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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Decision-Making Factors in Rural Tourism for Poverty Alleviation: Qualitative Insights from Jianchuan County, China

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, rural tourism has emerged as a vital tool for governments, grassroots communities, and international organizations to combat poverty. While existing literature primarily examines the economic, social, and sustainability impacts of rural tourism on poverty alleviation, there is a notable gap in research on the initial decision-making process behind selecting rural tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy. The reasons why rural areas opt for tourism as a solution to poverty remain fragmented and unclear. This paper qualitatively explores why rural areas choose tourism as a strategy to alleviate poverty. Using semi-structured interviews in Jianchuan County, China, the study identifies key factors influencing this decision and how they interact. The findings reveal that rural tourism in Jianchuan County is driven by local assets, government intervention, and external networks, transforming cultural heritage into viable poverty alleviation tools. These findings can help the academic community systematize and enrich research on this issue. Additionally, they can assist other rural areas in carefully examining their own development conditions, analyzing advantages and disadvantages, and making targeted decisions when considering rural tourism for poverty alleviation.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the decision-making factors that influence rural areas to select tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy, providing qualitative empirical insights from a micro level in a bottom-up approach, and revealing the complex interplay between local development conditions, government support, and external assistance.

1. Introduction

Rural tourism has become a widely-watched poverty alleviation tool worldwide (Scheyvens, 2007). As an innovative industrial model that integrates economic

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development and social governance functions, rural tourism provides new economic growth points for poverty-stricken areas by utilizing rural natural resources, cultural characteristics, and social capital (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). In the past decades, many developing countries have regarded tourism as an important part of their poverty alleviation strategies and promoted rural economic development and improved the living standards of residents by developing rural tourism (Ashley & Goodwin, 2007). As a country that has long faced unbalanced development between urban and rural areas, China has gradually developed various models of poverty alleviation through rural tourism and achieved remarkable results in many poverty-stricken areas since it began to implement tourism-based poverty alleviation policies in the 1980s (Zou et al., 2014). In the past decade, China's rural tourism has gained unprecedented development opportunities under the framework of targeted poverty alleviation initiative, becoming an important tool to promote rural revitalization (Ma et al., 2024).

There have been numerous studies on the role of rural tourism in poverty alleviation, especially the evaluation of its economic benefits, social impacts, and sustainability (Medina-Muñoz et al., 2016). However, the research on the decision-making logic behind the launch of rural tourism projects, that is, the driving factors of rural tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy in poverty-stricken areas, is still weak (Kumar & Valeri, 2022). This not only hinders the academic community's panoramic understanding of the phenomenon of poverty alleviation by tourism but also brings uncertainty to actual policymakers (Qin et al., 2019). Fundamentally, this is because when different regions choose to develop rural tourism, their decision-making logic may be affected by various factors, including resource endowment, policy environment, market potential, and the social and cultural background of the community (Qin et al., 2020). These factors interact with each other, making in-depth study on the motivation of rural tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy in rural areas become a research direction with great academic value and practical significance (Anderson, 2015).

In addition, most of the current research on the driving factors of rural tourism selected as a poverty alleviation strategy focuses on the theoretical discussion at the macro level, while the in-depth empirical research on tourism-driven poverty alleviation from the micro level with a bottom-up approach is lacking (Luo et al., 2024). Theoretical analysis at the macro level cannot fully reflect the real needs and personal experiences of the poor as direct stakeholders, nor can they fully identify the driving factors influencing decision-making (Feng et al., 2018). In fact, the decision-making process of developing tourism to alleviate poverty in rural areas is often affected by a variety of internal and external factors, and is the result of complex interactions and trade-offs between multiple stakeholders (Wang et al., 2023). Especially in such a diverse socio-economic context as China, different regions may have significant individual factors when choosing rural tourism as a poverty alleviation tool (Luo et al., 2024). Therefore, in-depth exploration of these influencing factors is not only of great theoretical significance, but also of significant practical value. On the one hand, this helps to reveal the generation mechanism of poverty alleviation by rural tourism, improve the relevant theoretical framework, and fill the gaps in existing research; on the other hand, these research findings can provide decision-making references for other rural areas that intend to develop rural tourism, helping them to more rationally evaluate their own development conditions, so as to be targeted in the process of policy design and implementation and avoid blindly following the trend.

