE STUDY AREA

Case studies can provide detailed information on specific factors, based on interviews and observation; highlight the most apparent facilitators and barriers faced by a region during the initiation and/or operation of tourism (Zielinski, et al., 2020). Hence, the case study data can provide important evidence and insights into the evolutionary process of tourism area development. The data of this paper is mainly from Shennongjia Forestry District Precise Poverty Alleviation battle headquarters Offices (hereinafter referred to as SFDPPAO).

Shennongjia area, commonly known as Shennongjia Forestry District due to its high forest coverage rate, is located in the northwest of Hubei Province (Figure 1). Established in 1970, Shennongjia is the only administrative division in China named after "forest area", which is directly under the jurisdiction of Hubei Province. The area covers a total area of 3,253 square kilometers, with a total area of 109°56' ~ 110°58' east longitude and 31°15' ~ 31°75' north latitude.

Shennongjia Forestry District has jurisdiction over 6 towns and 2 townships, 1 national nature reserve, 1 state-owned forest industry enterprise forestry administration, and 1 national wetland park, with forest land accounting for more than 85%. Shennongjia is the first place in China to be inscribed on the "Triple Crown" list of UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Nature Reserve, World Geopark and World Heritage Sites. On July 17, 2016, Shennongjia was added to the World Heritage List, becoming the first world Natural heritage site in Hubei Province and the 11th in China.

In general, the local government has effectively helped local residents out of poverty through efforts (Table 1), and it is noteworthy that on August 7, 2018, the government of Hubei Province approved Shennongjia Forest district to be removed from poverty. In September 2018, it won the title of "China's Natural Oxygen Bar". In March 2019, it was listed as one of the first counties for the protection and utilization of revolutionary cultural relics.

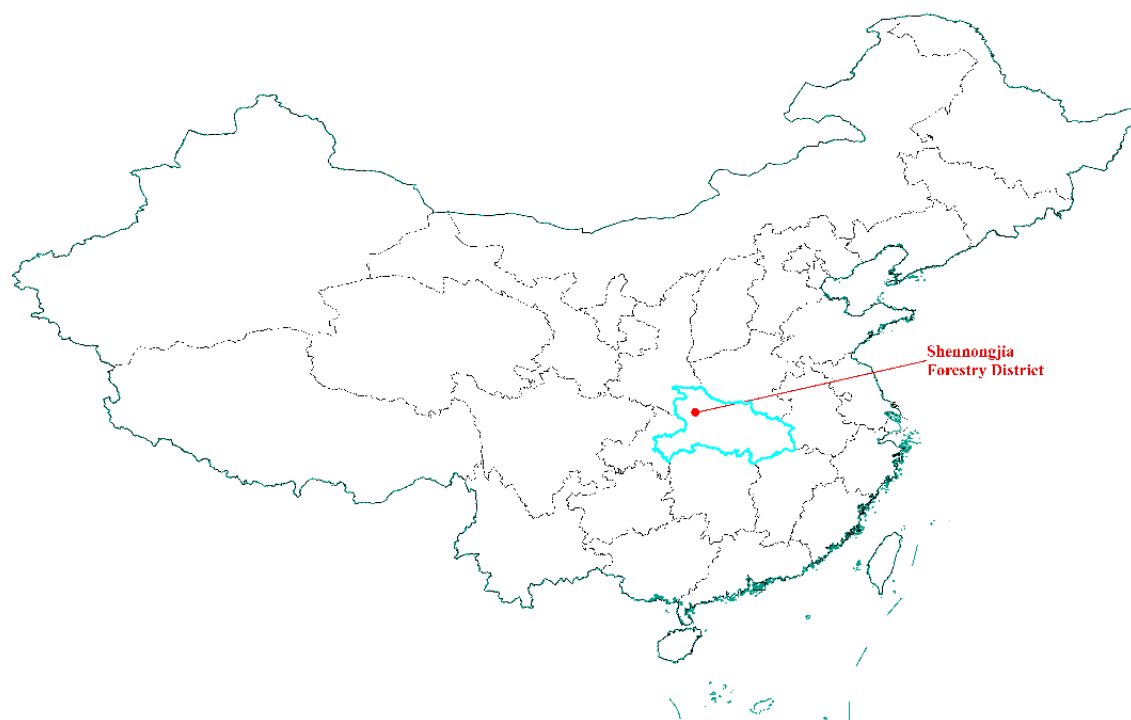


Figure 1: Case study area in China

Table 1: Summary data of targeted rural township poverty alleviation in Shennongjia Forestry District (The statistical unit is the number of households or persons)

