

STUDY OF RURAL TOURISM IN TURPAN, CHINA

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ABSTRACT: Rural tourism has long been considered the means of accelerating economic and social development, and has become a development tool for many rural areas. In response to agricultural structure adjustment, rural tourism in China took into shape as a new economic growth point to meet the market demand at the late 1980s. Now, a structural frame of rural tourism has shaped, with the core of Zhujiang (Pearl) River Delta, Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu of China. But in Xinjiang, the western part of China, there are hardly any studies in this field in spite of its richness of tourism resources. In this paper, development of rural tourism is studied in Turpan of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. With its rich natural and cultural tourism resources, Turpan has become one of the pioneer tourism destinations in China. But same to the rural tourism development of the other areas' of China, rural tourism programs in Turpan mainly aimed at sightseeing activities, and little attention had been paid to the protection and exploitation of national minority culture—an important factor to satisfy both tourists demand and local economic development. However, this kind of rural tourism development policy is harmful on the long run. Because, many tourists seek tourist destinations that offer pleasant experiences related to not only the natural environment but also historic heritage and cultural patterns. The study suggests that on the base of government support in the long term, to enhance tourism training, to protect and exploit national minority culture are essential elements of rural tourism development in Turpan.

KEY WORDS: rural tourism; Turpan; Uygur

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1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of rural tourism is multidimensional and there are several different definitions about rural tourism. The followings are some examples: according to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), rural tourism is defined as tourism taking place in the countryside. BRAMWELL and LANE (1994) described rural tourism as a multi-faceted activity rather than farm-based tourism only. It not only includes farm-based holidays but also comprises special interest nature holidays and eco-tourism, walking, climbing and riding holidays, adventure, sport and health tourism, hunting and angling, educational travel, arts and heritage tourism and, in some areas, ethnic tourism (REICHEL *et al.*, 2000). Rural tourism refers to those traveling activities that aim at pursuing natural and humanistic attraction with rurality in rural area (HE and LI, 2003). MACDONALD and JOLLIFF (2003) introduced the concept into this particular study and de-

finied it as cultural rural tourism. By this definition rural tourism refers to a distinct rural community with its own traditions, heritage, arts, lifestyles, places, and values as preserved between generations. When tourists visit these areas, they are well informed about the culture and experienced folklore, customs, natural landscapes, and historical landmarks. They may also enjoy other activities in a rural setting such as nature, adventure, sports, festivals, crafts, and general sightseeing (MACDONALD and JOLLIFF, 2003).

Rural tourism is seen as a valuable and growing sector of the overall tourism market, representing a significant source of income to rural economies. More specifically, the development of rural tourism offers potential solutions to many of the problems facing rural areas. These may be summarized as: 1) Economic growth, diversification and stabilization through employment creation in trades and crafts; the creation of new markets for agricultural products; and, a broadening of a region's economic base, because local residents with a few skills

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can readily work as food servers, retail clerks and hospitality workers. Tourism also can serve as a vehicle for attracting potential investors, as today's tourist may spend their life after retirement or start a business there.

2) Socio-cultural development, including the maintenance and improvement of public services, the revitalization of local crafts, customs and cultural identities, increases opportunities for social contact and exchange.

3) Protection and improvement of both the natural environment and built infrastructure. Tourism, which is generally considered to be a relatively clean industry, may support local environment conservation.

Rural tourism also has potential negative effects. Employments in the travel and tourism industry are frequently with low-paying and seasonality, and often offer limited benefits. Tourism can also increase demand for land in rural areas, which may make real estate prices increase by potentially putting up the cost of housing, which will be beyond the reach of the average local resident. Other negative effects include potentially higher rates of crime and greater demand for local services, such as police and fire protection and sanitation services, which could be too expensive to be provided. Greater demand for local arts and crafts can also potentially lead to a lowering of the quality of these products. Finally, tourism is at the risk of the degradation of natural resources in rural areas unless efforts for environmental sustainability are made. The rural environment is particularly fragile and susceptible to large numbers of tourists, and the provision of attractions and facilities to satisfy their needs, may diminish or even destroy the characteristics that originally attracted them to the countryside. Some activities (such as skiing, hiking, rock-climbing, riding) cause damage to the natural environment, which suffers from intensive visitor uses. Pollution in various forms increases as visitor numbers rise: physical pollution (through litter and rubbish), air pollution (increased by traffic), noise pollution (caused at weekends and during holiday periods) or visual pollution (intensity of lights, disordered country roads). Increased activity levels may also disturb the ecological and biological ecosystems and the fauna (CANOVES *et al.*, 2004).