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Based on this, this study uses qualitative methods to conduct an in-depth investigation of three villages in Jianchuan County, Yunnan Province of China, and explores in detail the key factors that influence their choice of rural tourism as a poverty alleviation tool. This study attempts to answer the following research questions: i) which influencing factors prompted the study area to choose rural tourism rather than other industries for poverty alleviation? ii)How did these factors interact to influence decision making in the study area? By addressing these questions, this study aims to provide new perspectives and inspiration for theoretical research and practical decision-making on poverty alleviation by rural tourism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Poverty Alleviation and Tourism

Poverty alleviation remains a central objective of development policy worldwide (Pawar & Tasse, 2023). Traditional approaches have focused on industrialization and urban-centered growth, but recent scholarship emphasizes that inclusive growth must directly benefit marginalized rural populations (Moges, 2013). When developed focusing on poverty reduction, tourism can create jobs, promote local businesses, and enhance community empowerment (Phi, 2021). Winters et al. (2013) offer a research agenda that explores the ways in which tourism can directly affect poverty, through economic opportunities production and social capital creation. Their research contends that a multiplier effect typical of tourism—whereby wealth created in tourism industries is recirculated through local communities—can be a powerful force for closing urban-rural income divides, if properly managed.

In the Chinese context, such poverty alleviation initiatives with tourism components have reaped some rewards. Tang et al. (2022) assessed how state-driven strategies have been effective at closing the urban–rural income gap. Well-crafted policies, such as developing the infrastructure and offering the right amount of financial support to tourism-related programs, can help raise the rural household incomes significantly, their paper concludes. Similarly, Pan et al. (2021) examined rural tourism programs that integrate some aspects of elderly care and community involvement, demonstrating how tourism can enhance not only material well-being but also social inclusion.

However, the literature also mentions that poverty alleviation by tourism is not automatic, or, more specifically, that not every area is suited to cater to tourism (Dada, 2018). Aspects including local governance, the quality of infrastructure, and the capacity of local communities to engage in tourism development are critical determinants of tourism success (Winters et al., 2013). Furthermore, although tourism may have some short-term effects on income, sustaining poverty reduction requires structural improvement and capacity building over time for these benefits to be long-lasting (Feng et al., 2018).

2.2. Rural Tourism

Rural tourism encompasses tourism activities that transpire in non-urban settings and capitalize on natural landscapes, traditional cultures, and indigenous craftsmanship (Kantar & Svržnjak, 2017). Its advancement is frequently perceived as a strategy to rejuvenate rural economies and mitigate rural depopulation (Pokharel & Bhattarai, 2022). Shen et al. (2019) argue that the unique environment of rural areas has a special

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role in cultivating ecotourism and rural tourism. They also emphasized that rural tourism is not only about leisure and entertainment, but also about heritage preservation and the strengthening of local identity.

Rosalina et al. (2021) provide a detailed review of the definition of rural tourism and the challenges it faces in a literature review. They believe that rural tourism can not only protect cultural heritage but also promote economic development, thereby promoting local sustainable development; However, rural tourism may also bring challenges such as overexploitation of resources and unfair distribution of benefits. Liao et al. (2022) took Guangdong Province of China as an example to study the spatial distribution and development path of rural tourism resources, and they believed that scientific planning can help rural tourism areas realize the cluster layout of scenic spots, thereby promoting the balanced development of the region. In addition, He et al. (2021) believe that the sustainable development of rural tourism can only be promoted by combining environmental protection, community participation and economic benefits. In order to evaluate the sustainability of rural tourism projects, Weng et al. (2021) integrated the four dimensions of environment, economy, administration, and market and proposed a comprehensive framework model. The results show that the quality of tourism products and the improvement of local infrastructure are key elements in attracting tourists and can bring lasting benefits to local communities.

