

Article

Rural Tourism in Globalizing Beijing: Reproduction of the Mountainous Suburbs into a New Space of Leisure Consumption

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Abstract: Rural tourism is increasingly becoming an important complementary service sector of major Chinese cities operating at their immediate adjacent suburban or rural zones. By promoting a green economy, such zones of rural–urban interface/interactions attract more and more public investments, business investors, and leisure seekers. Taking the Yanqi Nightless Valley of Huairou District, and the Ganyugou Village and Xibailianyu Village of Miyun District of Beijing as case studies, this paper investigates the private entrepreneurship, the local peasants’ business drive, and the role of the local governments in integrating the mountainous “backwater” into Beijing’s globalizing economy. Their joint efforts in reconstructing and branding rural tourism resorts, and the ways in which the rural socioeconomic setting was transformed into a post-productive, consumption-dominated, and creative-cum-quality service center is analyzed. The paper analyzes the success and failure of Beijing’s rural tourism business operations, and links their marketing with the capital city’s ambition to brand itself into a globalizing city. Results show that success is highly dependent on physical connectivity. Those seated at the “semi-periphery” with highways or other access corridors are capable of attracting large city clientele. Remote sites, on the contrary, can hardly benefit from the trickle-down process. Hence, a more integrative framework in favor of a more balanced development is finally addressed.

Keywords: rural tourism; valley economy; peasants’ entrepreneurship; leisure space; suburban Beijing

1. Introduction

Since the past two decades, the rural areas of Beijing have witnessed a profound transformation from a farming society to a manufacturing-cum-service-led economy. In 1996, Beijing’s primary industry still recorded a high 24.2% of its total rural gross domestic product (GDP); however, in 2010, this fell fast to a low 5.5%. Conversely, its tertiary sector made a drastic leap in contribution from 29.2% to 49.3% in the rural GDP during the same period [1]. One of the key contributors in the service industry was attributable to the planned “Ecological Reserve Development Areas”, designated in the ecologically fragile but aesthetic mountain areas in the Beijing suburbs (see Figure 1). These areas are mainly located within Yanqing, Huairou, Miyun, Mentougou, and Pinggu Districts, whereby the Beijing municipal government prudently has tried out, since the 1990s, a strategy to clear up the pollutive sectors there and replace them with green industries highly characterized by sustainable tourism [2,3].

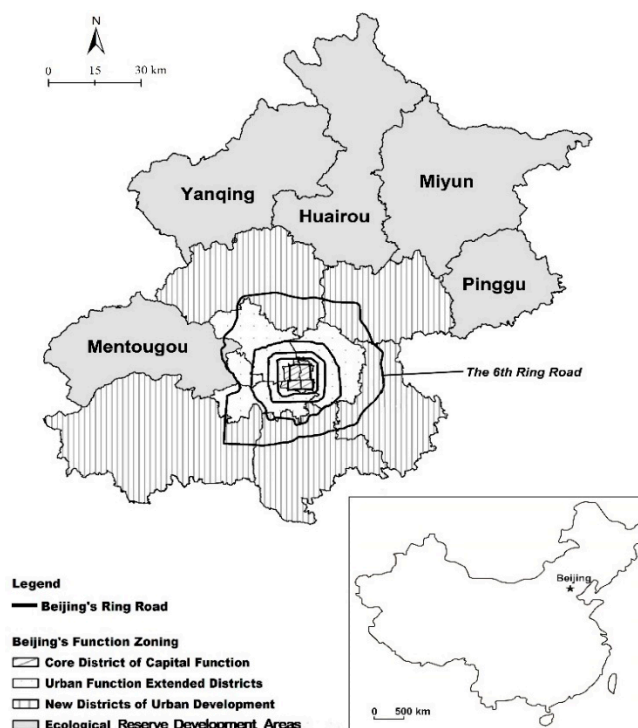


Figure 1. Beijing municipality and its function zones.

Remarkably, during the period 2011–2012, the tourism industry in the rural districts of Huairou and Miyun accounted for more than 20% of their GDP growth, and 62.5% of the GDP growth in Yanqing District [4]. Sources of revenues were derived not only from ticket sales for entrance to the suburban scenic spots and historic resorts, but also from another major source, popularly called “*nongjiale*” (delights in farm guesthouses), run by local peasants offering catering and lodging services.

Since the boom of popular tourism in China, “rural tourism” became a nation-wide popular phenomenon not only in Beijing’s suburbs, but also in some other big cities like Shanghai and Chengdu [5,6]. With rising affluence and busier routine working schedules, Beijing residents find that the natural ambience and aesthetic views in their neighboring mountainous areas, rural way of life, and farm guesthouses provide them with nostalgic sentiments of familial intimacy and relaxing leisure times. Their demand prompted local peasants to organize or to reorganize the hospitality packages to attract the potentially very large source of city guests.

In meeting challenges of this new market, Beijing’s rural tourism is faced with the need for a series of reforms and changes in the economic, environmental, and social dimensions. In the study of tourism development in Beijing’s rural sector, one of the most illuminating features is the articulation of power and interests of local peasants whose self-motivated efforts have changed their own fate. They have done it following grassroots-level institutional innovations in terms of asset operations and the socio-spatial (re)production of the economic opportunities [7]. In this paper, the peasants’ entrepreneurial spirit as witnessed in the study of rural tourism, and their active participation in this modernized sector serving an urban clientele are vividly discussed. The social and spatial dynamics of the tourism activities are also highlighted.

Indeed, the once “enclosed and inward-looking” peasants have transformed themselves into operators of a modern business open to the outside world. In our analysis of the process, three research questions are investigated here: (a) why does the Beijing municipal government promote rural tourism and what is its key role; (b) how has rural tourism contributed toward narrowing the rural–urban dichotomy in Beijing; and (c) why are there success and failure experiences of the respective “superior” and “inferior” tourism sites?

This paper begins with a brief review on the initiatives of triangular forces that make rural tourism work in the Chinese context: private entrepreneurship, peasants as actors, and local authorities as project prime-movers. This is followed by an introduction of the rapid boom of Beijing's rural tourism, focusing on three developmental paths that we discovered in our municipal-wide investigations: (a) the spontaneous market-led growth found mainly at the resourceful sites such as Yanqi Valley; (b) the bottom-up institutional innovations undertaken as an alternative measure in several inferior sites; and (c) the major local governments' strategy to stimulate tourism development by capitalizing on local advantages in the "valley economy" and "tourism corridor" (see Figure 2). Before we turn to these developmental paths and discuss their respective operations and mechanisms, a brief introduction of Beijing's rural tourism industry, its public policy objective, and the survey method are first addressed.

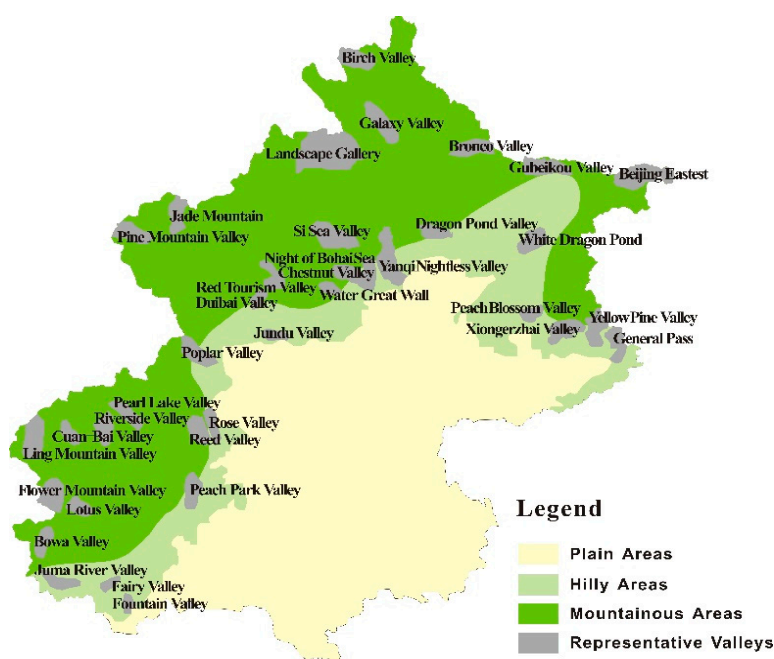


Figure 2. Beijing's known valley economies in the hilly and mountainous areas [8]. Note: hilly areas here refer to 500–800 m above the mean sea level, whilst mountainous areas have a terrain above 800 m.

