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Tourism Development with an Endogenous Approach: A Case Study of Xidi, China

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ABSTRACT

With a critique of over-dependency on and vulnerability to externally controlled development, the endogenous approach has been increasingly accepted as a more effective way to animate sustainable socio-economic development in rural areas. Although tourism has been frequently taken as an alternative development strategy for rural economies, little academic effort has been made on examining the mechanism of how the endogenous approach can be operationalized in a tourism framework. Using qualitative methods, this study examined the experience of tourism development in one of China's most famous rural cultural tourism destinations (Xidi). Based on the case analysis, a new communal endogenous approach for tourism development, which is prevailing in rural China, is summarized and its influences on community participation in tourism are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

With a critique of over-dependency on and vulnerability to development designed and controlled by “extra-local” forces (Ray, 2000), the endogenous approach to rural socio-economic development, which focuses on locality and their indigenous resources with the principle of public participation, has been gaining increasing acceptance as a more effective way to animate robust and sustainable development than its exogenous counterpart (Lowe et al, 1998; Ray, 1999).

According to the explanation from Webster's dictionary, the term ‘endogenous’ means ‘originating or produced from within’. Though endogenous, as a concept, originally comes from a botanical analogy that refers to ‘endogen’, yet it means to originate from or to grow within a pre-existent body (Ujam, and El-Fiki, 2006). This metaphor views a society as a giant organism, within which innovations develop and simply refers to growth from within. As Lowe et al. (1998) pointed out, the foundational assumption of this endogenous development approach is that basing development action on the indigenous physical, human and intangible resources of the locality is the best way to animate the well-being of a local economy. Local participation is always an essential concern for the endogenous development theory. It claims that whatever development action occurs should be based on local participation in its design and implementation, thus engendering a feeling of ownership and commitment to the territorial development and providing a mechanism to control the nature of development to be in accordance with local wishes (Ray, 1999). As a ‘bottom-up’ model, the operationalization of this endogenous approach rests on the establishment of an effective territorial organization for initiating and carrying out the development (van der Ploeg, & Long, 1994; Ray, 1999). This organization may be an existing political-administrative body (or development agency acting on its behalf as in urban regeneration projects) or a new body created for the purpose (Ray, 1999).

During the past few decades, tourism has been frequently taken as an alternative development tool (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000; MacDonald & Jolliffe,

2003) for maintaining the continuous economic development in peripheral and rural areas where primary traditional industries are in declining. Although tourism has been a popular option for the existing endogenous rural development practices either in developed or developing countries (Barke & Newton, 1997), little research has been done on the mechanism by which the endogenous approach can be operationalized in a tourism case. A case analysis of a rural cultural tourism destination is made in this study to illustrate China's experiences in rural tourism development with some kind of socialistic endogenous approach.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study is conducted in one of China's most famous rural cultural tourism destinations-Xidi, a mountainous historic village in eastern China with a population of over 1000 (See Figure 1 and Table 1). In order to have a systematic understanding of Xidi's 20-year experience of tourism development, qualitative field research is employed as the main research method, as it is well suited to the study of social process over time (Babbie, 2001, p. 276). In addition to review of archival materials and past researches, the field research spanned 2 years from 2001 to 2003, and was generally conducted in two major forms: non-participant observations of the role played by the territorial organization in Xidi's tourism development process and in-depth interviews with 30 interviewees respectively from territorial organization, community authority, local government, and ordinary villagers, external businesses, etc.

Relative to the influences of other stakeholders in Xidi's tourism development, the role played by the local community was the major focus of this research at the observation stage. The community's responses to specific events usually played as the key clues for the observational works, which, thus, were carried out in a case-by-case pattern. The non-participant observations mainly dealt with the following issues, including who initiated those community actions and initiatives to respond to the changes in the tourism development process; what was the proportion of the population involved in those community actions and initiatives; who was the main subject of those actions and movements; what kind of measures were taken by the community in these movements as responses to given events; how were the tourists as well as the community itself influenced by these actions and initiatives; what were the eventual outcomes of these community initiatives and what were their further impacts on the stakeholders of the tourism business, etc.

In order to obtain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the case, open-ended interviews were also conducted with 30 carefully chosen residents in Xidi. Those interviewees were believed to belong to different interest groups within the community, embracing local and non-local owners of those small tourism businesses (including small inns, restaurants and souvenir shops), households opening to tourists and not opening to tourists, as well as local and non-local employees in the tourism corporation.

