Perceived impacts of the poverty alleviation tourism policy on the poor in China

Dazhi Qin[a,*], Hong Xu[a], Yeasun Chung[b]

[a] College of Tourism and Service Management, Nankai University, No.38 Tongyan Road, Haihe Education Park, Jinnan District, Tianjin, 300350, China
[b] School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Oklahoma State University, 365 Human Sciences, Stillwater, OK, 74078, USA

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The implementation of the poverty alleviation tourism policy (PATP) in China has reduced the poverty rate dramatically and has had substantial benefits for the poor population in several areas. However, there is limited knowledge in Western academic circles about how in particular the PATP is helping with efforts to eradicate poverty. This study used semi-structured interviews in three National Poverty Alleviation Tourism Pilot Zones in northern China to illustrate the national policy's impact on the poor. The results show the perceived benefits of and concerns about the PATP from economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspectives. These perceived impacts can also be categorized into policy-related and tourism-related impacts, presenting a conceptual model of how this policy affects the poor. Our study also found that different stakeholders perceived the impacts of the PATP on the poor differently and identified several key points that appear mainly in the PATP. These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the PATP's impact on local residents and generate a new perspective on this subject that is relevant to tourism administrators worldwide.

1. Introduction

Although it is still controversial whether tourism contributes to reducing poverty worldwide, China is witnessing a dramatic reduction in the poverty rate as a result of the implementation of the Poverty Alleviation Tourism Policy (PATP) by the Chinese Government. As an effective poverty-resolving solution, pro-poor tourism (PPT) has attracted the attention and recognition of Chinese society by promoting supply-side structural reforms in poverty-stricken areas, promoting the integration and development of relevant industries, and revitalizing accommodation assets in rural areas. The poverty rate is high in these vast and remote mountainous and rural regions, yet at the same time these areas have distinct tourism resources (Zeng & Ryan, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative that PPT be implemented in places where rural tourism resources are abundant.

As the UK's Department for International Development has stated (DFID, 1999), tourism that generates net benefits for the poor could be defined as PPT. From the 149 studies carried out between 1999 and 2014, Medina-Muñoz, Medina-Muñoz, and Gutiérrez-Pérez (2016) found a growing trend in the academic literature investigating the relationship between tourism and poverty alleviation, which in turn has attracted considerable attention from academics worldwide.

Mekawy (2015) first proposed the concept of tourism-led poverty reduction (TLPR), emphasizing the importance of research on the poverty reducing effect of tourism. As Novelli and Hellwig (2011) have pointed out, the contribution of tourism to poverty reduction is mainly economic. In general, there are three ways in which tourism affects the poor: direct effects, secondary effects, and dynamic effects (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). As stated in their book, direct effects include (income from) labor and other forms of income and non-financial life improvements. Secondary effects include both redistribution of tourism revenue and non-tourism industry revenue triggered by tourism activities. Dynamic effects are long-term influences on the local and macro economy, which might also include several environmental impacts. The results of developing the tourism industry in impoverished areas could: (1) increase community revenue and individual income and optimize the north-south wealth distribution system (Spenceley & Meyer, 2012), (2) provide employment opportunities for the poor to participate in tourism activities (Brau, Lanza, & Pigliaru, 2007), (3) invigorate the local economy and increase the added value of natural and cultural resources (Lapeyre, 2011), and (4) connect with related industries and establish cross-industry value chains (Torres, 2003).

However, tourism may be of little benefit to the local economy or to reducing impoverishment; it may also not bring actual advantages to most residents (Mbaiwa, 2005, 2011). Even worse, compared with other industries in the national economy, in some African countries, the

---

impoverished population shares few of the benefits deriving from the tourism industry (Muchapondwa & Stage, 2013). In addition, relying solely on the invisible hand of the market for spontaneous organization and regulation suggests that the tourism industry would eventually forget the original intention behind poverty alleviation owing to lack of proper coordination. Moreover, since the tourism industry in poor areas is highly dependent on multinational enterprises, this may lead to the leakage of tax revenues (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). Meanwhile, if the tourism industry grows too quickly, it may leave little space for other industries, which can lead to the so-called "Dutch disease" (Bolwell & Weinz, 2008).

With respect to socio-cultural and environmental impacts on the poor, the tourism industry helps individuals in reshaping their confidence and creating space for cultural communication (Ap & Crompton, 1998). In a study of the small town of Ghana, Mensah and Amuquandoh (2010) found that tourism activities have brought improvements to the quality of life in the areas of health care, drinking water, transportation, and safety for poor residents. Meanwhile, the development of heritage tourism in India has also helped protect the natural and cultural heritage of different areas of the country, created cultural exchanges for visitors and local residents, and alleviated environmental pollution caused by destructive industrial development in the past (Moli, 2003).

Tourism activities can also have many negative socio-cultural and environmental effects on the poor. Poor residents usually suffer from a lack of technology, management, or marketing skills when faced with tourism development and, as a result, are generally deprived of rights and power. Thus they are often marginalized, or even excluded, by the so-called elite groups when they participate in decision-making, management, and profit distribution of tourism projects (Poultney & Spenceley, 2001). Worse still, due to socio-cultural factors and gender discrimination in the labor market, large tourist enterprises often suffer from sexism when engaging in tourism development in poor areas, which obviously fails to help poor families to rise out of poverty (Stonich, Sorensen, & Hundt, 1995). In terms of the environment, the negative environmental consequences of tourism development will negatively impact the natural environment in poor areas, while environmental degradation will intensify the negative feedback relationship between tourism and poverty (Liu & Jenkins, 1996).