2. Rise of Beijing's Rural Tourism

2.1. Brief Review

At the top policy level, Gill and Williams addressed that endogenous political change is critical in transforming domestic internal policy [9]. This statement matches perfectly China's post-reform undertaking in which exogenous economic processes unfolded, leading to a growth-led development path including engaging its rural sector toward a modernist tourism development. Looking at the link of rural tourism with the neo-liberal market economy, Beijing's mountainous rural sector, the periphery, is likened to its integration with the core (city area of Beijing), from which a trickling-down effect is expected [10].

On sustainable rural tourism and from the public authority perspective, Roberts, Hall, and Morag pinpointed the importance of sustainable rural tourism governance (planning and management) which would ensure the success or failure of projects and policy implementation effectiveness [11]. Such governance must be linked to a close partnership with relevant stakeholders. In Beijing's case, we need to see an institutionalized and appropriate authority, which seeks to recognize and satisfy the respective needs of business entrepreneurs and the peasants who are key players for environmental conservation and commercial undertakings. In terms of specific projects including even small-scale ones, governance involves also fulfillment of national and local policies, as public sector agencies

are financial and professional supporters in environmental conservation policies, for instance. Rural tourism development is clearly subordinated to national agricultural policy.

Sustainable rural tourism, in the economic sense of it, according to Walmsley, is a lifestyle-led business opportunity associated closely with the surging leisure industry and general rising affluence of the middle class [12]. Some rural communities who are endowed with localized aesthetic qualities will be able to capitalize on this. Obviously, their self-training and service specialization in “place marketing”, whether in cultural input or aesthetic beautification skills, will have a strong influence on which places they would “win” or “lose” whilst moving into a lifestyle-led and leisure-oriented society. In many cases, rural tourism would just serve well as a means to rejuvenate local communities and as “an alternative economic base . . . to help maintain their attractiveness as places to live” [13]. In this sense, it helps to withhold city-bound rural folks, ensuring they stay put and contribute to the local economy. However, local response and involvement in the “commodification dynamic” is essential for local economic transformation. Kneafsey found in his Australian study that not all locals were equally enthusiastic or equally able to participate in tourism initiatives [14].

Location is another critical factor, as proximity would motivate tourists to travel to a nearby resort to fulfil psychological needs such as self-actualization and social interaction. Some places would simply enjoy classical locational advantages and reap benefits such as cheap land near to good transport with high volumes of passersby [13,15]. One should also recognize that local rural culture, in its broadest sense, is a key prerequisite for promoting tourism, and rural resorts can also be used as business culture for retreats [16,17]. Lastly, Michael found that tourism micro-clusters, where the complementary firms cluster, can generate economic benefits through multiplier and accelerator effects [18]. In the process, local communities can strengthen their own well-being through involvement in tourism activities. Where particular market conditions favor cluster formation, it may create substantial opportunities for local growth.

Many studies recognized the positive and participatory effects of rural tourism, using particularly the community-based tourism model (CBT) as a development strategy [19]. However, rural tourism development also showed that it may produce negative effects on local communities and their residents, such as impacts on social values and lifestyle change [20,21].

2.2. Objectives and Current Economic Situation of Beijing's Rural Sector

It is acknowledged that the municipality-initiated private–public partnership and the promotion of peasant entrepreneurship aim at multiple objectives. The partnership involves three main players: the public sector (Beijing municipality), tourism investors, and local peasants. For over 20 years now, their joint efforts were not only a pure commercialization process, but also devoted to the tackling of poverty of local peasants whose income gap was expanding with the increasingly affluent city people, a key inequality issue that the central state is seriously concerned with. Accompanying this objective came the other opportunity that the municipal government intended to manage, which was the longstanding pollution nuisance. By obligation, pollution falls under the municipal responsibility that must be managed and made good in line with the nation-wide objectives to enhance the level of environmental sustainability [22].

Rural Beijing experienced a drastic commercialization process during the past three decades. Table 1 shows that, in 1983, when peasants were allowed to take part in the rural collective-owned enterprises, only 12.4% of them did so. By 2002, following a deepened form of reform, larger private enterprises began to penetrate the rural market, and, by 2010, they already made up 38.1% of the total revenues, becoming the largest investment source. Correspondingly, collective investments continued falling during the 1983–2010 period, taking up a low 30% in 2010 [23]. Peasants' input tended to fluctuate after 2000, probably due to the mobility of peasants to the cities where jobs and other self-employment opportunities were substantial.

The overall transformation highlights the commercialization process and the striking feature of modernization and urbanization in the countryside, as its physical and socio-economic environments were dramatically restructured. Consequently, Beijing's rural sector was transformed from a largely agriculture-based economy into a service-oriented one.

Table 1. Commercialization of Beijing's rural economy (1983–2010) [23]. RMB—Chinese yuan.

Year	Rural Revenue			Year	Rural Revenue				
	Total (billion RMB)	Composition			Total (billion RMB)	Composition			
		Collective %	Household %			Company * %	Collective %	Household %	Company * %
1983	5.1	87.6	12.4	-	1997	92.3	68.9	31.1	-
1984	7.0	84.9	15.1	-	1998	101.1	63.3	36.7	-
1985	8.8	84.0	16.0	-	1999	111.9	60.3	39.7	-
1986	9.9	84.5	15.5	-	2000	128.7	57.4	42.6	-
1987	12.4	84.1	15.9	-	2001	149.0	55.6	44.4	-
1988	17.9	82.4	17.6	-	2002	172.2	49.5	41.8	8.6
1989	21.9	81.9	18.1	-	2003	203.8	46.9	40.9	11.2
1990	25.6	81.3	18.7	-	2004	245.8	43.2	38.7	18.1
1991	30.4	67.7	32.2	-	2005	280.7	40.3	38.2	21.5
1992	38.6	69.7	30.3	-	2006	287.7	39.2	34.2	26.7
1993	61.4	72.6	27.4	-	2007	320.9	33.9	33.4	32.7
1994	103.5	72.7	27.3	-	2008	342.4	33.3	34.0	32.7
1995	71.3	81.6	18.4	-	2009	379.8	32.8	32.9	34.3
1996	82.7	71.7	28.3	-	2010	417.4	30.5	31.4	38.1

* Large private investments come mainly from Beijing city and other provinces. Investors are attracted by the relatively low land cost of Beijing suburbs and the potentially large volume of visitors from Beijing and other cities in Hebei province.

In close proximity to the national capital, which is being rapidly globalized and modernized, Beijing's rural zones received inexorably such elements of "modernity" and "urbanism" diffused through tourism and commodification of local products and services. In fact, one may even notice that rural entrepreneurs offer branded commodity services as a unique "rusticity" to attract tourists of urban origins, particularly those from Beijing. A sharp rise in tourist visits to rural Beijing was witnessed over the last decade. Figure 3 shows that, for example, tourists received by local communities tripled from 2005 to 2016, while revenue earned by peasants in dining and lodging services quadrupled [24].

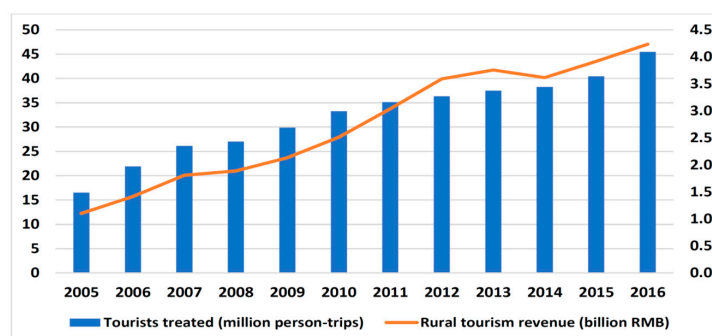


Figure 3. Boom of the rural tourism industry in Beijing, 2005–2016 [24].

