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Li Yang  
*Department of Geography, Western Michigan University*

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# TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Li Yang  
Department of Geography  
Western Michigan University

## ABSTRACT

*This study explores the impacts of agritourism on the quality of life of a rural ethnic community and discusses the challenges faced by residents who are attempting to improve their living standards through tourism. A case study was carried out in a rural ethnic village in Yunnan Province, China in the summer of 2010. Multiple research methods, including in-depth interviews, informal discussions, on-site observations and secondary data review were adopted in the case study. The study finding suggests that farms will benefit from increases in income but do not see dramatic increase in jobs mainly due to the family nature of the enterprises. Given the initiatives being undertaken in rural China, agritourism has the potential to grow into a much bigger industry. For a successful operation, it requires careful planning and a greater understanding of issues like marketing, communication, and government policy relating to this type of business.*

**Keywords:** *agritourism, quality of life, ethnic community, Yunnan, China*

## INTRODUCTION

Quality of life (QOL) has become an important topic of broad discussion in the social scientific literature in recent years. Many scholars have explored the contribution that tourism in general makes towards various aspects of the QOL of both hosts and guests (Neal, Sirgy and Uysal, 1999; Perdue, Long and Kang, 1999; Moscardo, 2009; Neal, Uysal and Sirgy, 2007). However, only limited attention has been given to the impact of agritourism on the QOL of ethnic minority communities. This study addresses this gap by exploring the impact of agritourism on the quality of life of a rural ethnic community and discusses the challenges faced by residents who are attempting to improve their living standards through tourism.

## AGRITOURISM

Agritourism is a hybrid concept that combines elements of agriculture and tourism. It is a form of tourism that encourages visits to farms or rural areas for short and long periods for the purpose of recreation, education, and/or active involvement in the activities of agricultural production and farm life (Das & Rainey, 2010; Yang, Cai & Sliuzas, 2010). Such tourism provides farm-based tourist experience for visitors who seek traditional rural hospitality and access to nature, outdoor activities and cultural experiences, while helping farmers to maintain agricultural viability and to diversify rural economies (Veeck, Che & Veeck, 2006). Many manifestations of agritourism can be found in locales where the town meets the country (Knowd, 2006), but it is commonly associated with non-urban environments and is usually seen as an aspect of rural tourism (Henderson, 2009). Agritourism attractions often include agriculture-related events such as farm stays, bed and breakfasts, farmer's markets, agricultural museums, festivals and fairs, and on-farm activities like pick-your-own produce, fishing, horseback riding and wineries.

Agritourism has long been considered to be a potential means for socio-economic development and regeneration of rural areas (Iorio & Corsale, 2010), especially where options for development are limited. In the past two decades, tourism in rural areas has increased remarkably worldwide and it has played a key role in the development of rural areas that were economically and socially depressed (Perales, 2002; Su, 2011). Growing challenges facing agriculture such as poor commodity prices, rising input costs, environmental pressures, climate change and globalization are substantially eroding farm incomes across the United States, Europe and throughout the world (McGehee, 2007). The decline in the ability of agriculture to generate sufficient income has caused many farmers to seek new sources of income and diversification of the local economy (Fleischer & Pizam, 1997). In Europe, agritourism has been encouraged and promoted as a useful means of addressing the social and economic challenges facing those rural areas affected by the decline of traditional agrarian industries (Wang, 2006). Agritourism ventures are viewed positively in North America as having a beneficial impact on local economies (Hall, Roberts & Mitchell, 2003; Weaver & Fennell, 1997). In many other countries, tourism-based farm diversification is increasingly being seen as an engine of rural development and regeneration (Sharpley & Vass, 2006).

## **METHODS**

A case study was carried out in a rural ethnic village – Longtan in Tuanjie Township, Kunming, Yunnan Province, China in the summer of 2010. Multiple research methods, including in-depth interviews, informal discussions, on-site observations and secondary data review were adopted in the case study. The working language was local dialect and translation was undertaken subsequently by the author. During the field research, the author lived with a host family and spent substantial time in the village to observe tourism events and to acquire insights into tourism issues through direct participation and observation. Semi-structured, open-ended questions that focused on life changes associated with agritourism were used to gather informants' perceptions of the impacts of tourism on their lives. With the aid of a research assistant, interviews were conducted with 68 households who are engaged in tourism in Longtan Village. Additionally, informal conversations were also carried out with tourism employees and other residents who were not directly engaged in tourism, both individually and in groups, to learn about their lives and attitudes towards agritourism development.

## **STUDY SITE**

Longtan Village is located in Tuanjie Ethnic Yi and Bai Township in Xishan District, the western suburb of Kunming City, Yunnan Province. Covering an area of 38.5 square kilometers, it consists of 661 households and a local population of 2,942 (Wang, 2007). The majority of residents are ethnic Yi and Bai. The villagers mainly depended on small-scale rice agriculture, logging, hunting, and collecting herbs and wild mushrooms resulting in a meager income prior to tourism development. Village tours started as a trickle in the early 1990s and a small number of urban tourists visited the village for sightseeing and recreation on weekends and holidays. Local villagers initiated small-scale tourism businesses by selling food and fruits to visitors. Encouraged by the incentive governmental policy in 1999, 15 households participated in tourism by providing meals and homestays for tourists. Tourism expanded rapidly in the 2000s and the number of host families in the village was increased to nearly 70 in 2009 (interview, 2010). Of these, 22 registered at the local Tourism Administration and the Administration of Industry and Commerce.