Given these debates in the last several decades, a new research trend has emerged that appeals to the need to pay more attention to enhancing governmental power in the PATP (Spenceley & Meyer, 2012), namely, the need to focus on the state's influence in helping to reduce poverty. China has a unique centralized government, which acts as a powerful authority. From 2011 to 2016, poverty in the country decreased from 122.38 million to 30.46 million, and the poverty ratio decreased from 12.7% to 3.1% (NBSC, 2017). Based on more than 30 years of experience in fighting poverty, the Chinese tourism industry may be a perfect case to study.

Since the PATP was put forward by Guizhou Province Tourism Administration in 1991, tourism has been seen as an efficient way to raise individual incomes as well as government tax revenues in the poorest areas of China. In 2000, the first National Tourism for Poverty Alleviation Pilot Zone (NTPAPZ) was established in Liupanshan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (NHAR). Since then, PPT in China has entered a new stage of development using the symbol of issuing tourism treasury bonds and the establishment of national and local PPT pilot zones. In 2013, Aershan in Inner Mongolia, Fuping in Hebei Province, and Ji'an and Ganzhou in Jiangxi Province were defined as the three new NTPAPZs and became typical examples of how China's PATP was practiced. Based on the poverty headcount ratio of USD 1.90 per day, it is clear that China has been successful in reducing poverty, compared with the world poverty ratio shown in Fig. 1.

While the literature has studied the impact of tourism activities on the poor in developing areas, it has not focused, however, on impoverishment in China, especially after 2015. Whether the conclusions
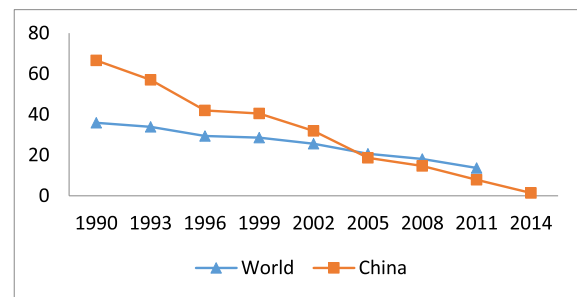

Fig. 1. Poverty headcount ratio at USD 1.90 a day (% of population) in China and worldwide. Source: The World Bank. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/topic/poverty.

that have been reached can be used in relation to China still need to be proved and new studies are called for in government-led regimes such as China. What are the holistic perceived effects of Chinese PATP on the poor? How does the PATP impact the poor? Are these perceived effects different among a variety of stakeholders? All these questions need to be addressed at present. This study suggests a conceptual model of how this policy influences the poor. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore the benefits and concerns that the PATP has for the poor and the positive and negative aspects that can be seen differently by different stakeholders, such as government workers, tourism company employees, and poor individuals from both the tourism and non-tourism sectors. Ultimately, this study can guide policy-makers to identify areas for improvement or maintenance.

2. Methodology

This study adopted semi-structured interviews to explore the benefits conferred by tourism on the impoverished population, as well as the positive and negative impacts of the PATP. Using a semi-structured interview approach was a less constrained method of data collection than adopting an in-depth interview approach (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003, p. 11). As the most significant representative policy of the PATP, the NTPAPZs were chosen as our research samples. We chose three pilot zones in northern China to avoid misunderstandings over Mandarin accents, as all of the researchers on our team were from northern China, and southern Mandarin accents posed potential difficulties for them. The three sample areas were Fuping, Hebei; Aershan, Inner Mongolia; and Liupanshan, NHAR, as shown in Fig. 2.

Liupanshan NTPAPZ was established in 2000. It is located in southwest NHAR. With a total area of $160 \, km^2$ and a population of about 400,000, it is a state-level poverty-stricken area with a harsh environment that has experienced numerous disasters since ancient times. In the year when the pilot zone was established, the per capita GDP of the region was RMB 1,548, the regional fiscal revenue was RMB 165 million, and there were 657,900 poverty-stricken people in the region (NSB, 2001). Fuping NTPAPZ was built in 2013. It is located in the Taihang Mountain area of western Hebei Province and has a long history and a well-developed culture. In 2013, the per capita GDP of the region was RMB 23,609, the regional fiscal revenue was RMB 263 million, and there were 158,900 poverty-stricken people in the region (HSB, 2014). Aershan NTPAPZ was also founded in 2013, and is located in the mountainous area at the southern foot of the Daxing'an Mountains to the northeast of Inner Mongolia. This territory has an average altitude of 1100 m, with one third of its surface covered by grassland, one quarter by forest, and one fifth consisting of national reserve areas. In 2013, the per capita GDP of the region was RMB 25,841, the regional fiscal revenue was RMB 131 million, and there were 14,800 poverty-stricken people in the region (IMSB, 2014). All three pilot areas are rich in both natural and cultural resources. Statistics from the China National Tourism Administration in 2013 show that Aershan in Inner

Fig. 2. Location of the three study areas in China. Source: Google maps.