Although rural tourism emerged as early as the late 1980s in the Huairou and Changping Districts, official data on Beijing's rural tourism were not released until the mid-2000s, when it began to grow toward a huge market. In 2014, Beijing's official statistics revealed that its rural tourism recorded 38.3 million passenger trips, generating a revenue of 3.6 billion yuan and absorbing 18% of Beijing's tourism employees [25]. In Beijing's hilly and mountainous areas, "nongjiale" business was proven to be an important source of revenues from ticket sales of their famous scenic spots and historic resorts (e.g., Great Wall in Badaling or Simatai, Ming tomb, etc.). In Miyun District alone, for instance, rural tourism received, in 2012, around three-quarters of total tourists and contributed almost one-fifth of the total tourism revenue [26].

The private investments into “*nongjiale*” businesses take various forms, including (a) collective operations by Village Committee or Township Government; (b) household businesses by peasants; (c) private companies by outside investors; and (d) joint ventures between local communities and outside investors. These investments vary in scale ranging from several thousand yuan for a modest *nongjiale* to tens of million yuan for holiday cottages and hotels. As the tourism-led commercialization process greatly restructured rural spaces and transformed state–market–community relationships, as well as the local society, the following sections proceed to demonstrate such changes through case studies. Firstly, the public policy which made rural change possible is dealt with.

2.3. Role of Beijing Municipality: A Public-Led Transformation of the “Valley Economy”

The development of Beijing’s rural tourism has gone through a tortuous pathway since the 1980s. Table 2 summarizes the four main stages of public interventions: (a) local spontaneous initiatives in rural tourism received virtually no public stimulus and guidance from the late 1980s until 2002; (b) Beijing municipality prepared regulatory measures during 2003–2005 to guide rural tourism; (c) from 2006 to 2012, there was ample provision of public infrastructure in its rural areas and successive upgrading of its rural tourism facilities, including those in newly identified hotspots, and tour promotions. Efforts in branding rural tourism as a “valley economy” were made, and (d) over the past few years since 2013, rural tourism has been deployed as a means to reduce disparity between city and countryside under the rural urbanization campaign, known as the “New Styled Urbanization”. Substantial financial support has been allocated to implement this policy and to facilitate spatial integration of the city with its rural areas. Such a policy change reflected a slow transformation from an embryonic but spontaneous stage of development during the 1980s and 1990s toward the undertaking of drastic measures by the Beijing Municipality in the early 2000s to drive its rural tourism sector. By and large, rigor has intensified as rural tourism is seen as an effective means to address China’s rural poverty problems, while pollution and environmental deterioration has also to be put under stringent control.

Table 2. Evolution of Beijing municipality’s intervention in rural tourism. The material is drawn from various policies on rural tourism issued by the Beijing municipality from 2003 until the present.

Development Stages	Government Actions Taken	Socio-Economic Impacts
Spontaneous initiatives (1980s–2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Few cases of public stimulus and guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of harmonious functioning of public facilities with serious pollution issues Low-quality service provision
Regulatory measures (2003–2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bringing rural tourism in conformity with a standard offering of catering and lodging services Publicizing outstanding business households and “Demonstration Parks” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Certificate awards to those resorts offering quality services, and this helped attract more guests and investors
Infrastructural improvement (2006–2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ample public investments in tourism infrastructure following Beijing’s “New Countryside Construction” initiatives Promoting tour and higher-end rural services (e.g., rural hotel, health resort) Branding rural tourism as a “valley economy” and integrating tourism resources and market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Levels of livability and access were enhanced greatly “One Valley, One Brand” as a new strategy to attract more city guests and investments
Reducing disparity between city and countryside (2013 until now)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New public funding (2.2 billion yuan) to bolster tourism business in the “valley economy” Strengthening tour network to link up previously inaccessible places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural tourism development is seen as an effective means to trickle down benefits from city to remote areas

Beijing's rural tourism is significantly called "valley economy" as it takes place in its northern and western regions characterized by mountain valleys with features shaped by their unique geology, landform, and drainage patterns. Enriched by a charming cultural landscape, this whole hilly and mountainous region has around 200 "valley areas" and has great potential for tourism development. Mentougou District was first publicized in 2007 as a "valley economy" with a strategic plan for tourism investment. For many years ever since, this District built up some branded products, one of which is the Cuan-Bai Valley. Yanqing District is particularly known for its Valleys of Flower Sea and Landscape Gallery, and Huairou District is known for its Yanqi Nightless and Tianhechuan Valleys, while Miyun District is known for its Gubeikou and Wine Road Valleys.

While development of rural tourism in Beijing enhanced income levels of the local communities, it was also accompanied by ecological projects which aim to protect the natural environment. Improvements were observed over these years and it was found that three-fourths of the mountain areas where tourism had taken place were returned to greenery. Similarly, soil erosion was put under control. According to our fieldwork conducted in 2013, the annual household income in the valleys undertaking tourism ranged from 100,000 to one million yuan, which was significantly higher than households depending on just farming, whose average annual income per household was 15,000 yuan.

Indeed, income improvements made the "valley economy" very popular among peasants, whose participation is also encouraged by the local township/village leaders. As reported by Beijing Municipal Commission of Tourism Development in 2014, a total of 15,000 households with around 70,000 rural workers took part in the rural tourism activities. Having the heritage of a highly centralized economy prior to the reforms, top-down motivations and incentives are still crucial in realizing new policies in China, and positive bottom-up responses from peasants are key to their success.

3. Peasants' Entrepreneurship in Rural Tourism

3.1. Boom of "Nongjiale"

The active participation of local peasants is observably a major contributor to Beijing's rural tourism by means of bottom-up approaches. Suburban Beijing witnessed a rapid growth of rural households engaged in "nongjiale" businesses in the past several years (see Figure 4). Miyun, Yanqing, and Huairou Districts are the top three which became the biggest growth areas for local peasants offering catering and lodging services. In 2012, Miyun District saw an increase of 283 rural households taking part in the rural tourism activities compared to 2011, and, in 2013, another 498 households joined in [27]. Clearly our study has discovered that the great majority of peasants have opted tourism as their new means of livelihood, replacing farming in the ecologically fragile mountain areas. Many farming zones of such districts were indeed earmarked to be "returned to forest" [28].

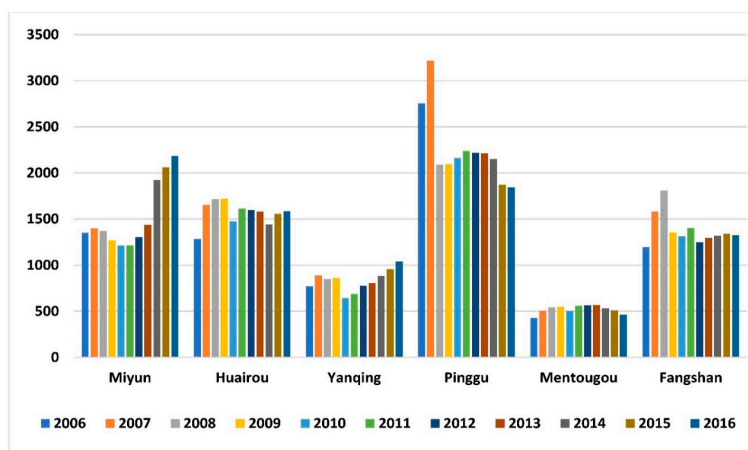


Figure 4. Growth of rural households engaged in the "nongjiale" business in each suburban district of Beijing (2006–2016) [24].