No.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
Rural township		Songbai	Yangri	Muyu	Hongping	Xinhua	Dajiuhe	Songluo	Xiagu	
Inputting record	Households	765	1010	534	588	442	517	844	778	5478
	Population	1969	2989	1304	1685	1343	1617	2534	2342	15783
Poverty-alleviation in 2014	Households	64	319	115	65	57	64	101	100	885
	Population	186	1045	163	205	177	258	201	328	2563
Poverty-alleviation in 2015	Households	111	182	88	60	63	157	96	103	860
	Population	338	656	240	234	203	487	375	348	2881
Poverty-alleviation in 2016	Households	350	277	190	278	146	241	375	374	2231
	Population	968	827	532	880	488	733	1298	1204	6930
Poverty-alleviation in 2017	Households	238	228	136	182	171	54	265	189	1463
	Population	468	450	354	360	460	137	643	422	3294
Poverty-alleviation in 2018	Households	All these rural townships were officially announced to be removed of the title "Impoverished mountain county" in 2018.								
	Population	(Source: <a href="http://www.hubei.gov.cn/zfwj/ezh/201808/t20180824_1712302.shtml">http://www.hubei.gov.cn/zfwj/ezh/201808/t20180824_1712302.shtml</a> )								

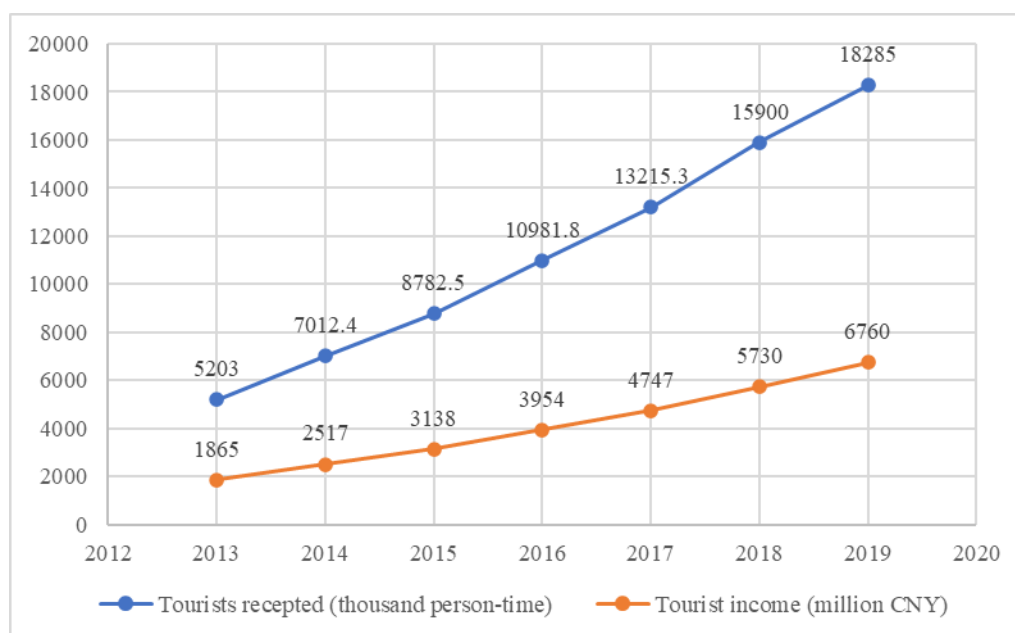
Source: The data in this table is from SFDPPAO.

## RESULTS

Shennongjia Forestry District has made active exploration in promoting regional poverty alleviation through tourism development. The development of tourism drives the overall development of other industries and constantly improves the rural public service system.