The literature shows that successful rural tourism requires the use of unique local resources, including natural landscapes, historical and cultural heritage, and traditional folk crafts, while at the same time guarding against environmental degradation and cultural commodification tendencies (David & Szucs, 2010). Therefore, rural tourism is a double-edged sword – if properly developed, it can boost communities, while poorly developed can exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities (Sachaleli, 2023).

2.3. Decision-Making Factors of Rural Tourism as a Poverty Alleviation Strategy

To understand why tourism is being employed as a strategy to alleviate poverty in rural areas requires identifying the decision-making factors behind this choice. Some studies, though not many, have begun to examine the driving factors of why leaders in poor areas choose rural tourism over other development strategies when developing poverty reduction strategies.

Kumar and Valeri (2022) systematically analyzed the complex interactions among multiple driving factors for rural tourism development. They believe that the combination of resource endowment, market potential, policy, and social capital influences the willingness of poor areas to develop rural tourism. Regions with abundant natural resources and cultural heritage are more willing to develop tourism because these resources are attractive to tourists and thus create economic value. However, areas lacking market potential, with an unfavorable policy environment, and insufficient social capital lack confidence and enthusiasm for developing tourism. Liu et al. (2020) focused on the role of government intervention in the driving mechanism of rural tourism development. They found that the government's proactive measures in terms of financial subsidies, infrastructure upgrades, and market regulation constituted key drivers of rural tourism decision-making.

The development of tourism-driven poverty alleviation projects is also inseparable from the strong support of international development organizations. The United Nations

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Development Program, the World Bank and other institutions have effectively promoted the launch and development of tourism-driven poverty alleviation projects in poor areas through capacity-building, technical support, and international advocacy (Lima et al. 2011). For example, in Africa and Southeast Asia, international development organizations have contributed to the development of local communities by providing skills training and market analysis reports to help rural areas better understand market potential and target tourism products that are in demand (Chok et al., 2007; Harrison & Schipani, 2007). This shows that international aid plays an important role in the start-up and management of rural tourism projects (Wang et al., 2020).

In short, the selection of rural tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy involves comprehensive consideration of many factors. It is influenced by the combination of local resource endowments, economic environment, the effectiveness of public policy implementation, and the level of local community participation in tourism.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Area

The location of this study is Jianchuan County, Yunnan Province of China. Jianchuan County, under the jurisdiction of Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, is located in the northwest of Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture and Yunnan Province. It has a total area of 2,250 square kilometers, with mountainous areas accounting for more than 90% and basins accounting for 7%, and by the end of 2023, the permanent population of Jianchuan County is 161,800 (Jianchuan County Statistics Bureau, 2023). Jianchuan has long been a poverty-stricken county in China, but the county possesses very rich tourism resources. In the past decade, relying on its unique advantages of rich tourism resources, beautiful ecological environment and strong ethnic culture, Jianchuan has gradually developed an innovative path of targeted poverty alleviation by rural tourism. In 2019, Jianchuan County was recognized by the Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism as a "Demonstration County for Poverty Alleviation by Tourism" (People's Government of Jianchuan County, 2022). In 2024, Jianchuan County was recognized as a "National Key County for Leisure Agriculture" by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of China (People's Government of Jianchuan County, 2024).

This study selected three villages in Jianchuan County as data collection sites, namely Sideng Village, Shilong Village and Mijing Village. These three villages are all villages in Jianchuan County carrying out poverty alleviation by rural tourism earlier, and have achieved good results.

3.2. Research Approach

This study employed qualitative research methods to obtain an in-depth and detailed view from the participants about the decision-making factors of rural tourism selected as a strategy for poverty alleviation. The qualitative research approach is most suitable for this study because it aims to give a better understanding of participants' thoughts, feelings and experiences in real-world settings to make sense of their world (Novek & Wilkinson, 2019), which can't be explained by numerical data and statistical analysis solely through quantitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The technique used for data collection in this research was face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews.