3.2. Power Matrix of Rural Tourism Development

Over the past few years, rural tourism has been performed as a complementary but relatively low-end service sector of modern Beijing's periphery. At the national level, local governments and rural communities were encouraged to take up rural tourism as an effective measure to narrow down rural–urban disparities. Rural tourism has proved a success in commercializing and upgrading values of rural resources, including undeveloped or underdeveloped land, low-occupancy cottages, local special dishes, and other attractions with rustic charms. This commercialization process in Beijing's countryside seemingly has transformed its “rurality/rusticity” and, hence, narrowed down the rural–urban divide haunting China over the last half of a century. Such a rural–urban imbalance is still highly characteristic in China in terms of inequitable share of political power and wealth.

Certainly, the bottom-up responses of Beijing's peasants allowed them to take advantage of a potentially huge rural tourism market. Through aggressive advertisements and marketing their hospitality packages to city guests, they attracted public and private investments. They sometimes deliberately deviated from land codes to meet their objective in favor of their investors (according to investigations on Yanqi Valley in Huairou District). In their “win–win game”, they positioned themselves at a competitive advantage in the marketplace, and managed to mobilize enough financial, legal, and social support to exploit available rural resources and publicize their higher-end tourism products.

Having a rural background, local farmers running tourism business have distinctly different socio-economic characteristics from the city guests they serve. As the survey conducted in 2014 shows in Table 3, city guests had a much younger age structure than that of rural hosts. Over 60% of the rural hosts were concentrated in the 41 and above age group; over 60% of the city guests, however, were in the 21–40 age group. Rural hosts had also lower educational levels than their guests, around 80% of whom attained university degrees or higher. By comparison, only 10.7% of rural hosts achieved such level. In terms of occupations, the majority of city guests (57.2%) were white-collar workers and about one-fifth were young students, as opposed to their rural counterparts, who were mostly small operators hiring one or a few helpers.

Table 3. Comparison between “nongjiale” operators and city guests.

Gender	Rural Hosts	City Guests
Male/Female	44.4/55.6	47.1/52.9
Age group (years)	%	%
Below 20	1.7	15.2
21–30	16.3	34.7
31–40	18.5	25.4
41–50	46.1	14.9
Above 50	17.4	9.8
Total	100.0	100.0
Educational level	%	%
University and post-graduate	10.7	79.5
Senior high/vocational school	54.5	11.4
Junior high school	30.3	9.0
Elementary school and below	4.5	-
Total	100.0	100.0
Employment type	%	%
Public sector	0.0	19.1
SOE or COE	0.0	3.3
Foreign capital/joint venture	0.0	21.9
Private enterprise	16.3	35.3
Family business	83.8	0.0
Young students	0.0	20.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Note: SOE or COE are state- or collective-owned enterprises. Sources: (1) The data on rural hosts came from a questionnaire survey conducted in the certified “cultural tourism villages” in Huairou, Miyun, and Yanqing Districts, June–August 2014 ($N = 178$); (2) the survey data on city guests were taken from References [29,30].

The above findings show that local rural youths largely left their home village for city jobs or education, leaving behind the more elderly to take up tourism operations. This makes it more difficult for the older villagers who are poorly educated and culturally hardly equipped with skills to manage their business well. It is, therefore, felt that the government and local committees need to encourage rural youths to return to their home villages to work and that on-the-job training be run to help the local small operators. By doing so, it is hoped that the enduring problems and business mismanagement can be cut down, and more innovative and higher-end tourism services can be addressed and realized.

After giving the background information about governmental and grassroots-level endeavors in the rural tourism development, we look into how the government and peasants collaborated to boost economic growth in the tourism villages. Specifically, we explore a developmental issue: why is tourism highly unevenly developed despite massive public investment and involvement of local authorities? Within the core issue of this study, we move on to analyze further how local village resources including institutional innovations and the locational factors influenced success or failure of the villages engaged in rural tourism operations. The socio-spatial unevenness in the rural tourism development is then interpreted.

4. Survey Method and Materials Used

In 2013, 2015, and 2016, we conducted extensive fieldwork in the key mountainous townships/villages in Beijing, with an objective to identify their different operation mechanisms and strategies in relation to their available resources and locational conditions in rural tourism. Based on this comprehensive survey, this section introduces two contrasted cases for analysis: (a) Yanqi Nightless Valley of Huairou District, with resourceful villages active in spontaneous market-led operations; and (b) Beizhuang and Fengjiayu of Miyun District and their respective villages, which are perceived as inferior sites, as they have to face tremendous challenges for being far away from the government-funded “valley economy” areas (Figure 5). These two cases chosen for analysis are fairly representative of rural tourism across the mountainous areas in Beijing. The comparative analysis examines the location-sensitive practices in these two areas in developing rural tourism, the way in which each location carried out its grassroots-level institutional innovations, and how each community was affected by its location.

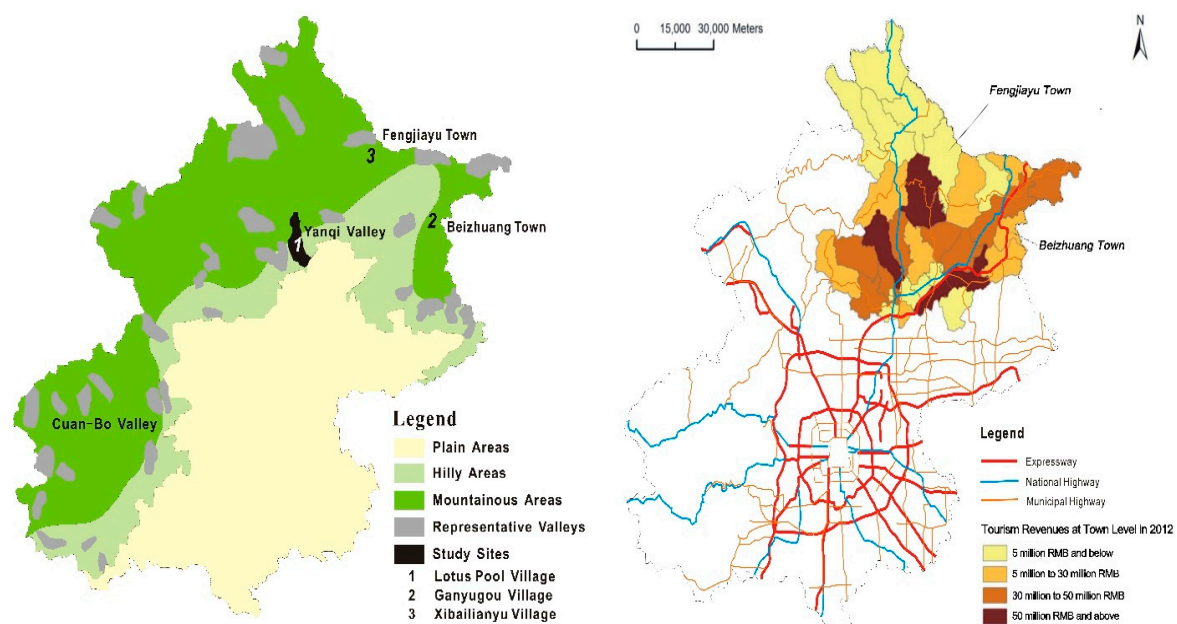


Figure 5. Study sites of the different mechanisms of rural tourism operations.

Our survey comprised two parts. Part one consisted of 24 interviewees selected from diverse backgrounds who were involved in rural tourism in one way or the other from the Huairou and Miyun Districts. For these interviewees, we used structured questionnaires. Part two was a more in-depth investigation which we applied to an additional 44 members of interest groups and city guests. Different approaches were deployed in the survey of the 24 members of interest groups which included (a) cadres of local village committees, township, and district governments; (b) managers of tourism cooperatives and nearby scenic spots and historic resorts; (c) local peasants, operators, and helpers engaged in “*nongjiale*” business; (d) main investors in holiday cottages and hotels; and (e) migrant workers. For groups (a) and (b), focus was on the tourism policies and development operations (investment, planning, marketing, and management), and their attitudes toward potential challenges and opportunities over the rural tourism industry. For groups (c), (d), and (e), attention was centered on their respective roles, motivations, cost–benefit considerations, expectations, and anxieties.