Shennongjia Forest District Party Committee played the core role. The first secretary of each village is the head and concurrent post of the district direct unit, effectively integrating capital, projects, talents and other resources to help the development of the industry. Take Week as the unit to promote regularly, set up a carry red and yellow flag, the last position of the speech system, encourage and urge to create a competitive atmosphere. They carry out in-depth research on poor villages and households, analyze the reasons for the lack of development capacity, and adopt targeted policies for each household and village. They combine measures to increase industrial growth and alleviate poverty. They improved the sustainable development of poor villages through tourism poverty alleviation, photovoltaic poverty alleviation, enterprise assistance, and share in dividends.

The local government attaches importance to industrial development to alleviate poverty. Based on the characteristic tourism resources -- the "Triple Crown" heritage site, they promote regional tourism. They develop tourism products in accordance with local conditions, hold various tourism festival activities, create a number of quality tourism routes. Residents here achieve poverty alleviation through running farmhouses, famous tourist villages, ecological leisure agriculture and scenic spot driving. Meanwhile, the modern planting industry and organic agricultural products are built according to local conditions. As a result, these measures worked, and the number and income of tourists in the Shennongjia forest area increased significantly (Figure 2).



Source: The data in this table was partly from SFDPPAO, and the other was from regional statistics.

Figure 2: The number and income of tourists in Shennongjia since 2013

Since most of the poor people are in rural areas, the government has made overall arrangements for the infrastructure construction and resource protection of each village. They comprehensively improve the rural environment and renovate dilapidated houses, and infrastructure for residents, such as water, electricity, roads, telecommunications, landscaping, and lighting, they improved living conditions throughout the area.

The government actively seeks funds to upgrade the existing health facilities and equipment, and improves the local medical level by means of medical trust, remote consultation, personnel training, in-depth exchange and new hospital. Meanwhile, they also improve the level of running schools in towns and villages by optimizing the layout and integrating resources, and actively supplements and improves vocational education and skill training, ensures that vocational high school and vocational college students can also receive systematic education and training, and rely on industrial development to start businesses and find jobs. They expand funding channels and build a comprehensive funding system from pre-school to universities to ensure that poor students can attend school smoothly. Precision is the most important part of targeted poverty alleviation. Therefore, it is necessary to first identify the poor areas and populations, and carry out targeted poverty alleviation, poverty alleviation relocation, ecological compensation and other means according to the specific conditions.

They attach importance to the integration of tourism and other industries, and provide training for poor residents, strengthen their skills, and enable them to find jobs and start businesses by relying on characteristic industrial zones, enterprises and eco-tourism zones so that they can get out of poverty through work. With manual weaving, tourism, farmhouse and e-commerce services, they developed new industries to drive rural poor women to increase their income and get rid of poverty through intellectual assistance, organization and coordination, and employment assistance.

## DISCUSSIONS

They make full use of regional ecological culture tourism resources in Shennongjia Forestry District since 2013, tourism poverty alleviation and development, in-depth practice "green water castle peak is the gold mountain" concept of development, the combination of a variety of mechanisms coordinated development. With these efforts, they promote the precision of the breakthrough and alleviate poverty in Shennongjia Forestry District. Hence, they also explore some conform to the laws of ecological protection, remote mountainous areas development, and the laws of tourism economic development practice and experience.

### Explore a model of efficient development based on reality

(1) Based on reality, they carefully select the leading industry. Remote mountainous areas usually have a good ecological environment and unique local culture. Tourism, with its strong correlation and low pollution, should be given priority to development.

(2) Driven by tourism, the industry in this district develops in an all-round way. For example, the rural households in the vicinity of the tourist area got rid of poverty and became rich through the operation of the farmhouse; Along the road, these farmers give full play to their traffic advantages, build ecological farms, family forest farms (named "Lin Jiale" in Chinese), and develop garden sightseeing. Farmers in other regions take advantage of the ecological advantages of Shennongjia to produce or sell featured tourism commodities such as soil honey, tea, Chinese medicinal materials, soil pig and forest chicken, and develop sales channels by relying on enterprises such as Shennongjia Shopping and e-commerce.