In response to agricultural structure adjustment, rural tourism in China took into shape as a new economic growth point to meet the market demand at the late 1980s. Though it is developed very late, it is growing with a fast speed. Now, a rural tourism structural frame has shaped, with the core of Zhujiang (Pearl) River Delta, Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu of China (HE and LI, 2003). But in Xinjiang, the western part of Chi-

na, there is no studies in this field in spite of its richness of tourism resources. Taking Turpan as an example, this thesis analyses the development of rural tourism in Xinjiang, finds problems encountered and presents solving suggestions in this field.

2 BACKGROUND OF STUDY AREA

Only with the advent of opening-up policies in 1978, tourism then became acceptable in China because of its capacity to make a contribution to modernization (SOFIELD and LI, 1998). And due to the international interest in the history and culture of the ancient Silk Road grown over the past two decades, the number of tourists visiting ancient sites all along this historic trade artery has also risen. The People's Republic of China has encouraged this new interest by allowing increasing the access to many formerly closed places in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. As a result, many tourists now arrive to view a wide range of recently discovered arts and artifacts, and ruins of ancient cities at Ürümqi, Turpan and other cities and towns in Xinjiang (TOOPS, 1999).

The Turpan area, including Turpan City, Toksun County and Shanshan County, is located between 41° 12' - 43°41'N and 87°16' - 99°51'E (LU, 2000), and has been an important stop for travelers on the Silk Road since the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) and remains as major tourist attraction because of its historical sites, current cultural sites, characteristic agriculture, landscape, catering, customs, folkways and festivals.

While historical sites in Turpan include the ruins of the ancient cities of Yarghol, Qara Qocho (Gaochang Ancient Town), Astana Ancient Grave, and Bezeklik Buddhist Caves, Tuyuk Valley, Rock-drawing of Korjey, etc., current cultural sites include Emin Minaret (Suleiman Tower), Bulyuk (Grape Valley), Kumtagh Park (Sands Park), Karez irrigation system, mosques, and bazaars (Fig. 1).

Yarghol, 10km west of Turpan City. It was the capital of the Kus (State of South Cheshi), one of the 36 kingdoms of Xiyu (Western Regions). The city was the administrative center of Turpan until the ascendancy of Qara Qocho. Eventually it was destroyed during the Mongol Rebellions and abandoned after the 1400s. The city's longevity was due to its defensive position, as it could only be attacked by the front gate. The city was dug into the ground. Underground dwellings to escape the heat were the norm in Turpan in ancient times. The layout of the city is still very clear. There is a Buddhist



Fig. 1 Distribution of main tourist sights in Turpan

complex at the center with a well that descends to the water table below.

The ancient city of Qara Qocho, 47km away from the southeast of Turpan City, has a large length of city walls, and buildings made of adobe, earth bricks. Inside are frescoes and statues of Buddha and Manes, as well as centers of worship and education for Buddhism, Manicheanism, Nestorian Christianity, and Confucianism. Qara Qocho, the capital of the Uygur Empire from the 800s–1200s AD, is known locally as Idikot Sheher (Ancient City). The present shape of the city took place during the 800s when the Uygurs from the northern grasslands maintained the Kingdom of Qocho. By the 1200s, the Uygurs of Qocho supported the Mongols and maintained their kingdom by the aid of the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368). In the 14th–15th centuries Turpan had converted to Islam that remains the predominant faith.

The Bezeqliq Buddhist Caves, 40km away from northeast of Turpan, are situated in the foothills of the Yalkun Tagh (Flaming Mountains). These 67 caves represent the evolution of Buddhism in the area from the 500s to the 1200s, as well as the intermingling of Uygur, Chinese, Turkic, Iranian, and Indian cultures. This was an important Buddhist site for worship for the Qara Qocho Uygurs. The Bezeqliq Buddhist Caves are earlier than Dunhuang's Mogao Grottoes. Built on the bank of the Murtuk River, the setting is quite splendid.

Emin Minaret, is at the eastern edge of the Turpan City. Building of the minaret began to be built in 1777 by the local ruler of Turpan, Emin Khoja, and was completed by his son Prince Suleiman. The Uygurs refer to the tower as Suleiman King Minare and the Chinese call it Suleiman Tower. The tower is designed in an Afghani architectural style by a local architect, Ibrahim, is built with mud bricks. According to the explanation engraved outside the tower, the reason for its construction was to commemorate Emin Khoja's crushing in a local rebellion against the Qing.

Turpan's unusual irrigation system, the Karez or Qanat, created this oasis landscape. Karez is basically underground canals accessed by wells. Turpan lies not far from the snow-covered Tianshan Mountains and gravity brings the melted water down from the mountains directly to the oasis via the Karez. The wells and canals prevent heavy water evaporation in the arid climate. This sustainable source of water has fed the oasis for over 2000 years, and this is the system once used throughout Xinjiang. Today it is still visible only in Turpan.