## RESULTS

The residents interviewed generally welcome tourism development in their village and they appreciate economic opportunities brought by tourists. They agree that tourism has provided more jobs and has brought more investment to the community's economy. An improved QOL can be seen through a higher standard of living, increased employment opportunities and economic diversity. The average living standard of the village has become higher than that of neighboring villages in terms of disposable income, and quality of housing and roads. The incomes of households engaged in tourism have increased substantially. Longtan was a poor village prior to tourism development, but it is now the wealthiest village in the county. Tourism has become a major source of income in the village. When asked about motivations for engagement in tourism businesses, three reasons were most frequently mentioned by villagers: economic reasons, spare rooms and cultural exchange. The economic return from tourism that subsidized farming was the main reason for most interviewees.

According to informants, tourism has diversified the local economy and facilitated the growth of other industries such as agriculture, food-processing, and transportation. The villagers started construction of large scale of green house vegetables and orchards by applying new technology to traditional farming in the 1990s in order to supply the tourism market. Orchards have been greatly expanded since tourism was introduced to the area. Local apples have become well known in Yunnan and have been exported to Japan and other southeast countries. The picking of fruits in orchards has become a popular tourism activity. Annual apple festivals have drawn mass tourists to the village. The rapid growth of tourism has also attracted substantial outside investments. Several private companies from Kunming have invested in developing eco-tourism resorts and recreation centers in the area. These investments have both enriched tourism experience and tend to extend the stay of tourists.

Tourism boom has spurred local roads and other physical infrastructure construction in the region. Longtan village was geographically isolated and there was no bus between the village and the city before 2006. Funded by the government, two highways were built in 2002 and 2004 respectively connecting the city to the surrounding areas, which shortened the travel distance and brought more tourists to the area. Several old villagers said it is easier to sell their handmade shoes, bags and other crafts in the farmers market today with better transportation. Many interviewees also pointed out that tourism has contributed to the conservation of natural environment and the protection of the ecosystem in the community and surrounding areas. Local rich natural resources such as forests, nature reserves, and eco-parks have provided a pleasant environment for tourism. These resources have been well preserved since tourism development. Local ecological environment was destroyed by excessive mining in the past decade. Since the area turned into a tourist attraction, local villagers have cooperated with the government conservation plan and have stopped logging. Instead, they have planted more trees and flowers in their yards to improve village scenery. Villagers used to dump garbage and waste on the roads or in the river. A garbage collection center was built in 2005 and several villagers have been employed to collect garbage regularly. Most residents are generally aware of environmental protection and conservation.

Tourism has enhanced the interaction between rural ethnic communities and the outside society. It functions as a bridge connecting city people and villagers, in which urbanites can learn traditional farm culture, while villagers can access modern information from the city. Many interviewees mentioned cultural and social changes sparked by tourism. They reported that the

guests brought new business to their families and had strong influences on their lives. They became more confident doing business with outsiders and open-minded towards their children's education. Many villagers sent their children to the city for school and some even sent children to overseas for higher education. Tourism has also contributed to the preservation of traditional houses and cultural heritage. With the construction of the new village, many villagers wanted to tear down traditional houses in the old village. When villagers saw tourists' strong interests in traditional architecture, they realized the value of their heritage and started preserving old houses. The old temples that were destroyed during Cultural Revolution in 1970s were rebuilt and opened to tourists.

The interviewees generally agreed that the local government plays a vital role in providing incentive policies and financial support for initial village tourism development. They have assisted the village in improving roads and other physical infrastructure, planning and hosting local festivals and events as well as marketing village tours. However, the villagers were dissatisfied with the current government support for tourism. Many villagers thought that the government policies were unstable and inconsistent towards tourism development. They stated that government policies and regulations have dramatic impacts on village tourism businesses. The former county government officials were very passionate about and supportive of tourism projects. They helped the village build roads and encouraged people to open restaurants and lodges for visitors. However, the current officials show little interests in village tourism and they have done little in terms of the village promotion and planning of tourism events. There were many more tourists when the village was actively promoted and marketed by the government. However, in recent years, it has become rare to see tourists wandering around the village except during weekends and the long holidays. The villagers are disappointed with the limited support of the current government officials towards their businesses. The future of village tourism seems dim.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Agritourism venues and events provide supplemental income to farmers and rural communities that they live in, as well as help preserve and sustain family farms (Das and Rainey, 2010). Like rural tourism businesses in other parts of the world, most agritourism operators went into the business in order to supplement their income and enable them to stay on the farm (Das and Rainey, 2010). This case study finding suggests that farms will benefit from increases in income but do not see dramatic increase in jobs mainly due to the family nature of the enterprises. Agritourism opportunities have the potential to expand the broader tourism industry. However, starting a tourism business is still a challenge for many poor farmers in terms of capital investments and skills.

The success of agritourism does not only depend on the initiative of the owners of tourist farms, but also relies on the possibility of gaining financial support for entrepreneurship, on the public infrastructure of the community, and on the active involvement of local authorities (Kosmaczewska, 2008). Strong support through finance and marketing on the part of government and tourism administration is essential for the further development of agritourism. Given the initiatives being undertaken in rural China, agritourism has the potential to grow into a much bigger industry. For a successful operation, it requires careful planning and a greater understanding of issues like marketing, communication, and government policy relating to this type of business.

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