Additionally, 20 city guests were surveyed about their viewpoints on how they perceived the rural tourism market and their consumption preference. The survey was also designed to be more inclusive, with observations and non-structured discussions which allowed open-ended answers from the respondents. All the data collected were cross-checked for consistency and reliability.

Operators in the study sites took initiative to innovate and promote their business. A few villages at inferior sites successfully made a major breakthrough in converting their rural land for investors to build a decent hotel, and Ganyugou Village of Beizhuang was one of them (see Figure 5). In our investigation of those failing to do so, we found that there was an attitude problem with the leaders who were resistant in adapting themselves to social change toward tourism. This brings us to examine the factors behind the successful ones.

5. Results

5.1. Yanqi Valley: Spontaneous Market-Led Growth at Resourceful Sites

The Yanqi Nightless Valley of Huairou District is one of the earliest and most popular “*nongjiale*” models of rural Beijing, which was reinvested and upgraded as a “growth pole” to revitalize the local economy. The Beijing government hoped that Yanqi would take the lead to spread its effects to the nearby impoverished villages through self-motivation and self-initiatives toward a market-led business strategy.

Known as the “Rainbow Trout Valley” during the early days for its fishing and recreational activities, as well as fish delicacies, Yanqi from the early 1990s began attracting large investors when the local village committee approved to convert their collective-owned lands for constructing tourism facilities and resorts. This move witnessed, in 1991, the first investor Buck Commune signing a 50-year lease on a 6.5-hectare land in Lotus Pool Village with an investment of 10 million yuan in a resort business. The valley has since become a hotspot in resort development followed by a more comprehensive range of products in the tourism industry.

This local initiative in rural tourism did not happen spontaneously by itself. However, it kicked off with public stimulus and guidance at the initial stage with an agreement with the public authority that land lease had to be fixed cheaply to pull in investors. For over two decades, such a low lease was not revised despite unhappiness among local villagers. Furthermore, their land-use conversion received no official recognition given that it did not go through the proper public expropriation procedure. Worse still, the contracts signed by local village committees with the investors were not precise enough to stipulate the necessary social responsibilities of the investors *vis-à-vis* pollution control, sustainable use of resources, and expenses sharing in the consumption of electricity and water. The village committees complained that, while they collected little rent from investors, they had to pay for the bulk of electricity and water consumption and expenses on road infrastructure and other public facilities.

For many city guests, Yanqi's higher-end resorts may be a symbol and main attraction of the valley. For the local peasants, however, the “*nongjiale*” business they run was just a fill-in, serving a complementary lower-end market offering low-priced catering and lodging services. “*Nongjiale*” were typically small operations without registered licenses which local peasants managed with their vacated cottages and disused land plots, with one or several helpers. Among those small operators in the Lotus Pool Village, Model Workers' Resort was the largest local “*nongjiale*” business, started in 1993 by the leaders of its village committee.

The “Rainbow Trout Valley” saw a sizeable inflow of funds from the mid-1990s to 2006, during which bigger investments came and clustered. In 2001, 60 million yuan was invested into the Mountain Bar Resort, followed by 35 million yuan into Three Resorts in 2002, and another 40 million yuan into Lotus Thai Resort in 2003.

Since 2006, public funding from Beijing was also administered to uplift the “*nongjiale*” at “Rainbow Trout Valley” to make it a municipal-wide brand, and the valley was renamed “Yanqi Nightless Valley”. An important part of public investments came from Beijing's “New Countryside Construction” projects, and, since 2007, from a pool of projects directed to vitalize the “valley economy”. At the time of our survey in 2013 and 2015, a wide range of constructions and facilities were completed, including upgrading measures for infrastructure, landscaping, route guidance system, environmental rehabilitation, and cultural promotion and branding. Nevertheless, our investigation shows that environmental conservation leaves much to be desired. Flood control, waste and sewage disposal, farmland, and water quality protection are lacking in effective management.

As of today, the Yanqi Nightless Valley has more than 100 resorts and “*nongjiale*” along the river valley, and attracts almost one billion yuan of investment. Nearly 90% of the investments came from private enterprises. With the massive inflow of private and public funds in recent years, the Yanqi Nightless Valley was extended to 47 km in length, covering all three popular scenic spots known as Mutianyu Great Wall, Shentangyu, and Lotus Pool, as well as a total of 11 administrative villages. As Figure 6 shows, a variety of tourism market took shape, ranging from a few dozens of higher-end resorts (for example, the Lotus Thai Resort), to the large numbers of low-end “*nongjiale*” run by local peasants. The latter group consists of largely marginalized businesses struggling for basic survival.

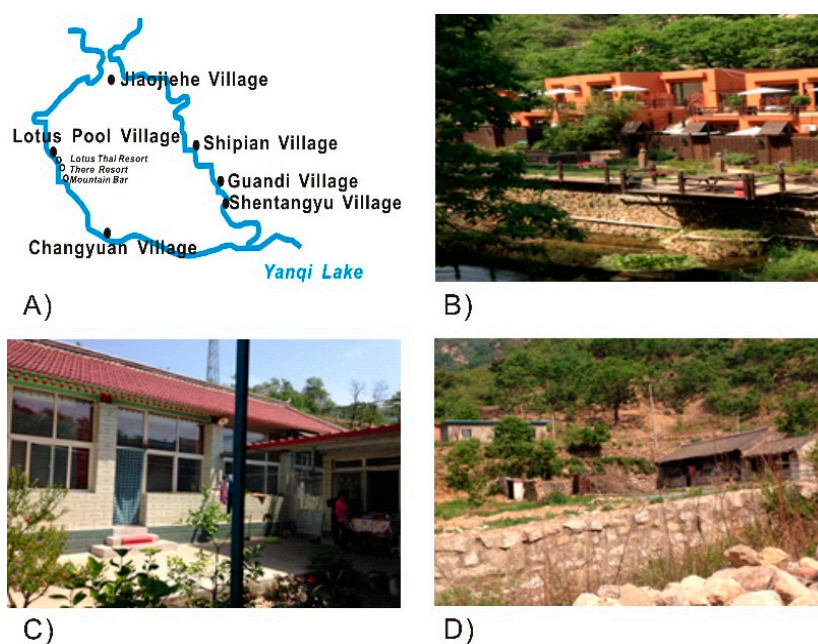


Figure 6. The spontaneous tourism market in Yanqi Nightless Valley: (A) map of Yanqi Nightless Valley; (B) a higher-end holiday cottage and hotel—Lotus Thai Resort built in 2003; (C) a peasant's lower-end “*nongjiale*”; (D) dilapidated housing of low-income peasants who failed to benefit from local tourism development. Source: fieldwork photos taken during April 2015.

From a once humble rural society virtually cut off from Beijing city proper, the Yanqi Nightless Valley rapidly transformed itself into a heavily invested and commercialized valley and a contested arena with diversified stakeholders. Being close to the increasingly affluent and densely populated Beijing, the valley's prime scenic spots and tranquil atmosphere attracted large investors who capitalized on these resources and low land lease. Local peasants simultaneously responded to such a leisure business opportunity and joined in the resort cluster's "*nongjiale*" undertakings. Despite making progress in income levels, local peasants who opted to stay behind to run their small businesses are still haunted by poverty. The worse of the lot are those aged folks who were edged out for lack of capital, property, and land, as well as skills and knowledge. In particular, the elderly and the physically disabled are most marginalized, and they are most noticeably the left-outs that the Local Tourism Cooperative found extremely difficult to get on track toward the path of co-prosperity.

Problems aside, the "valley economy" is in effect a trademark of Beijing's rural development strategy. This strategy is derived from the growth pole concept which one believes that the success of a certain village has a positive spillover effect into its neighboring areas. As the case of Yanqi Nightless Valley revealed, the spatial congregation of investors, resorts, and tourism facilities is now witnessing an external-induced economy actively operating in the hospitality market with inputs from specialized suppliers, subcontractors, skilled workers, travel/property agents, and information exchanges [31]. The spillover effects from the core of Yanqi Valley are found to decline with distance, benefiting predominantly the adjacent villages. Against such a tendency, the Beijing Municipal Government, over the years, made efforts to boost the development of more remote areas. Results show that the Yanqi Nightless Valley extended its spread effect from its original Guandi Village and Lotus Pool Village to as far as the other end of the valley near Yanqi Lake, as found in our investigations (see Figure 6).