Mongolia received a total of 1.31 million tourists, an increase of 20% compared with the previous year, and achieved RMB 1.57 billion in tourism incomes, or 20.8% more than the previous year. These data strongly confirm that the PATP can significantly promote regional economic development (CNTA, 2014).

The Chinese government used the following four policy items in pilot zones to help reduce poverty: (1) financial approaches: direct government financial allocation and institutional loans with low or no interest are the most common ways to support the poor to join tourism activities; (2) free skills training: government and tourism companies offered strategies for running small businesses to rural homestay hotel owners and service skills to potential services; (3) company participation: encouraging tourism companies provided financial aid and working opportunities to the poor. Enterprises were also encouraged to transfer part of the company's shares to the poor; (4) IT support: this entailed opening online stores for low-income communities and teaching them how to use the Internet and smartphones. Local government was allowed to adjust these policy items according to their own circumstances. The aims of this policy were not only to increase poor people's incomes but to reshape their levels of self-confidence.

Poverty has always been linked to less developed areas, especially rural areas (Su, 2011). In China, owing to the dual rural–urban structure, most extremely impoverished people live in the countryside (Zhang, 2018). The group of experts visited the selected rural areas, including villages that had direct and indirect links to the tourism industry, to carry out three surveys in June and July (peak tourist season) of 2018. Using opportunistic and snowball sampling approaches (Veal, 1997), we interviewed 42 people in total, consisting of 12 government officers, 7 tourism enterprise managers, 5 tourism enterprise employees, 13 tourism-related residents, and 5 non-tourism-related poor residents. The total sample included 23 male and 19 female interviewees. Their ages ranged from 20 years and below (2 respondents), to 21–30 (7 respondents), 31–40 (10 respondents), 41–50 (12 respondents), 51–60 (7 respondents), and 61 years and above (4 respondents). Interviews ranged from 20 min to 1 h 31 min in length.

Our study was divided into four stages.

1. *Preparation.* In this stage, researchers designed the study plan and interview questions.
2. *Data collection.* The researchers first conducted field research and collected basic regional information materials. Subsequently, we conducted a semi-structured interview with government staff involving the development of PPT projects and related briefings. We selected these interviewees through convenience sampling, using a snowball sampling approach. The researchers then conducted semi-structured interviews with local tourism practitioners and residents by acting as tourists and customers, visiting local homestay hotels, entering tourist goods stores, and renting transportation. In the process, we randomly searched for new interviewees until theoretical saturation was achieved. Beginning with the 39th interview, researchers noticed that no new information appeared in the interviews. We carried out a further three more interviews to verify our conjectures and then stopped interviewing after the 42nd interview (Francis et al., 2010). The researchers used mainly photography and other recording methods to record the interviews, supplemented by the researchers' written records of the key contents. The researchers also recorded research diaries at the end of each day.
3. *Organizing materials.* The researchers organized and numbered the interview materials and other textual information, as well as classifying and naming the images and photos.
4. *Data coding and analysis of theory frames.* The researchers converted the audio and video data into text form. These codes could come from either theory or text or from a combination of the two (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). In our case, three main codes came from theory; sub-codes came from both theory and text (Table 1). This study employed two researchers who had background knowledge of tourism management in order to code text data separately to avoid human coding errors arising from failures in judgment. These researchers were trained by other researchers before the coding process. A binary data (yes or no) coding rule was adopted. We used the most common approach to calculate coding consistency (Gery & Russel, 2000): coding consistency = $2M/(N_1 + N_2)$, where M represents a fully consistent number of codes, N_1 represents the number of codes by the first coder, and N_2 represents the number of

Table 1
Economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts of the PATP on the poor.
Source: Author