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3.3. Sampling and Data Collection Procedure

As it is the deliberate choice of participants due to the qualities the participants possess, purposive sampling was used in this study (Etikan et al., 2016). Three categories of research participants, 29 in total, were interviewed: 23 local poor residents, 3 head villages, and 3 tourism operators. The researchers first visited the village committees of the three villages and interviewed the heads of the three villages. The list of poor residents of the three villages and the list of local tourism operators were obtained from the village committees. Then purposive sampling and convenience sampling were used to determine the poor residents and tourism operators to be interviewed from the two lists. Table 1 shows the summary of sampling.

Table 1: Summary of Sampling

Category of Participants	Target	Sampling Method	Sampling Procedure
Poor residents	23	Purposive sampling Convenient sampling	Obtain the list of poor residents Select the research participants
Tourism operators	3	Purposive sampling Convenient sampling	Obtain the list of tourism operators Select the research participants
Village heads	3	Purposive sampling	Find out and interview the official head of each village

Each semi-structured interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. The research participants agreed to have the interviews recorded and have signed informed consent forms. To comply with ethical obligations, all research participants were assigned pseudonyms. Both the researchers and the research participants commit to maintaining the confidentiality and security of the interview contents, personal information, and disclosures, ensuring they are not accessible to unauthorized third parties. Additionally, the researchers pledge to protect the privacy and dignity of the research participants.

3.4. Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method was employed in the analysis of the primary data collected through semi-structured interviews. Through thematic analysis by the software NVivo14, driving factors behind the selection of rural tourism in Jianchuan County as a poverty alleviation strategy were identified. Firstly, the interview contents by audio were transcribed into text, and then further translated into English. Then, after fully familiarizing with the original data, coding was employed, resulting in 90 codes. After that, codes with common characteristics were grouped to generate 8 emergent themes. Subsequently, these emergent themes were compared and analyzed, further synthesized, and ultimately categorized into 3 categorized themes. Table 2 presents the detailed information of the thematic analysis. The results of the thematic analysis are analyzed, and discussed in the following part.

Table 2: Thematic analysis details

Emergent Themes	Categorized Themes	Frequency of Codes
Locational advantages Geographical limitations	Local development conditions	46
Local government promotion	Government support	28

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Reference to successful development model Policy support Financial subsidy Expert guidance External funding	External support	16

4. Results

4.1. Local Development Conditions

When asked what factors motivated the local area to choose rural tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy, most research participants mentioned factors related to local development conditions.

4.1.1. Locational Advantages

Among the 29 research participants, 23 said that the main reason for choosing rural tourism as an important means of poverty alleviation in the study area is that the local area has significant locational advantages.

Sideng Village was once a significant post station along the ancient Tea Horse Road in southwestern China and has been remarkably preserved to this day. The village boasts historic streets, an ancient stage, temples, and a substantial number of well-maintained traditional dwellings. These architectural relics bestow Sideng Village with a rich cultural heritage, serving as a crucial foundation for its tourism development. Numerous visitors are drawn to Sideng Village specifically to explore the cultural heritage. MP-01, a research participant from Sideng Village, shared this view:

> *"The primary factor lies in the unique advantages Sideng village possesses for tourism development. […]. These historical assets continue to hold substantial appeal for visitors."*

In Mijing Village, research participants also underscored the critical importance of cultural heritage in the village's decision to develop tourism. However, the cultural heritage of Mijing Village has its own unique characteristics. Mijing possesses abundant salt mine resources, and salt well mining activities in this village can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty. Consequently, the millennium-old salt culture and associated historical architecture offer a significant advantage for the development of tourism in Mijing. Research participant MP-13 from Mijing Village asserts that the village's longstanding and distinctive salt culture motivate the local government to develop tourism. He said,

> *"Our village is a very old one, and our salt culture is quite famous. […]. I think that's the reason that our local government chose to develop tourism."*