During the peak tourism season from April to October, the Yanqi Nightless Valley would be jam-packed with city guests, and many of their cars would be diverted to other less crowded villages. Such a spillover effect benefits the adjoining less accessible places. Market competition, however, is strong between them where the phenomenon of "survival of the fittest" takes effect. In recent years, we witnessed the shutting down of several mismanaged resorts and "*nongjiale*". Indeed, it became increasingly difficult for those lacking the impetus of capital and innovative initiatives to enter the market. The following subsection describes our survey findings about how those inferior sites struggled to stand on their feet with innovative measures in the competitive tourism market.

5.2. Miyun: Innovative Measures at Inferior Sites for Survival

Success in the core of the Yanqi Nightless Valley does not cover some inaccessible areas in the periphery such as Fengjiayu and Beizhuang Towns of Miyun District, which leak out from the trickle-down effects. Our surveys conducted in 2013, 2015, and 2016 on these inferior sites, however, showed that they made great bottom-up efforts to transform their lands to suit the needs of investors. Entrepreneurial attempts of Fengjiayu and Beizhuang Towns are discussed here to explain the extent of their success in terms of location, human resources, grassroots-level innovations, and organizational skills.

Location-wise, as Figures 5 and 7 indicate, Fengjiayu and Beizhuang Towns are located within Miyun District, lying far beyond the famous "Miyun Reservoir Circle Tours", a tourism circuit close to the 101 National Highway, planned and built by the Miyun local government. This "highway" plays a crucial role as a growth corridor for its easy access from Beijing residents. Locational advantage enabled business operators located next to the highway to gain a large share of tourism revenue in Miyun District, which, in 2012, recorded a total revenue of over 30 million yuan (Figure 5). In contrast, Fengjiayu and Beizhuang Towns lagged behind Miyun's rural tourism development due to locational disadvantage. Even though Beizhuang Town is close to Beijing's Jingcheng Expressway in the northeast, it still takes around a one-hour drive from the center of Beijing (see Figure 8).

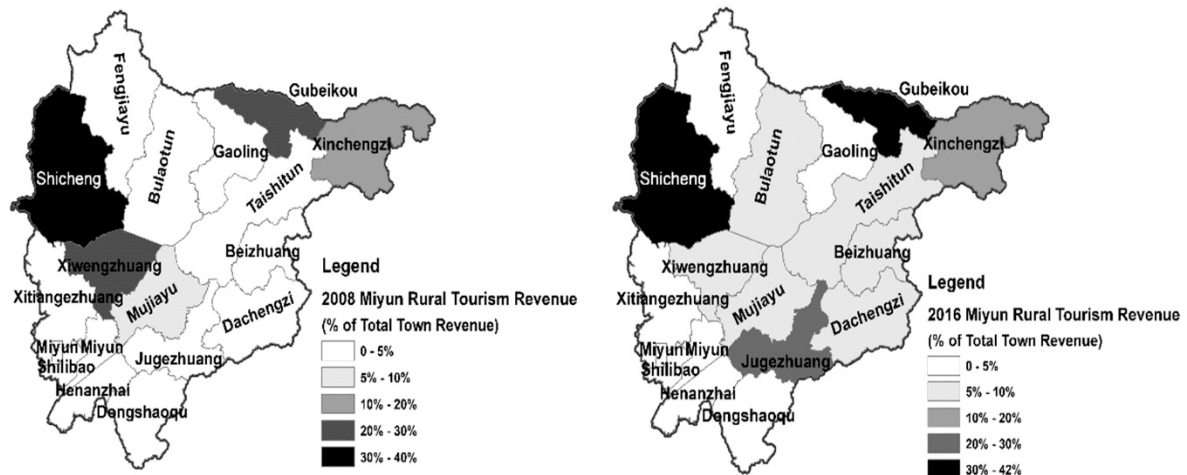


Figure 7. Beizhuang Town versus Fengjiayu Town in Miyun District [32].

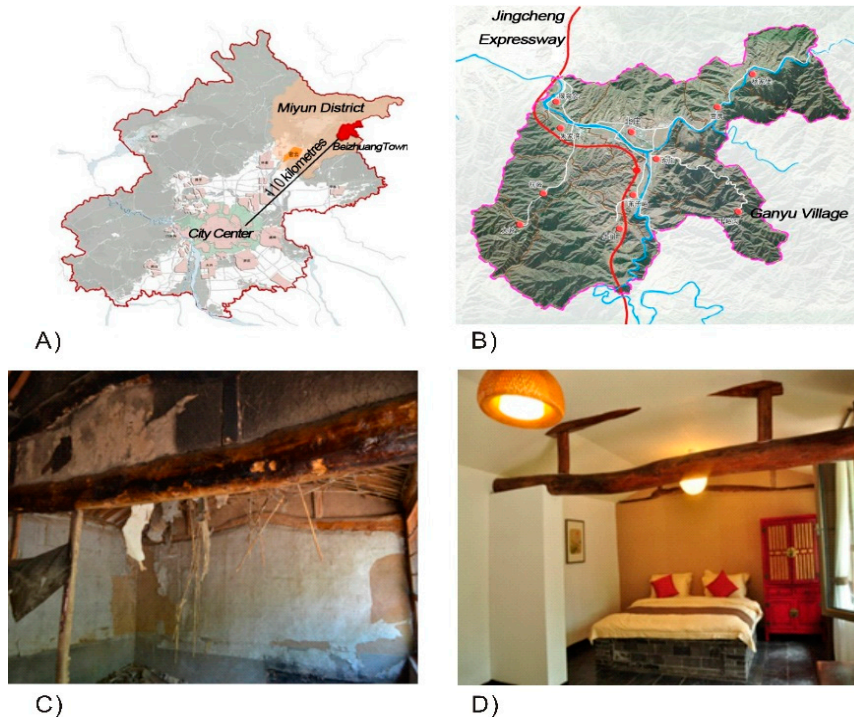


Figure 8. The bottom-up land transfers in Ganyugou Village of Beizhuang Town, Miyun District: (A) location of Beizhuang Town; (B) traffic conditions of the Ganyugou Village, Beizhuang Town; (C,D) comparison pre- and post-upgrading of old cottages. Source: Fieldwork photos taken in Miyun District during 2013.

In particular, Ganyugou Village of Beizhuang Town is known by tourists for its “mountain cottage” project. Ganyugou Village experienced a “youth flight” that left the village with dozens of vacated cottages and farm plots, and an aged population. Then, the Village Committee, in collaboration with the Beijing Beizhuang Tourism Development Corporation, decided to persuade the villagers to surrender their lands for comprehensive redevelopment to meet the recreational demand of the city guests.

Soon after, participating farmers were given shares in the newly formed cooperative, and the Beijing Beizhuang Tourism Development Corporation became the main investor managing the “mountain cottage” project. After pumping in a large investment, the Ganyugou Village saw a radical change in its appearance after renovating its cottages with well-equipped Western-style hotels

to cater to Beijing's middle-class consumers (see Figure 8). A wide range of recreational facilities were developed to attract tourists, including comfortable restaurants, a tennis court, swimming pool, spa, and assembly rooms. According to the corporation's longer-term plan, 33 old courtyards will be upgraded with modern facilities and an investment of 100 million yuan will be made available. As shareholders, local peasants received 20,000 yuan annually per head after surrendering their land to the cooperative. Many of them also worked as waiters, porters, tourist guides, drivers, maintenance workers, security guards, cleaners, and gardeners. Their average annual salary per capita was in the range from 20,000 to 30,000 yuan.