Attribute	Codes	Sub-codes	Examples
Economic impact			
Benefits	Financial support	No-interest loan	"I can get three-year-long no-interest loan from bank."
		Enterprise subsidy	"Government provides direct subsidies to companies."
		Special poverty alleviation subsidy	"Government gave us land and labor subsidies."
	Business development	Pioneers	"The government encourages pioneer enterprises to join PPT."
		Drive regional development	"Government provided special policy terms to drive community's development."
	Linking relevant industries	Creating industrial cooperation	"Creating opportunities to encourage cooperation between tourism and non-tourism-related industry."
	Increase in jobs	Provide jobs	"Companies provide fixed job positions to the poor."
		Provide orders	"Companies offer special orders to the poor's products."
	Increased income	Pay wages	"I could earn RMB 1800 from my service company."
		Informal income	"I will pick up some wild herbs and sell them to tourists."
		Land transfer income	"I transferred my land to a company and get paid every year."
		Shareholding in company	"I use my house to buy into a business and get an annual bonus."
Concerns	Rise in living costs	Rising prices	"Prices are much higher than in previous years."
	Income Gap	Increase in the gap between rich and poor	"The money was taken away by the few who led the way, and nothing was left for the hard workers."
	Low profitability	Seasonal income fluctuations	"The two months in the peak season bring in a year's income, and in the low season nobody will visit us."
		Low industry profit	"Take out the cost, and there's almost no profit left."
		Low industry entry threshold	"Anyone can run a homestay hotel if they like."
Socio-cultural impact			
Benefits	Infrastructure development	Build roads	"Government helps to build new roads to every village."
		Electricity, water and Internet supply	"Make sure every village could enjoy electricity, water and Internet service."
		E-commercial shops	"Government sets up at least one e-commercial shop in every village."
	Support on ongoing basis	Service atmosphere improvement	"The whole society has a good service atmosphere."
		Project assistance	"Some areas create novel PPT forms, like PPT workshops."
	Living conditions improvement	Fixed asset improvement	"Government provides free standard sheets, pillows, and comforters to the poor who will run homestay hotels."
		Tourism facility quality control	"Administrator builds uniform industry standards."
		Social environment improvement	"Our streets become cleaner; our social surrounding is getting better."
	Social class enhancement	Social status enhancement	"I was poor in the lowest layer of society, now I am a manager."
		Family status enhancement	"After making money, my status in the family also improved."
		Social influence increase	"As more and more people came to me for advice on how to run a hotel, I felt more and more influential."
	Education and health service	Mental health improvement	"I became more positive to life."
		Medical quality enhancement	"We could have better medical conditions."
		Rise in quality of children's education	"After making money, I can afford my son's tuition for a better school."
		Labor skills training	"I gained service standard training in a four-star hotel."
		Company with family members	"I have more time for my children and family."
		IT skills training	"I got the computer and e-commercial training."
	Work environment improvement	Employment nearby	"I can work at home."
		Low labor intensity	"Tourism industry is not as tired as other industries."
		Flexible working schedule	"I can attend PPT workshop at any available time."
	Development in attitudes	Boost in morale	"Community members believe they could have a bright future."
		Strong willingness to work	"They are more willing to work."
		Positive working attitude	"Their enthusiasm for work was aroused."
		Confidence improvement	"I feel confident when talking to others."
		Change in values (willingness to cooperate)	"We all know cooperation is the only way to success."
		Smooth information exchange channel	"We had a Wechat group; even older members could receive the latest news."
		Broaden vision	"After talking with visitors, I knew lots of new things from the outside world."
		Enhance the sense of pride	"I feel so proud as a member of our tourism company."
	Empowerment	Greater opportunity to express inner voice	"We met with our leader every week, and share our opinions to him/her."
		Gain right to reward and punishment	"If a member of our community does something harmful to us, we could vote to eject him/her."

Table 1 (*continued*)

Attribute	Codes	Sub-codes	Examples
Concerns	Conflict between poor and non-poor residents	Increased conflict between poor and non-poor	"Non-poor can't get bonus from PPT policy, so some of them become jealous."
		PPT policy is not accurate enough	"No solid standard to value who are the poor, so some people with special relationships with admins would be seen as the poor."
	Variations in policy implementation	Fluctuations during policy implement	"How specific policies are implemented changes quite often."
	Difficulties in communication between poor and administrative officers	Deviations in policy execution	"The national policy is good, but when it is implemented, it changes."
		Unclear about belongings of tourism property	"The same tourism resources often belong to many different administrative agencies, resulting in management chaos."
		Poor communication channels	"There is no perfect way for admins to listen to individuals voices."
	Cultural traditions commercialized	Traditional culture commercialized	"Neighbors used to help each other, but now it takes money to borrow something from neighbors."
		Traditional values changed	"Young people used to want to have more education, but now they want to make money as early as possible."
	Possible conflicts between Tourism-related stakeholders	Irrational administrative system	"The way to implement PPT policy is always complicated by irrational administrative system."
		Non-violent action	"Others and I sat in front of the government gate to get more power for ourselves."
		Violent action	"Some taxi drivers and I blocked the road to the scenic area, just to make an argument."
Environmental impact			
Benefits	Individual environmentally friendly awareness	Spontaneous environmentally friendly awareness improvement	"If our environment was polluted, then no visitors would visit us. So we need to protect the environment."
Concerns	Pollution of non-tourism areas	Increase in pollution in non-tourism areas	"Yes, the tourism areas are clean enough. But look at other places, nobody cares."

codes by the second coder. The final inter-coder reliability was 95.7%.

3. Results

3.1. Impacts of the PATP on the poor

Following the three-level coding process, we found 23 positive and negative impact items constituting the impact of the PATP on the poor. Based on previous studies' categorical frames (Liu, Sheldon, & Var, 1987; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2016; Truong, Hall, & Garry, 2014), we divided the data into three impact groups: an economic impact group, a socio-cultural impact group, and an environmental impact group. The results are given in Table 1.

We found that some of the PATP provisions were directly related to the tourism industry. For example, the government provides direct one-off subsidies for enhancing homestay accommodation facilities, or companies directly buy or help to sell tourist souvenirs made by the poor. There are also some of the PATP provisions that are indirectly related to the tourism industry. Although these provisions cannot directly promote the development of tourism, a more favorable development environment has been created for the tourism industry. For instance, the PATP has improved infrastructure such as roads, the availability of drinking water, and access to the Internet in poverty-stricken areas, and has provided a good infrastructural basis for developing the tourism industry in those areas. The vocational skills training provided by enterprises for the poor also lowers the threshold necessary for them to enter the tourism industry.