Uygur is one of the 56 ethnic groups that officially recognized by the People's Republic of China. Uygur, the main ethnic group living in Turpan, has a population of 386 747 in Turpan, making up 70.2% of the total population of 550 879 in 2000 (Xinjiang Statistical Bureau, 2001). Uygur has its own history, music, art, cus

toms, folklore, food and festivals as examples of its identity. Uygur (also called Uyghur or Uigur) is a Turkic ethnic group of people living in northwestern China (mainly in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, where they are the dominant ethnic group together with the Han people), Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. And some Uygurs live in Taoyuan County of Hunan Province in Southern Central China. Uygurs began to convert to Islam in the 10th century, but most Uygurs in the Besh Balik (Beiting Ancient Town) and Turpan regions did not convert until the 15th century. Before converting to Islam, Uygurs had faith in different religions included Manichaeans, Buddhists and even some Nestorian Christians.

Uygur songs (naksha) and a series of energetic traditional dances accompanied by Uygur instrumentalists are authentic and characteristic. The performers are outfitted in traditional Uygur costumes: the chapan (jacket), koynek (shirt), and doppa (skullcap). In a traditional Uygur farming family, mehman (guests) sitting cross-legged on a carpet, sipping cupfuls of tea with rock sugar, eating fresh grapes and melons, and tandoor-baked nang (bread). Uygur meal and foodstuffs of pullao (rice pilaf), leghmen (noodles), kewap (kebabs), uzum (grapes), koghun (Hami melon), etc., are available at the bazaars by day and by night, which recreate the historical landscape of the Silk Road.

In short, these are resources for development of rural tourism in Turpan, and the development of tourism has brought some benefits to this area.

3 RURAL TOURISM IN TURPAN

Turpan has been an important stop for travelers on the Silk Road since the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) and remains an equally important stop for Xinjiang's tourists. It was opened completely for tourists in 1979. Even though there is no airport, and the nearest rail station at Daheyuan is 45km away, the city has remained a major tourist attraction. And until 2001, Turpan had received 1.47×10^6 tourists as a tourist destination (ZHANG and ZHANG, 2003).

The tourism intensity rate (TIR) is a method to measure the impact of tourism on an area. The chief purpose of this rate is to provide a context by which compares the relation of tourist arrivals and the size of the population. This rate is calculated with the following formula (TOOPS, 1999).

$$TIR = \frac{\text{Tourists in a given year}}{\text{Population in a given year}} \times 100$$

From Table 1, Ürümqi and Turpan show the largest

Table 1 Tourists impact in Xinjiang in 2000

Destination	Population	Visitors (International)	TIR	Rank
Ürümqi City	1643760	144830	8.81	1
Turpan	550879	43641	7.92	2
Kashgar	3365560	27510	0.82	3
Altay	594456	2550	0.43	4
Aksu	2050294	6028	0.29	5
Hotan	1664527	3910	0.23	6
Total of Xinjiang	17915459	256082	1.43	–

Source: Xinjiang Statistical Bureau, 2001.

impact of tourism. Of course, this measure does not consider financial or socio-cultural impacts of tourism. But it shows that Turpan is one of the most important tourism development regions in Xinjiang.

So, it is evident that the development of tourism in Turpan has met with some success. But the same as the rural tourism development of the other areas' of China, rural tourism programs in Turpan mainly aimed at sight-seeing activities. And little attention had been paid on the protection and exploitation of Uygur culture—an important factor to satisfy both tourists demand and local economic development. And the main problems remained as follows.

(1) Lack of support. The rural tourism entrepreneurs in Turpan are lack of support from the government, which has significant impact on protection and exploitation of Uygur culture and development of rural tourism. According to the survey in Grape Valley, 76.06% of rural tourism entrepreneurs invested less than 10×10^3 yuan (RMB) in their tourism business.

(2) Lack of training. A majority of rural tourism businesses believe they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to show ethnic culture and to provide an effective, high-quality service. Training and educational programs, related to the tradition/culture of Turpan, have not been made available to the tourism operators. In Grape Valley, only 16.9% of rural tourism entrepreneurs admitted that they can speak fluent Chinese, a common language used in tourism service. It is obvious that most farmers and entrepreneurs do not have the appropriate skills to run an effective tourism business since the transition of the farming industry into small tourism units is a major challenge. This change, from serving the land to tending people, is revolutionary and it requires dealing not only with marketing, finance and business accounting, but also directly with the people who are served. The farmer or part-time "innkeeper" can hardly understand the service expectations of customers and the tourists, which constitute a chance for economic survival and even prosperity of tourism.

(3) Lack of diversity in rural tourism programs. In the process of rural tourism development, tourism programs are just designed for sightseeing activities and little or no attention is paid to the tourist's demand for cultural experiences and participations in them. Many enterprises only provide a number of activities related to sightseeing and a few activities such as fruit-picking, etc.