Research participants from Shilong Village, highlighted the importance of their intangible cultural heritage to motivate the tourism development. Shilong Village is the cradle of some traditional Bai ethnic art forms, including the celebrated Bawangbian dance and the distinctive Baiqu singing style of the Bai people. Furthermore, Shilong Village boasts a significant number of inheritors of national-level and provincial-level intangible cultural heritages. These unique cultural assets lay a robust foundation for

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their tourism development. MP-15, a research participant from Shilong Village, holds this view. She said,

> *"Bawangbian dance and Baiqu singing style performed by our Shilong Village are the most authentic. […]. These resources endow our village with distinctive advantages for developing tourism."*

Research participant MP-15 also believes that in addition to its rich intangible cultural heritage, another locational advantage for Shilong Village in developing tourism is that it is very close to the mature tourism area of Sideng Village and the scenic spot of Shibaoshan. These two scenic areas both attract a huge number of tourists every year. The influx of tourists from both scenic areas presents a significant opportunity for Shilong Village by tapping into this substantial pool of potential customers.

4.1.2. Geographical Limitations

Research participants also highlighted several geographical limitations in the region which indicate that the study area is not conducive to the development of manufacturing and agricultural sectors which require specific geographical conditions such as level terrain and convenient transportation. In contrast to manufacture and agriculture, tourism imposes fewer stringent requirements on geographical conditions. Instead, tourism frequently leverages distinctive topographical and geomorphological characteristics to attract visitors. Therefore, many research participants believe that the reason why local area has chosen to develop tourism is that their geographical conditions do not allow for large-scale development of other economic sectors, and hence tourism is the most suitable development strategy for them.

Research participant MP-01 from Sideng Village believes that Sideng Village has more mountains and less flat land, and the transportation is not convenient. These factors make tourism the most suitable development strategy for their village. MP-01's statement is as follows:

> *"The village is surrounded by mountains on all sides, […], with very little land, which is not flat either. The transportation is also inconvenient. […]. Developing tourism is most suitable for us."*

The assessments provided by research participant MP-13 from Mijing Village and research participant MP-16 from Shilong Village concerning the geographical conditions of their respective villages were largely consistent with those given by research participant MP-01 regarding Sideng Village. MP-13 said,

> *"We have many mountains and little flat land. Transportation is not convenient. Nothing else can be developed here"*

MP-16's view is as follows:

> *"As you can see, there are mountains all around and the transportation is not convenient either, […]. The only option is to develop tourism."*

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4.2. Government Support

A total of 15 research participants identified government support as a critical driving factor in the selection of rural tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy.

4.2.1. Local Government Promotion

According to the research participants, the local government of the study area played a leading role in the process of developing tourism for poverty alleviation and was the most important promoter of local rural tourism. Initially, the local government did not fully appreciate the value of their cultural heritage in tourism development. However, upon observing the remarkable success of rural tourism initiatives in other regions of China and being enlightened by experts, they gradually recognized the potential of their local cultural heritage and understood that rural tourism could serve as a crucial means to address poverty issues. As research participant MP-06 stated:

> *"These ancient buildings have existed for hundreds of years. […]. But after international experts came, the government suddenly took notice and started to develop tourism from then on."*

The local government not only recognized the significance of tourism development and led the local tourism from scratch, but also actively promoted and publicized it to attract tourists. This played a crucial role in the growth and expansion of the local tourism scale. In addition, the government's role in promoting local tourism is also reflected in its investment in the construction and improvement of tourism facilities. The upgrading of tourism infrastructure has also played an important role in attracting tourists. Research participant MP-13 from Mijing Village talked about the government's investment in the improvement of local tourism infrastructure. MP-13 said:

> *"At that time, the village leaders began to invested money to improve tourism facilities in the village. […]. Later, more and more tourists started to visit us."*

4.2.2. Reference to Successful Development Model

Sideng Village is the earliest village in Jianchuan County to develop rural tourism. After more than 20 years of development, rural tourism in Sideng Village has achieved remarkable success and made significant progress in tourism-driven poverty alleviation. After the government of Jianchuan County realized that poverty alleviation by rural tourism was a feasible approach, it focused on promoting the development model of Sideng Village throughout the county, encouraging other villages to develop rural tourism and alleviate poverty through it. The government's endorsement and promotion of the successful model of Sideng Village have significantly facilitated the development of rural tourism and tourism-driven poverty alleviation initiatives county-wide.