Therefore, there are two different ways in which the PATP impacts the poor. In the first, the PATP helps the poor directly through tourism activities. For example, the policy provides IT skills training to guide people to promote and sell their travel products on the Internet; the government also assigns staff to help poor households to repair their homes and improve their accommodation facilities. In the second (indirect) way, the PATP first initiates policy impacts in poor areas, and based on these policy influences, poor people can achieve tourism-related impacts by participating in tourism activities. With the help and support of the PATP, the level of infrastructure in the whole society has been directly improved through providing the most basic support for the poor to engage in the tourism industry. With the encouragement of tourism policies, tourism enterprises have also provided more jobs and support measures for the poor, and this has become a sufficient condition for the poor to engage in tourism. At the same time, the poor have achieved financial and labor skills improvements, and thus have become qualified to work in the tourism industry.

Thus, we divide the perceived impacts of the PATP into policy- and tourism-related impacts. We then refine this classification into economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts. The results are given in Table 2.

In these two different ways, the PATP has brought tangible benefits to the poor and has been recognized by them as so doing. The majority of interviewees indicated that they are very satisfied with this policy and will continue to participate in PPT projects if they have the opportunity. We have summarized the conceptual model of the impact mechanism of the PATP on poor people in Fig. 3. Although Mitchell and Ashley (2010) suggested three ways in which tourism affects the poor, their theory is rooted in economic distribution and the redistribution process, rather than from the comprehensive viewpoint of the PPT strategy, nor does it clarify how the PPT strategy influences the poor holistically. Our conceptual model shows a clear process as to how PPT impacts the poor in two different ways.

3.2. Perceived impact of the PATP on the poor by different stakeholders

The previous section summarized the two ways in which the PATP impacts the poor and outlined the perceived advantages and dilemmas of each phase. This section reviews these specific perceptual influences and analyzes the main perceptual impacts of PATP policies on the poor from the perspective of different stakeholders. The percentage of perceived impact items mentioned by different stakeholders is shown in Fig. 4. In general, different stakeholders have different perspectives on the benefits and concerns of the PATP. Tourism administration officers always focus more on benefits, while ignoring concerns. In contrast, non-tourism-related poor residents pay more attention to concerns than to benefits. The tourism-related poor respondents gave almost equal attention to both the advantages and disadvantages of each dimension, apart from environmental concerns. Tourism company staff also paid attention to every dimension, but this group gave less attention to socio-cultural concerns than any other group.

3.2.1. Tourism-related poor

The tourism-related poor population is the major and most direct

Table 2
Policy- and tourism-related impacts of the PATP on the poor.
Source: Author

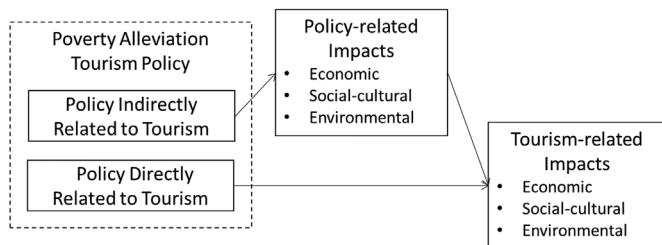|		Policy-related impacts	Tourism-related impacts
Economic impact	Benefits	Financial support	Business development
			Linking relevant industries
			Increase in jobs
			Increased income
	Concerns		Rise in living costs
			Income gap
			Low profitability
Sociocultural impact	Benefits	Infrastructure development	Development in attitudes
		Support on ongoing basis	Empowerment
		Improvement in living conditions	
		Social class enhancement	
		Education and health service	
		Working environment improvement	
	Concerns	Conflict between poor and non-poor residents	Commercialization of cultural traditions
		Policy implementation variations	Conflicts among tourism-related stakeholders
		Difficulties in communication between poor and administrative officers	
Environmental impact	Benefits		Individual environmentally friendly awareness
	Concerns		Pollution of non-tourism areas

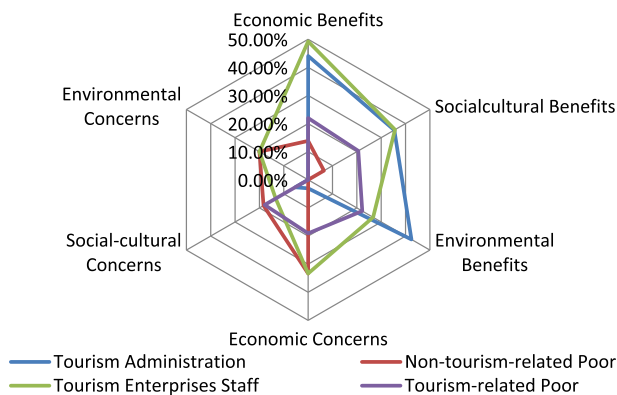**Fig. 3.** Conceptual model of the impacts of the PATP on the poor.

Fig. 4. Percentage of perceived impact items mentioned by different stakeholders.

beneficiary of the PATP. Analysis of their perceptions of the impact of tourism policies suggests that these perceptions are mainly positive and focus on tourism-related impacts. Their concerns are concentrated mainly on the fluctuations in policy implementation and the hope that the policies can be implemented more effectively and generate further benefits.

3.2.1.1. Income. Tourism has brought a significant increase in the incomes of poor families, but tourism income exists as a supplement and is not their major source of income. Seven tourism-related poor people mentioned in their interviews that the tourism industry has raised their personal and household incomes. The best example is a disabled hotel owner in Tianchi, Aershan City.