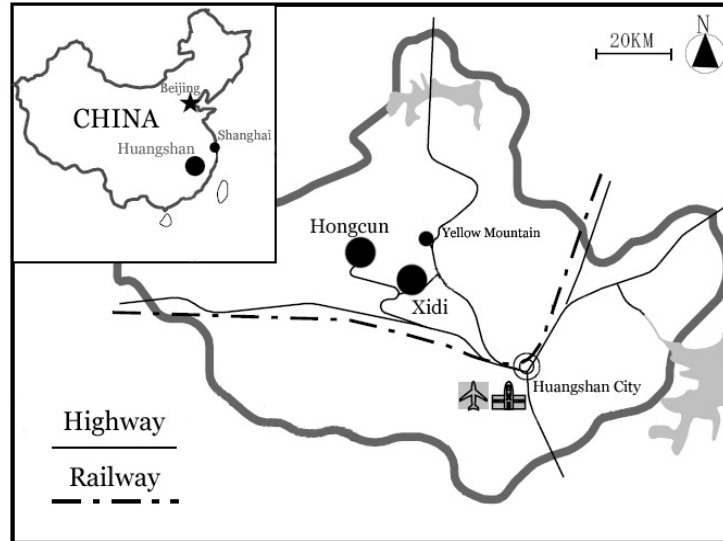


Figure. 1. Locations of Xidi and Hongcun

Table 1. The tourism setting of Xidi

Attributes	Xidi
History	Formed in 1047 AD, with a history of about 960 years.
Population	About 300 households, more than 1000 residents
Area	12.96 hectares
Administration	Under Xidi Town, Yixian County
Social structure and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Uses clan kin as the base of the community's social structure; ● Acts as the representations of Hui Culture in Eastern China; ● A single family name 'Hu' is shared in the majority of Xidi's residents
Origin of tourism	1984
Tourist attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The appearances and layouts of non-urban settlements; ● Historic architectures and decorations in Hui style; ● Traditional Hui Culture and customs.
Renown and honors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Was recognized as a provincial historic protection site of Anhui in 1986 ; ● Was added to the List of World Cultural Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 2000; ● Was recognized as national historic protection sites of China in 2001.

Note: This table is edited by the researchers with the relevant data from the official web sites of Yixian County (www.yixian.gov.cn) and Xidi (www.xidi.cn), as well as the two villages' application materials for the World Cultural Heritage Site.

FINDINGS OF THE CASE STUDY

A nearly two-decade history of tourism development makes Xidi one of China's earliest rural cultural tourism destinations with its historic houses as major tourist attractions.

The study found that, the entire village of Xidi plays as a single unit of tourist attraction. In stead of exhibiting the private-owned historic houses to tourists by individual local households, a collectively-owned corporation was founded by the community authority- the villager's committee- to take charge of the village's entire tourism business.

The tourists are charged a single entrance fee by this corporation for their sight-seeing activities in the village. The revenue of ticket selling is generally kept within the community. Besides the negotiated payments to those contracted households who open their houses to tourists, a proportion of this ticket selling revenue is also allocated by cash in an equalitarian way among all the villagers, including those not involved in tourism. Another portion of the ticket-selling revenue will be reserved for preserving and maintaining the historic built heritages, funding infrastructure construction and other public welfare facilities (e.g. school, elder nursing home). Figure 2 illustrates the allocation of Xidi's ticket-selling revenue in the fiscal year of 2000 (Ying & Zhou, 2007).

Meanwhile, family-owned tourism businesses are also encouraged, but must under the regulation of the general tourism corporation. Nearly 80% of local labors take tourism-related jobs.