Fengjiayu Town told a quite different story, despite their ambitious efforts in rural tourism development. The endeavors of all the villages of Fengjiayu Town went unrewarded for being distant from the main arteries leading into the city areas. Fengjiayu villages gained some fame for having well-conserved parts of the Great Wall and other historic resorts, which dated back to the Song and Ming Dynasties. It turned out that it could only draw in young backpackers going there for more adventurous trips. Local peasants, especially those of Xibailianyu Village, told us they tried to do something ambitious, but their Village Committee managed only to raise enough money for the construction of hiking and cycling paths to attract more backpackers and those going there to explore the wilderness along mountain routes. All these villages had a disappointing performance due to their remoteness from more affluent visitors.

6. Discussion

6.1. Widening the Rural–Urban Gap and Inter-Village Variance in the Globalization of Beijing

Conscious or unconscious of the rural–urban disparity, local peasants engaged in “*nongjiale*” business seem to think their income improvements are satisfactory. They are mostly middle-aged with grown-up children, hoping that their children will get a good job and they will move together to the city soon. With this hope, they look upon their “*nongjiale*” business more like a market-driven response to customer needs for short-term returns, with much less concern for the distant future. Happy with revenues brought in by their commodified land, local villagers would not interfere with investors' activities, even though they were disturbed by noise nuisance, as well as pollution problems and other abuses, such as improper sewage disposal, traffic jams, illegal land encroachment, and damages done to their crops, vegetables, and orchards for years. All these negative environmental byproducts are a consequence of hospitality services built up following land expropriation and village relocation, undertaken in the name of socio-economic progress and income improvement [33–35]. Doubtlessly, it is the market forces, interwoven with the top-down planning and management, that decided the revenue sharing of local peasants taking part in the rural tourism activities [21,36].

Rural tourism surely brought income improvements to the mountainous villages in rural Beijing. However, the trickle-down effects are unevenly distributed, with the bulk of benefits going to the prime locations enjoying easy access and highly attractive scenic spots and historic resorts. More remote sites with few charms share relatively little. Table 4 gives a picture of such income gaps in “*nongjiale*” business, between the highly lucrative Cuandixia Village, known particularly for its preservation of the Ming Dynasty's architectural heritage, and its three poorly performing neighboring villages (Huanglingxi, Shuangshitou, and Baiyucun). All four villages transformed themselves from coal mining, farming, and grazing to the tourism sector over the past three decades. The *hutong* heritage of Cuandixia Village is especially popular with city guests. The other three villages that previously destroyed extensively their traditional buildings with a replacement of modern buildings are less popular with tourists.

Table 4. Income gap between successful and unsuccessful villages in rural tourism in Mentougou [24,37].

	Disposable Rural Income per capita (yuan)		
	2005	2010	2015
Villages in Cuan-Bai Valley Economy			
• Cuandixia	8581	14,012	29,178
• Huanglingxi	5802	7541	11,238
• Shuangshitou	4405	7180	10,649
• Baiyucun	4531	7703	11,938
Average of Zhaitang Town, Mentougou District	5086	7694	11,145
Average of Rural Areas in Mentougou District	6948	9982	14,582
Average of Rural Beijing	7860	13,262	20,569

As cited earlier, location plays an important role in income levels. Villages near townships, which are topographically low-lying are more accessible and have modern services, provide better business opportunities. Some of such villages in Changping District, for instance, were involved in real-estate developments, bringing in substantial revenues. In recent years, income gaps continued widening. Thus, it was found that rural tourism has a limited spillover effect to remote villages brought about by city guests. Table 5 shows a short period of close urban–rural income ratio during the 1980s when the campaign for Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) was launched in rural Beijing. However, as urban Beijing took off rapidly from the 1990s to modernize and globalize itself, the rural–urban dichotomy began widening again and the income ratio stabilized at 2.2 to 2.6 in recent years. The gap can be explained essentially by the much higher values of the city core’s productive services than the low-end “*nongjiale*” services active in the rural periphery. It is also noted that, until 2016, urban–rural income gaps were still substantially large in Beijing, showing that those living in predominantly mountainous ecological reserve development areas were especially poor (Table 6).

Table 5. Widened urban–rural income gap in Beijing, 1978–2017 [24].

Year	Disposable Income per capita (yuan)		Urban–Rural Ratio	Year	Disposable Income per capita (yuan)		Urban–Rural Ratio
	Urban	Rural			Urban	Rural	
1978	365	225	1.6	1998	8472	4029	2.1
1979	415	250	1.7	1999	9183	4316	2.1
1980	501	308	1.6	2000	10350	4687	2.2
1981	514	361	1.4	2001	11578	5274	2.2
1982	561	430	1.3	2002	12464	5880	2.1
1983	591	520	1.1	2003	13883	6496	2.1
1984	694	664	1.0	2004	15638	7172	2.2
1985	908	775	1.2	2005	17653	7860	2.2
1986	1068	823	1.3	2006	19978	8620	2.3
1987	1182	916	1.3	2007	21989	9559	2.3
1988	1437	1063	1.4	2008	24725	10,747	2.3
1989	1597	1231	1.3	2009	26738	11,986	2.2
1990	1787	1297	1.4	2010	29073	13,262	2.2
1991	2040	1422	1.4	2011	32903	14,736	2.2
1992	2364	1569	1.5	2012	36469	16,476	2.2
1993	3296	1855	1.8	2013	40321	18,337	2.2
1994	4731	2422	2.0	2014	43910	20,226	2.2
1995	5868	3208	1.8	2015	52859	20,569	2.6
1996	6886	3563	1.9	2016	57275	22,310	2.6
1997	7813	3762	2.1	2017	62406	24,240	2.6

Table 6. Urban–rural income gap in Beijing in 2005 and 2016 [24].

Functional Zones	Disposable Income per capita (yuan)				Consumption Expenditure per capita (yuan)			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	2005	2016	2005	2016	2005	2016	2005	2016
Urban function extended districts (inner suburbs)								
Chaoyang	17,506	60,056	11,085	-	13,257	40,034	8017	-
Fengtai	15,795	51,173	8995	-	11,988	37,831	6848	-
Haidian	18,479	67,022	9987	-	12,942	46,630	8069	-
New districts of urban development (outer suburbs)								
Fangshan	15,175	39,486	7205	20,849	11,648	25,105	5204	15,470
Tongzhou	15,603	40,845	7661	23,538	11,077	29,238	4566	17,098
Shunyi	16,167	36,448	7459	24,649	10,208	23,810	5450	15,245
Changping	15,684	42,149	7416	21,871	10,849	29,892	6735	18,949
Daxing	15,179	43,932	7405	19,555	10,107	28,166	4426	17,389
Ecological reserve development areas (mountainous areas)								
Mentougou	16,006	45,872	7556	21,861	11,975	32,977	5532	20,271
Huairou	15,661	36,013	7201	21,620	10,549	23,633	4502	17,195
Pinggu	15,050	38,080	7336	21,866	10,478	24,539	4231	15,755
Miyun	15,106	36,631	7203	20,798	10,175	23,020	4716	15,300
Yanqing	15,596	38,442	6985	19,588	10,384	24,809	4383	14,500

6.2. The More Balanced Framework to Address the Rural–Urban and Inter-Village Inequality Issue

A number of studies by, for example, Wong (2015) and Chio (2014) on rural tourism in South China revealed that they each have their unique governance and approach in boosting tourism business and the local residents' response to pressure from public authorities is largely case-specific, and highly policy-dependent [38,39]. Generally speaking, rural tourism plays a dynamic role in restructuring the countryside by furnishing secondary incomes for rural households in many parts of the world [9,10]. However, rural tourism cannot be seen as an absolute “panacea” of economic restructuring to counter the loss of agricultural and manufacturing jobs. Some rural folks would “win” whilst some others could “lose” in the consumption- and leisure-oriented “place marketing” competitions [11]. How have the tourism and place-marketing activities relocated the new developmental opportunities to the rural areas? As shown in our case studies on the Beijing villages, rural tourism development can be quite case-specific, even within the same metropolis. By and large, the character of places (including specific natural and heritage resources, and social capital) is becoming increasingly important, and the geographic factors (location, distance, and accessibility) are still critical in determining viability of the rural tourism development.