"Owing to my physical disability, my previous income relied on my relatives and friends. Since participating in the tourism industry, I have relied on government help and my own tenacity, struggling to expand from a homestay hotel with only a few beds to a large hotel that can contain 200 people. I have not only realized the transformation from poverty to prosperity, but also offered working opportunities to poor people around the country."

At the same time, however, two respondents believed that the tourism industry provides lower incomes than the industry in which they formerly worked. At present, the main source of income for their families is not from the tourism industry, but from other, more stable, industries, and their spouses are the main sources of income for the family. Some interviewees even mentioned that due to family factors, such as caring for the elderly and children, they could engage in the tourism industry only temporarily, as a supplementary source of family income. If they had the opportunity in the future, they would be willing to return to the industries they previous worked in.

"My youngest daughter is only nine months old; I have to give up a well-paid job in a big city and come back home to raise her. My income from the homestay hotel is much less than it used to be. When my children are older, I will continue to work in the city."

3.2.1.2. Jobs. Tourism provides a large number of jobs for the poor. These positions are respectable, less labor-intensive, and the work environment is good; thus, they attract the return of rural labor and alleviate the hollowing out of rural areas. Four respondents mentioned that the tourism industry has many job opportunities and the work is relatively easy. One interviewee stated:

"In the past, I was planting trees outside, and I was exposed to the sun every day. Now I have joined the Tourism for Poverty Alleviation Working Group. I can do manual work at home every day. There is no limit to my working time. When I have time, I can do it and use all my free time. The more I work, the more I earn. I could have a reasonable income in doing manual work."

Tourism provides a large number of jobs for the female population, thus helping them increase the household income as well as taking care of the family. Meanwhile, they can balance their own development with their children's education. For example, in Longwangba, Guyuan, under the guidance of the village cadres, all of the villages' residents reused family rooms to run homestay hotels. The latter not only revitalize rural assets, they also increase family incomes. Laborers who in the past went out to work have chosen to return to their home towns to start businesses. They can take care of the elderly and educate their children at the same time, thus achieving a balance between their own

development and that of their families.

"I used to have to do farm work and raise children at home, but now I can take care of my family while running a hotel. My family's financial situation is much better than before. Now, many tourists visit our village; that attracts a lot of villagers who were working outside and came back to participate in tourism. The days are getting better and better, and we are working with great energy."

3.2.1.3. Social class promotion. The training programs provided by the PATP provide the poor with a channel for social class mobility. Two poor respondents discussed their experience of benefiting from the PATP and achieving an improvement in social status. By participating in the skills training program provided by the government and enterprises, the poor become familiar with the skills required in the tourism industry and acquired the ability to work in the industry. After a period of hard work, they mastered the hospitality skills required by the catering industry, hotels, and other related industries. They participated in the intensive follow-up training run by enterprises and the government; and gained various qualifications for work. Some developed themselves to become training managers for rural tourism enterprises, some were employed by high-status hotels in the city, and some opened their own homestay hotels with the support of the government. Both of those interviewed shared the fact that they had achieved social class mobility because of the PATP. One homestay hotel owner said:

"Can this be the same? I used to be a poor person who worked for others. Now I am a business owner and I am employing someone else. I am the boss now!"

3.2.1.4. Development in attitudes. The PATP has multiple ways to improve the attitudes of those in poverty. First, people are educated and trained and exposed to tourists and the outside world. Their horizons are broadened, their minds are liberated, and their outlook is significantly improved. Second, to attract tourists, the poor have to greatly increase the level of hospitality infrastructure and their own services according to the needs of tourists, which indirectly promote a substantial increase in their living environment and personal attitudes. Four respondents mentioned the PATP as having a positive effect on their personal outlook. One of the female respondents noted that:

"Since working in a tourism company, I have become self-confident and dare to communicate with others. Even my taste in clothes is different than before."

Poor people benefit in different ways from the tourism industry. They do not need to travel long distances to work but can obtain employment at home. Thus, non-working hours can be used for family care and children's education, and the intergenerational transmission of education can be realized. Three respondents mentioned the improvement in their education and of the medical environment as a result of the PATP. Parental education plays an irreplaceable role in the growth of children, so the PATP indirectly promotes improvements in the educational standards of the next generation.

"Since I ran this hotel, I could have more time to stay at home with my children and talk with them. The first thing I will do when I have more money is to send my children to schools with better teaching quality."

3.2.1.5. Variations in policy implementation. Because different practitioners have different understandings of this policy, variations in policy implementation exist to some extent, resulting in dissatisfaction and worry among some poor respondents. Four tourism-related poor respondents spoke about their concerns over the volatility of policy implementation. One respondent said:

"Since the allocation of poverty alleviation funds is the responsibility of the village committee, the relationship with the village party secretary can be important. Knowing people (who have a relationship with the government) can maximize the enjoyment of policy benefits, and you cannot get anything without knowing people. After the change in the village leaders, if the new village party secretary is not capable, other villages will attract a higher level of policy benefits. The villages that should have enjoyed policy support will not be able to enjoy it."

3.2.2. Non-tourism-related poor

Non-tourism-related poor people have not benefited from the PATP directly, but have suffered from the negative impacts of tourism development in poor areas. Therefore, this group's perception of the impacts of such policies is concentrated mainly on the negative impacts of tourism activities, as the presumed positive impacts are not obvious to them.