Research participant MP-12 from Mijing Village believes that their village chose to develop tourism because they saw the success of Sideng Village and wanted to imitate its development model. MP-12 said,

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> *"Later, when tourism in Sideng started to thrive, we began to learn from them, […]. Tourism development in Sideng has given confidence to the leaders of our village."*

4.2.3. Policy Support & Financial Subsidy

The Chinese central government has implemented a comprehensive set of supportive policies aimed at protecting traditional villages and fostering rural tourism nationwide. In 2012, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Finance jointly promulgated the "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Protection and Development of Traditional Villages", aiming to promote the protection, inheritance, and utilization of traditional villages. Since then, the central government has consistently issued policy documents almost every year aimed at enhancing the protection of traditional villages. These policies have provided a solid foundation for Jianchuan County's villages to preserve their cultural heritage and traditional culture, as well as to further develop rural tourism.

In 2013, Mijing Village was officially designated as Traditional Chinese Ancient Village by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development. This prestigious national-level recognition significantly boosts the development of rural tourism in the village. The endorsement signifies that the traditional cultural heritage of Mijing Village has been formally acknowledged, which holds considerable appeal for potential tourists. The head of Mijing Village, research participant VH-02, said,

> *"The designation not only laid a solid foundation for our tourism development but also bolstered the confidence of our village committee leadership."*

In addition, the central government also provides financial subsidies. For instance, in 2013, Mijing Village was designated as Traditional Chinese Ancient Village by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development. Consequently, the village received financial subsidies from the Ministry. These funds were primarily allocated for the preservation of cultural heritage, and the construction of tourism infrastructure.

4.3. External Support

In the development of rural tourism within the study area, support is received not only from governments at various levels but also from external sources.

4.3.1. Expert Guidance

During the initial development of rural tourism in Sideng Village, heritage protection experts and architectural experts played a crucial role. In 2002, Sideng Street in Shaxi Town was designated by the World Monuments Fund as one of the "world's endangered sites worthy of attention". The acquisition of this designation not only brought Sideng Village into the national spotlight but also served as an exemplary promotional platform for its subsequent tourism development. Subsequently, commissioned by the World Monuments Fund, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and the Jianchuan County government jointly established a conservation team to protect the architectural heritages of Shaxi Town, especially those of Sideng Village. This initiative was named "Shaxi Rehabilitation Project". The technical director of this project was Mr. Huang

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Yinwu, an architectural expert. Mr. Huang and his international team made substantial contributions to the restoration and preservation of Sideng Village, thereby laying a robust foundation for its subsequent development of rural tourism. Some research participants highlighted the significant role played by Mr. Huang and his international team in advancing local tourism development. For example, research participant MP-01 said,

> *"Following restoration efforts of Mr. Huang and his team, the Sideng Village's appearance significantly improved. Since then, the village has gradually begun to develop tourism."*

Mr. Huang Yinwu not only guided the tourism development of Sideng Village, but also offered valuable suggestions for the tourism development of Mijing Village. The head of Mijing Village, research participant VH-02, mentioned that Mr. Huang had visited Mijing Village for an investigation a few years before and made a tourism plan for it.

4.3.2. External Funding

In the process of developing tourism in the research area, financial support serves as a critical driving force as well. It is worth noting that a portion of the supportive funds originates from external sources rather than from within the research area.