Firstly, accessibility can affect exposure of the rural sites. In many hilly and rural areas, provision of infrastructure to facilitate access is expensive, thus undercutting the potential of their socio-economic development, including access to their eco-assets and natural and heritage resources. In our empirical study, we demonstrated that, in the villages situated in the northern deep mountains along the Beijing–Hebei border, enthusiasm of local villagers in undertaking tourism is necessary, but it is not a sufficient precondition for success due to remoteness and poor accessibility. This explains the relevance of the following currently widespread catchphrase: “Want to get rich? Build a road first! (*yao zhifu, xian xiu lu*)”. Road construction indeed played a significant role in stimulating the economic development in the peripheral areas.

Secondly, it is the importance of the “macro-geography” factor that a favorable public policy is taken on developing a chosen sector followed by a “micro-geography” on where to develop such a sector, for example, the “micro-cluster” such as “valley economies” for tourism development [11,12]. The classical locational advantages, especially to easily accessible sites within a day-trip distance from the metropolises, would have good potential in attracting large volumes of visitors. In Beijing,

the Huairou rural districts emerged as nearby sites attractive to visitors, and they could make up a tourism “micro-cluster” for a combination of specialized regional products. The multiplier and accelerator effects can be achieved through the tourism clusters at the micro-geographical scale. The economies of scale are achievable by pooling tourism suppliers and their potential customers. Consequently, through enhancing the quality of labor supply, product diversity, and information and infrastructure, common costs are shared and reduced.

In Beijing, for instance, local township governments initiated the rural tourism blueprint to develop the “valley economy” (*gouyu jingji*) which is a typical tourism micro-cluster. Dozens of valleys in the north and west were identified as having potential to be developed into leading tourism village spots. The different dynamics that lead to successful clustering were identified to speed up the multiplier and trickle-down effects in the local areas. It is also believed that the “recreational corridor” for self-driving tourists can become an even more effective force to develop the co-located tourism industry, through which it can maximize the tourists’ travel range and promote its complementary growth that the tourists need. The geographic and market conditions that would favor the tourism-based cluster formations and the particular performance of tourism clusters were analyzed and compared here. Our findings further attest the importance of both the “macro-geography” and “micro-geography” in promoting rural tourism industries.

Thirdly, since 2010, the “dependency theory” was renovated to theorize the core and periphery relations between the metropolises and the rural tourism development of their peripheral countryside [9,10]. In the post-dependency discourses, semi-peripheral locations are cited as those settlements found along the highway or other corridor, which act as facilitators of contact between core and periphery. Their role includes the dissemination of the benefits of development from the city core to the adjacent peripheries through a trickle-down process. Apparently, semi-peripheral townships are capable of attracting even greater development opportunities than their peripheral peers. Our study compared the outcome of different rural tourism communities, and found that accessibility advantage provided more benefits and revenues.

In many circumstances, nevertheless, the success of rural tourism is also dependent upon the planning and governance, as to how to bridge the linkages between peasants, market, investors, and other relevant stakeholders. In fact, peasants’ entrepreneurship in rural China is intertwined in the power asymmetries between the rural and urban. Rural tourism itself cannot narrow the rural–urban income gap, and it can even widen the gap between semi-peripheral villages on the corridors and those remote peripheral ones. As found in some case studies on Nanshan, Qiyunshan, and central China, the top-down state control and planning approach, such as the Chinese-style “community-based tourism model” (CBT) could be highly influential in the development results. Such an approach is quite distinct from the Western-style community participation principles [40–42].

Hence, it is suggested that, from the planning perspective, rural policies should be improved for a more balanced rural–urban and inter-village development, involving (a) the devolution of planning power to local communities, as this would ensure that interests of local villagers could be better considered; and (b) the integrative rural–urban institutional reforms to address the rural–urban *hukou* inequalities and the long-standing rural–urban power asymmetries in terms of the circulation of capital, people, and commodities in the rural–urban divided tourism market. Without these profound reforms, it would be difficult to address the long-lasting developmental challenges that exist in the rural parts of Chinese metropolises, such as uneven development, weak social capital of local community, government–community conflicts, and some other issues. In this sense, we propose below an indicative conceptual framework which aims to integrate the different stakeholders in a more inclusive and balanced manner (see Figure 9).

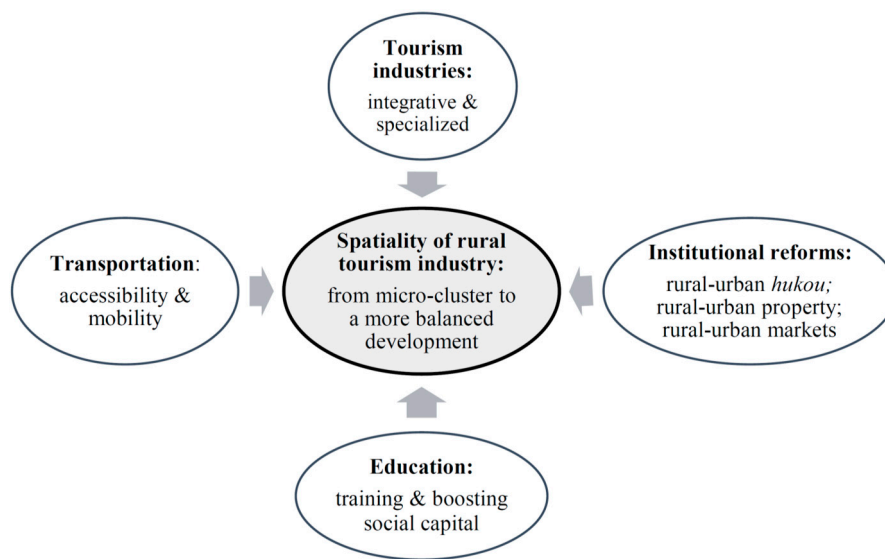


Figure 9. Conceptual framework for a more balanced rural tourism development.

7. Conclusions

This research investigated how rural tourism is promoted as a strategy to reinforce the economic linkage between China's metropolises and their adjoining rural zones. Results achieved, however, differ from site to site, depending essentially on accessibility, competitive edge, and operational capital. After analyzing Beijing's rural tourism development history and the multiple stakeholders (public authority, large investors, and peasants) in the "nongjiale" businesses, it was found that Beijing's rural tourism was faced with the need for a series of reforms and changes in order to adapt to new circumstances. Rural tourism villages underwent a series of grassroots-level institutional innovations in asset operations and the socio-spatial (re)production of economic opportunities in order to meet the recreational demand of city guests and attract more investments. The peasants' entrepreneurial spirit and their active participation in the modernized sector serving the huge market of urban clientele were investigated in the case studies, which showed two sharply different outcomes.

Firstly, business opportunities are unevenly distributed in Beijing's rural tourism sector. We found that the natural ambience, aesthetic views, local special dishes, and other attractions with "rustic" charms are the core rural resources that successful operators publicize for their tourism products and services. Larger valley economy schemes, despite being sponsored by the local government, could not improve tourist attractions by sheer size and investment capital.

Secondly, local peasants engaged in tourism business, disadvantaged by capital and skills, lost out in competing with the urban "elites" from the "modern" world. In this aspect, the peasants have to sharpen their competitive edge to produce more quality goods and services, rather than cheap labor and facilities, to meet higher demand from city visitors. Skill upgrading and on-the-job training are seen to be key for their future career and business improvement. As to why Fengjiayu Town is lagging behind, we found that poor access infrastructure was the crucial factor obstructing tourist access in the mountainous sites. The study proved that trickle-down effects are unevenly distributed, with the bulk of benefits going to the prime locations enjoying easy access and highly attractive scenic spots and historic resorts. More remote sites with few charms share relatively little. These villages need to be more systemically networked into the whole urban economy through road construction and institutional reforms.

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