3.2.2.1. Income gap. The tourism-related poor enjoyed multiple policy bonuses as their ability to work and their self-confidence and enthusiasm are stimulated, and a virtuous circle is thus gradually established. By contrast, most poor people, who do not participate in tourism, remain in a state of inertia waiting for help, and this creates a vicious circle. The income gap between the two groups has gradually increased. In our study, the research team found that poor people who did not participate in the PATP or other forms of poverty alleviation generally adopted negative attitudes; they were indifferent to the jobs provided by the government, waited passively for the government's help, did not work, and showed no enthusiasm for life. Three non-tourism-related respondents believed that the uneven distribution of government policies is the root of the growing gap between rich and poor.

"These basic service jobs provided by the government were too low; I don't want to do it. I am waiting for anti-poverty inspection group. When they were here, I can have everything I need without working. Tourism industry is not as easy as it looks like to earn money. Most of the money went to the leaders; those who work hard have little money left."

3.2.2.2. Conflicts. The PATP established standards for distinguishing between policy beneficiaries and policy outsiders. Policy beneficiaries can enjoy direct or indirect financial subsidies and many kinds of policy bonuses, while those untouched by the policy do not receive any benefits. As a result, some members of this group, as well as those with incomes above the poverty line but below the level of the well-off, are dissatisfied. Policy adjustments need time for them to be implemented, which has gradually led to dissatisfaction and conflict between this group of people and policy beneficiaries, as well as government departments. As one resident said:

"In a flood accident in a village, the only road connecting the village and a scenic spot was washed away by the flood, and the village cadres called on all villagers to repair this together. However, non-tourism-related poor people believe that those who are beneficiaries of government policies are obliged to participate in flood repair. They would not work for the village without acquiring the benefits of the policy."

3.2.3. Tourism administration

Government workers are the main setters and implementers of the PATP, and are the dominant beneficiaries of this policy. During the interview process, their perceptions of the policy were almost entirely focused on its positive aspects, which, intentionally or unintentionally, neglected the problems with policy implementation; they talked little

about the negative issues of the policy.

3.2.3.1. Infrastructure development. The PATP policy has promoted the rapid development of infrastructure construction in poverty-stricken areas, but provides only the most basic guarantees to the poor for participating in the tourism industry and obtaining benefits from it. Ten government workers mentioned this in the interviews. Special PATP funds help rural areas to repair roads, renovate and rebuild endangered houses, mend water taps, and establish Internet access in each village to help poor residents achieve the most basic level of communication and networking. These improvements in and upgrades to infrastructure have laid the foundations for regional tourism development in the future.

> "Since the implementation of PPT policy, the government has paid to help the village build roads, provide water, electricity and Internet access, provide the village with e-commerce shops and provide villagers with free e-commerce skills training. So the infrastructure in the village has improved rapidly."

3.2.3.2. Environmentally friendly awareness. Five government workers mentioned the mandatory ecological regulations imposed by the government. The government has formulated relevant provisions for environmental protection, protecting the ecological environment of the tourism area directly, as well as helping environmental awareness to penetrate into the lives of the poor. According to the mandatory regulations of the government, almost all tourism companies have a designated person responsible for ecological environmental protection; this ensures basic ecological protection and environmental sanitation maintenance in tourism areas.

The villagers benefited from the economic impact of tourism and expressed their desire to protect the ecological environment. Five government workers and four tourism-related poor respondents mentioned that protecting the ecological environment is a spontaneous individual behavior. They know that:

> "Visitors come to see beautiful scenery in my hometown. Once the ecological environment is polluted, tourists will not come again."

3.2.4. Tourism company staff

As the carriers of policy implementation, tourism enterprises play a significant role in connecting the poor population with government departments. Therefore, the positive and negative impacts of the policy as perceived by tourism company staff are often the most comprehensive. Their perceptions included observations on policy-related as well as tourism-related impacts. In view of the profitability of tourism companies, the most obvious feelings of staff pertained to the impact of the policy on the income of the poor. Eight tourism company staff members mentioned that the PATP could help the poor to raise their incomes, and five respondents mentioned an increase in the gap between the rich and the poor as a whole. The perceptions of tourism enterprise staff with regard to other items affected by the policy were relatively balanced, with perceptions of the policy's influence on other groups being similar.

> "PPT policy does bring real benefits to the poor. You see, our enterprise is required to provide certain job opportunities to the poor; these people have a fixed wage income, so they directly get rid of poverty. Our enterprise also helps them with technical training, so that they can have jobs wherever they go. However, this policy does make some people very jealous. Those who don't enjoy the policy have a low income level, which also causes some social conflicts. These negative impacts are inevitable."

4. Discussion and conclusions

By examining the use of the tourism industry as the main means of poverty alleviation in China's rural areas, this study and paper have: (1) explored the perceived impacts of the PATP on the poor, (2) investigated the underlying influencing mechanisms, (3) analyzed different stakeholders' perceptions of the policy's impact on the poor from different perspectives, and (4) summarized several key impacts that are implied by the PATP, as discussed further below.