As previously stated, an international team spearheaded by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, in collaboration with the People's Government of Jianchuan County, launched the "Shaxi Rehabilitation Project", an international cooperation initiative, in 2003. The team raised 14 million RMB from international sources to fund the restoration of historical structures and the preservation of ancient villages. This initial capital injection was instrumental in fostering the development of Sideng Village, as the fund achieved the expected results, which gave the local government the confidence to develop tourism. Research participant MP-03 opines that without this crucial international funding, the subsequent success of tourism development in Sideng Village would have been unlikely. MP-03 said:

> *"Without the support of the 14 million yuan in international funds, our government would not have had the confidence to restore the cultural relics and develop tourism."*

In addition to international financial support, another noteworthy source of funding is the financial assistance from Shanghai. Since the launch of China's national targeted poverty alleviation strategy in 2013, the central government has designated developed eastern provinces and cities to provide one-on-one aid to underdeveloped western regions. As part of this initiative, Shanghai was paired with Yunnan Province, while Pudong New Area of Shanghai specifically provided assistance to Jianchuan County. Financial assistance is one of the aspects of the support provided by Pudong New Area to Jianchuan County. The head of Mijing Village, research participant VH-02, noted that Pudong New Area of Shanghai provided their village with 2 million yuan in financial assistance, which was utilized to enhance tourism infrastructure within the village. What's more, to ensure these funds are applied to local tourism development and that there is no wastage due to improper utilization, Shanghai authority exercises oversight over the funds and conduct periodic reviews.

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5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the decision of Jianchuan County to adopt rural tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy is driven by a complex interplay of local development conditions, government support, and external support. These factors collectively reflect the complex decision-making mechanism of rural tourism development in geographically constrained regions, and underscore the significance of leveraging cultural heritage, policy frameworks, and collaborative networks to achieve poverty alleviation outcomes. The discussion below synthesizes these findings through the lens of existing literature, offering valuable insights into the driving factors of rural tourism being selected as poverty alleviation strategy and their broader implications for policy formulation and practical implementation.

The prominence of locational advantages, particularly cultural heritage, as a driver of rural tourism aligns with broader scholarship on heritage tourism as a catalyst for rural revitalization. Sideng, Mijing, and Shilong villages exemplify how unique architectural, historical, and intangible cultural assets can differentiate rural destinations in competitive tourism markets (Yang & Wall, 2022). Sideng's preservation of the Tea Horse Road relics, Mijing's salt-mining heritage, and Shilong's intangible Bai ethnic traditions resonate with Mowforth and Munt's (2015) assertion that cultural authenticity enhances destination appeal. However, the villages' reliance on heritage also mirrors the risks of cultural commodification, where traditional practices risk being diluted for commercial appeal (Cole, 2007). For instance, Shilong's emphasis on "authentic" Bawangbian dance performances raises questions about whether such cultural expressions are preserved for intrinsic value or repackaged for tourist consumption—a tension noted in other heritage tourism contexts (Su & Teo, 2009). In addition, the success of rural tourism development in study area also hinges on the close spatial linkages between villages and attractions. For instance, Shilong's proximity to Sideng and Shibaoshan scenic areas enables it acquire a huge number of potential tourists, thus providing an innate advantage for its tourism development. It illustrates the importance of spatial linkages in tourism clusters, where peripheral villages can capitalize on spillover effects from established attractions. This finding aligns with Christaller's (1963) central place theory, which emphasizes hierarchical spatial relationships in tourism development, positing that peripheral areas can thrive by leveraging proximity to tourism hubs. It is also congruent with revelations by Gooroochurn and Hanley (2005), who illustrated that interrelated tourism demand among regions can engender substantial spillover advantages, thereby culminating in tourism expansion.

Geographical constraints, paradoxically, materialize as both a limitation and a facilitator. The limited arable land and mountainous terrain of the study area constrained the development of agriculture and manufacture, forcing them to seek alternative development paths. This situation is consistent with Gössling's (2001) view that tourism tends to be a good alternative strategy in areas where traditional economic activities are difficult to develop. This phenomenon is also explained by the theoretical framework of "forced innovation" in the periphery proposed by Hall and Boyd (2005), who argue that geographically constrained rural areas tend to view tourism as the "path of least resistance". However, although tourism can effectively overcome geographical limitations, problems such as insufficient infrastructure, seasonal fluctuations, and excessive reliance on external market demand can also easily have a negative impact on its sustainable development (Lane, 2009).