(4) Lack of protection of tourism resources. Cultivating the land, maintaining the farms, refurbishing the buildings are parts of the cultural heritage of rural areas. Without a typical rural life style, there is no tourist attraction (SHARPLEY, 2002). But Uygur culture is distorted during the exploitation process of tourism, as a result, the protection of famous cultural landscapes is paid little attention to, even some of them is destroyed during the rebuilding process or urban construction.

(5) Lack of effective marketing. It could be argued that the most acute weakness of rural tourism operators is their inability to meet customer needs. About 22.75% of visitors in Grape Valley prefer to hearing folktales from the locals, but no rural tourism entrepreneurs can provide this kind of tourism product. Furthermore, a coordinated pricing/service policy and publication of brochures have not been achieved. And 90.14% of rural tourism entrepreneurs in Grape Valley admit that they do not advertise their business in any media.

(6) Lack of benefit for local people. Only the travel agencies get benefit from tourism, local people like Uygur actually have always got very little or no benefit from these businesses. For example, in Grape Valley local people' satisfaction level for the job opportunity and income increase derived from tourism business is only 49.36% and 64.36% (XIONG and HAN, 2005).

(7) Low occupancy levels. Tourism in Turpan remains stubbornly seasonality. Most tourism activities happen in July, August and September. The number of tourist in these months takes up 66.1% of that of the whole year. The average occupancy rate of tourism hotels in Turpan was 35%–40%, and this is lower than that of the whole China (66%) and Xinjiang (65%) in 1997 (YANG, 1998).

4 SUGGESTIONS

According to the problems mentioned above, it is suggested to strengthen the government's support in economy and policy; to enhance tourism training related to tradition/culture of Uygur people in Turpan; to protect and exploit ethnic cultural tourism and to improve and diversify the tourism product; and to organize the locals to participate in rural tourism activities. All those are

maybe the appropriate way of the development of rural tourism in Turpan.

In many countries, rural tourism has enjoyed substantial encouragement, support and, in some cases, directs financial assistance from both the public and private sectors, because government's central guidance and control is necessary to develop tourism. That is, not only is there a need for conformity in terms of services, facilities and subsequent pricing levels, but it is important to ensure a critical mass of amenities and facilities to attract visitors to tourist destination, to keep them there and to encourage repeat visits. Related to this, there is also a need for ongoing public sector support and guidance in terms of both training/education and marketing. Thus, it is recommended that operators of rural tourism establishments should be trained to handle a variety of marketing and public relations activities involving advertising and public relations in order to attract customers. For example, sending out inexpensive brochures that can either be sent to interested customers or taken home by satisfied customers whom spread through personal recommendation to friends and relatives is the recommended way to advertise rural tourism.

The fundamental challenges to sustainable ethnic tourism are that whether sufficient autonomy is exercised by the ethnic minority group, how their culture is marketed, what socio-cultural responses from the ethnic minority group are expressed toward tourism, and what the prospects are for future development. A pattern of cooperation between the state-owned, the industry, and the host community needs to be developed in pursuit of a common interest. It is important to coordinate the native people involve in rural tourism planning and development processes (LI, 2000). Besides, the operators should realize the women's important role in promoting the values of the local culture and protect the environment.

Rural tourism cannot be circumscribed simply within a concept of accommodation, because the combination of living in ethnic minorities' home, sharing their family life and discovering the peculiarities of the territory and landscape, is precisely what makes rural tourism special. In order to attract and keep tourists and offer suitable opportunities for expensing, it is not only necessary to protect and conserve existing natural and build environments, but also to preserve and strengthen traditional lifestyle and culture. There is need for concerted efforts particularly from the local and central governments, the museums, travel agencies, and tour operators to enhance the development, preservation and marketing of

these attractions. There is also strong appeal for cultural performances and establishment of community museum to preserve and exhibit cultural attractions. Before exploiting attractions, it is important to have a clear understanding of the underlying experiences that make international tourists and local people to decide to visit such attractions. This kind of research makes it possible to develop planning, management, and cultural tourism product development strategies and policies to guide tourism product planning (KENNEDY, 2002). Also, rural tourism operators should take advantage of the souvenir production, because this was identified as one that was particularly under-exploited in Turpan.

Finally, and in conclusion, there is little doubt that rural tourism can be an effective vehicle of socio-economic development in rural areas. But it is unlikely that rural tourism can sustain without government support and relatively high levels of investment relative to its returns. Therefore, long term government support is maybe an essential element of rural tourism development in Turpan.

Of course, as MACDONALD and JOLLIFF (2003) mentioned, more research is needed to explore topics as that how do local communities identify the cultural resources for rural tourism development? How does community-based rural tourism planning develop? How to organize the Uygur people to protect their ethnic cultural heritage and get profit from rural tourism through participating in the tourism business? These research problems provide a few of the many potential directions for future study into rural tourism development in Turpan.

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