(3) Innovate organizational model and promote efficient development, Combine the role of the Internet of Things, mobile Internet and other information technologies to realize the transformation of products into industrialization through the mode of "e-commerce + tourism + agricultural products + training"; On the basis of guaranteeing farmers' interests, industrial organizations should innovate in the forms of human stock, lease, subcontract, concession and trusteeship.

### Strengthening policy support for poverty alleviation under the leadership of the government

The government is the leader of poverty alleviation and the coordinator of the development of tourism and other industries. The first step is to establish government leadership and give full play their activity. Second, the Party Committee should play its core role of overall leadership and coordinating all parties, strictly implement the one-person responsibility system for poverty alleviation, and effectively integrate funds and projects to provide support for the development of tourism. Third, they also actively mobilize the enthusiasm of community-level Party organizations and the masses, select community-level cadres with strong abilities, responsibilities and dedication, and encourage them to devote themselves to poverty alleviation and development, so as to enhance cohesion. Finally, a scientific and comprehensive follow-up support and consolidation promotion mechanism should be established to strictly implement the requirements of "taking off the poverty cap without taking off responsibility, policies, assistance and supervision".

### Change ideas and straighten out the thinking on rural development

Relying on basic conditions, they choose industries with distinctive features according to local conditions, change traditional development concepts, and straighten out rural development ideas. First, improve the autonomy of residents in poor areas in project development, so that they can have more power in decision-making and supervision, supervise the whole process of design, development and operation of poverty alleviation projects like tourism, and make development projects open and transparent. Second, change the concept of rural operation, and deepen the definite rights of forest, water, land and housing rights of residents in poor areas, so that they can enter the tourism industry smoothly. Third, build confidence and determination to get rich through hard work, and promote the residents of poor areas to lift themselves out of poverty with dignity in the course of rural revitalization and tourism development.

### Relocate the poor in the inhospitable areas to other area and ensure that supporting industries lift them out of poverty

Before relocation, the government organizes development, reform, forestry and other departments to go deep into towns and townships, adopt on-site office and one-stop handling methods, and centrally countersign and approve the site selection, planning, and nature of land use of the centralized settlement sites, so as to quickly start the preliminary procedures. Adhere to the follow-up industrial development throughout the relocation work, in accordance with the idea of both housing and happiness, relocation and poverty alleviation, do a good job in supporting industries.

### Managerial implications for electronic business: Poverty alleviation by E-commerce

Give full play to the platform advantage of e-commerce, strengthen the construction of social poverty alleviation websites, and encourage social capital and Internet resources to enter the poverty alleviation system. They guide outstanding enterprises and organizations to jointly promote the development of poor areas, integrate social resources to the maximum extent possible, and promote the formation of an overall pattern of social poverty alleviation. Strive for domestic and foreign assistance, build a perfect e-commerce platform for agricultural products, optimize the allocation of resources, improve the logistics system, through the e-commerce system to perfect the docking of product demand and supply. And through the e-commerce system, they are able to promote the local products and the popularity of the tourist attractions. They also organize poverty alleviation projects such as tourism development, and organize agricultural and tourism professional companies and other units to promote value creation.

E-commerce contributes to poverty alleviation by promoting cash flows and information flows through the prevalent traveling mobile apps, such as Airbnb<sup>TM</sup>, Ctrip<sup>TM</sup>, eLong<sup>TM</sup>, Metuan<sup>TM</sup>, Qunar<sup>TM</sup>, Fliggy<sup>TM</sup>, Little Red Book<sup>TM</sup>, and Tripadvisor<sup>TM</sup>, etc.; or by stimulating the electronic transaction of the souvenirs and the special local products in the e-commerce platforms, such as Taobao<sup>TM</sup>, JD.com<sup>TM</sup> and Pinduoduo<sup>TM</sup>. Hence, by Web crawlers' techniques and quantitative analysis, we can conduct the correlation analysis on the linkage between poverty alleviation through tourism and e-commerce in an explicit way.

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