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Government support means that state intervention plays an extremely important role in the development of rural areas, especially in the context of China. Local administrations functioned as initiators, advocates, and regulators of tourism, embodying the "developmental state" paradigm wherein state actors direct economic metamorphosis (Wu, 2018). The progression from passive heritage conservation to proactive tourism advocacy corresponds with Oakes' (2013) examination of how Chinese local governments frequently assume entrepreneurial roles in response to emerging economic prospects. The emphasis on publicity and promotion, and infrastructure enhancement is consistent with Bramwell's (2011) view that public sector leadership is critical to mitigating the adverse effects of rural tourism due to its small scale.

The successful promotion of the development model of Sideng Village fully reflects the typical strategy of policy diffusion through "demonstration and guidance" in China's governance framework (Heilmann, 2008). By establishing Sideng as a "demonstration site", the county-level government has helped other villages avoid risks and reduce costs when they emulate similar development models. This is fully in line with Rogers' (2010) theory of innovation diffusion, which states that successful examples can help later adopters break through barriers at minimal cost. However, the results of the study also warn of the potential risks of a homogeneous development strategy. Although Mijing and Shilong have benefited greatly from the experience of Sideng, their unique cultural resources have put forward higher requirements for more targeted development strategies, but this differentiation strategy is often not fully valued in the process of blind replication (Li et al., 2019).

Policy support and financial subsidies further reflect the interaction between the central and local governments. Local measures are often highly aligned with central government policies, reflecting the effective operation of a multi-level governance framework in China's poverty alleviation practice (Guo et al., 2022). The central government stimulates local development through policies and financial subsidies, while local governments ensure that policies and subsidies are implemented and applied effectively but flexibly according to their own development conditions. However, financial subsidies have also sparked discussions about dependency. Although financial subsidies play a crucial role in the initial development of rural tourism, over-reliance may pose a potential threat to the stability of local development (Zhao et al., 2011).

External forces played a key role in addressing the initial lack of expertise and funding. For example, the early involvement of international institutions and heritage experts in Sideng Village fully demonstrates the core value of external resources and expertise in promoting the development of rural tourism. This is in line with the findings by Aas et al. (2005) that external expertise can contribute to the improvement of local tourism development capacity. Moreover, the case of Sideng Village illustrates the sustainable development of local rural tourism by balancing external support with local autonomy (Hampton, 2005).

External financial support, especially from Shanghai, demonstrates the significance of regional coordination in China's poverty alleviation strategy. The "East-West pairing" mechanism is essentially a redistributive instrument, aiming to balance regional development (Wang, 2024). However, Shanghai's strict regulation of aid funds may limit the flexible development and independent innovation of the assisted areas, which also becomes a problem easily generated by the government-led poverty alleviation governance model (Liu & Wang, 2024).

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6. Conclusion

This study reveals that the development of rural tourism in Jianchuan County is not simply driven by the market, but by the combination of local development conditions, government support and external assistance. The cultural heritage of the study area forms the basis of tourism development, and the support of the government and the introduction of external forces further transform this cultural heritage into a powerful tool for poverty alleviation. The results of the study emphasize that the development of rural tourism needs to be adapted to local conditions, and it is necessary to maintain a balance between learning from others and innovation, preservation and development, external assistance and autonomy. The experience of Jianchuan County serves as a valuable reference for regions aiming to alleviate poverty through rural tourism by leveraging cultural heritage resources. When considering rural tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy, these regions should not only evaluate their geographical advantages and resource endowments but also take into account the attitudes of governments at all levels, the policy environment, and reliable sources of supportive funds. It requires thorough consideration to determine whether these various factors can synergize in complex interactions to support decision-making.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers obtained the research ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Sains Malaysia. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the ethics committee. Consent to participate in this study was also obtained from all research participants.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study

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