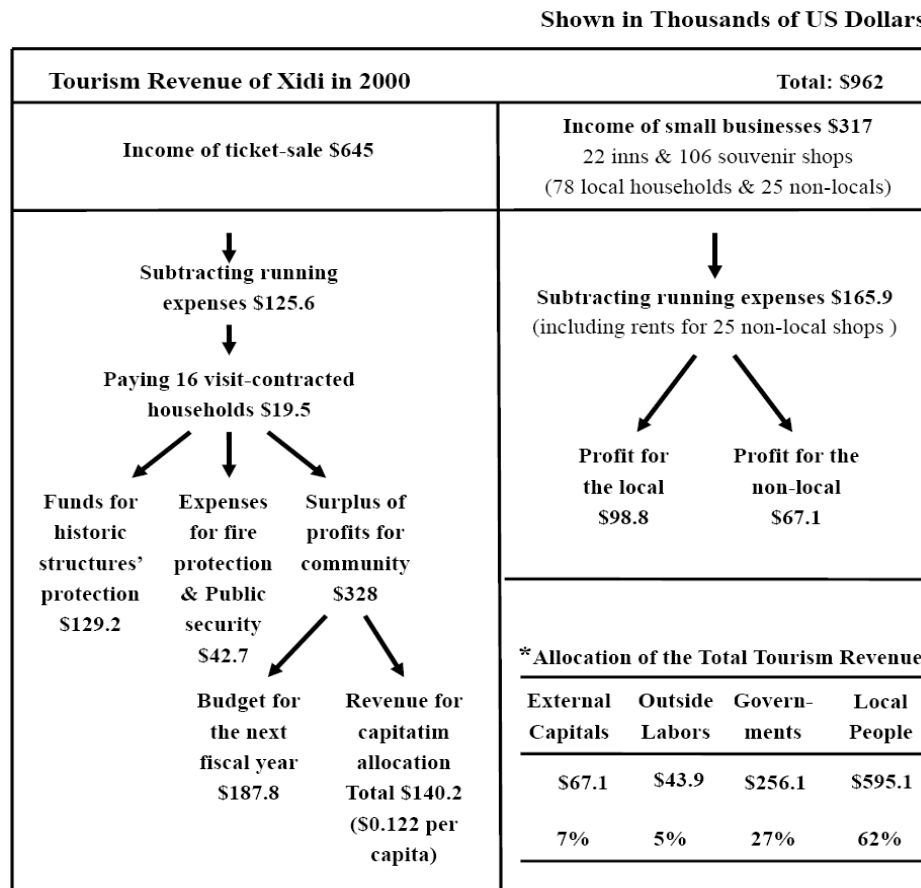


Figure 2. Tourism Revenue Distribution of Xidi in 2000

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A competent territorial organization is the key to a successful endogenous tourism development. An institutional innovation has been made by the local in Xidi's case based on the local political, cultural and socio-economic contexts. Through establishing an exclusive tourism business organization, the communal pattern of tourism development in Xidi enables the transference of the fee-charging right from individual households to the community collective, and leads to a subjective reallocation of the tourism revenue. The equalitarian allocation of a certain proportion of the tourism ticket revenue among all the community members is believed to be conducive to alleviating the tensions among different sub-groups within the community. This process, more or less, helps every community member achieve his/her benefit-cost balance in terms of tourism. On the one hand, this payment acknowledges the collective ownerships of the public properties that are serving as tourist attractions or tourism facilities; on the other hand, it is also a compensation for the public-shared costs caused by the tourism development, since some of tourism's costs are commonly shared among all the local residents, regardless how much they are involving in tourism. Meanwhile, with a collective participation on benefit level, this approach may also improve the efficiency of tourism management by forming an all-covered economic mutual-benefit relationship within the community.

Xidi's experience also indicates that it is only through an effective control of relevant resources that the territorial organization's capability and authority in tourism development can be guaranteed. The understanding of 'resource' should not be limited only in material forms. Under some circumstances, 'resource' may also refer to the possession of a certain type of right, like the right of charging tourists a sightseeing-fee in Xidi's case.

The 'self-reliant' and 'local-centered' natures of endogenous approach do not necessarily mean the exclusive dominance of local community in tourism development. During the first several years of Xidi's tourism development, whereas its refusal of external capitals and government intervene kept the tourism revenue within the community, the tourism business also faced stagnancies for a time due to the lack of funds and skills for tourism development. Taking in external funds and technology will be advisable in the tourism development process, as long as the local community maintains its principal position.

As an institutional innovation attempt in rural cultural tourism development, the endogenous approach that Xidi consciously or unconsciously adopted caters well to the current socio-economic conditions of rural China. Whereas there are some specific questions that still need a further examination, Xidi's experience may have the potential to play as a beneficial reference to those areas having a similar situation.

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