(1) This study explored the perceived impacts of the policy on the poor from economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects that have been documented in previous studies. Specifically, the positive perceptions are that the economic impact of the PATP assists in raising the incomes of the poor (e.g., Croes & Vanegas Sr, 2008), developing businesses (e.g., Manyara & Jones, 2007), linking relevant industries (e.g., Spenceley & Goodwin, 2007), creating jobs (e.g., Brau et al., 2007), and providing financial support (e.g., Slocum & Backman, 2011). The concerns created by the economic impacts are rises in living costs (e.g., Bowden, 2005), an increasing income gap, and low profitability in the industry (e.g., Muchapondwa & Stage, 2013). The effects of the economic impacts investigated in this study are mostly consistent with those reported in the literature. Although there are studies that suggest that the tourism industry contributes to local revenue (e.g., Croes, 2014), this did not occur in the areas selected for this study. Moreover, as tourism poverty alleviation is implemented mainly in inland mountainous areas, and the degree of openness in these regions is low, no evidence was found that tourism contributes to foreign exchange earnings or to dependence on foreign capital and international tourists (e.g., Bowden, 2005).

The perceived impacts of the PATP on the sociocultural dimension include infrastructure development, improvements in living conditions, working environments (e.g., Spenceley & Goodwin, 2007), and education and health services (e.g., Ashley & Roe, 2002), developments in attitude empowerment (e.g., Butler, Curran, & O'Gorman, 2013), support on an ongoing basis, and social class enhancement. Concerns about these also exist, including the possibility of conflicts between different stakeholders (e.g., Zhao & Ritchie, 2007), variations in policy implementation, difficulties in communication between the poor and administrative officers, and the commercialization of cultural traditions (e.g., Medina-Muñoz et al., 2016). The perceived environmental impacts of the PATP include the positive enhancement of environmental awareness (e.g., Mbaiwa, 2011) and the increasing negative impact of pollution in non-tourism areas (e.g., Bowden, 2005; Truong et al., 2014). However, no wasted drinking water or energy (e.g., Manyara & Jones, 2007) was found in this study.

(2) The study proposes a conceptual model for how the mechanism of the PATP works and how it affects the poor in the government-led model. Although decision-makers recognize the role that tourism development plays in economic growth, they often ignore the impacts of tourism development on the poor in practice (Christie, 2002). These impacts may have the effect of undermining local social and cultural traditions if proper planning and management do not occur (Ashley, Boyd, & Goodwin, 2000); therefore, policy-makers need to implement reasonable interventions and plans for local tourism development. Although previous studies have discussed the role of government as a tourism industry policy-maker, the policy itself will also play a guiding role in poverty alleviation (Slocum & Backman, 2011). However, there is no in-depth study of the impact of the tourism industry on the poor in the process of poverty eradication and of the mechanism underlying these impacts. In the context of how government-led tourism poverty alleviation works, this study has identified a new method for classifying the perceived impacts of the PATP and its effects on the poor

population. The policy-related impacts refer to the non-tourism-related impacts that may be caused by the PATP and that may further affect tourism development in poor areas. This model could offer a clear guide to policy-makers; the design of the PPT policy should consider not only tourism terms, but also required basic government service terms to build a solid foundation for tourism development and that of communities. It also provides new ideas for further PPT studies; for example, against a government-led background, the impacts of PPT strategy on the poor have distinct phases and pathways. Further studies should avoid confusing different levels of influence and instead try to clarify them based on this model.

(3) The study also analyzes the perceived impacts of different stakeholders in the process of PPT. Zhao and Ritchie (2007) suggest that the poor, the private sector, and governments are the most directly related to PPT activities. Appropriate stakeholder management is regarded as cost-effective, conducive to knowledge integration, capable of informed decision-making, and capable of ensuring fairness and equality by reducing poverty. This study further clarifies how various stakeholders perceive the impacts of the policy on the poor. As a policy-maker and executor, government officers pay attention mainly to promoting the positive aspects of this policy. Non-tourism-related poor people do not directly benefit from the policy, so their feelings about the policy are mostly negative. The tourism-related poor are the target of the policy, and their perceptions of it are diverse but focus primarily on its economic impacts. As carriers of policy implementation and bridges between government and the poor, tourism enterprises also feel the impacts, both positive and negative, of this policy economically, socio-culturally, and environmentally.

(4) Finally, the study highlights several key points that appear as perceived impacts of China's PATP. Studies have shown that tourism poverty alleviation activities may address inequality in poverty-stricken areas (Ashley & Roe, 2002; Bowden, 2005); this study further confirms that a tourism poverty alleviation policy is an effective means of achieving social class mobility for the poor. Our study also shows that the tourism poverty alleviation policy is an effective way to reduce poverty and increase incomes among the poor (e.g., Croes & Vanegas Sr, 2008). However, due to the low profit margins of the primary tourism industry and the involvement of some poor people in the informal economy (Bowden, 2005; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012), for the majority of poor families, the tourism industry only complements families' main source of income, rather than being their primary source. However, it should be emphasized that it is this complementary income that increases the overall income of families and becomes the decisive factor for lifting families out of poverty.

At the same time, China's PATP has imposed unnecessary difficulties on the poor. The PATP has bred inertia among some poor people, and non-beneficiaries have become jealous of the benefits to beneficiaries. The policy has also become a revenue-generating tool for some government officials, and, as a result, the conflict between officials and the poor has intensified. At the same time, the volatility in policy implementation has also raised concerns about the stability of the policy.

These four points contribute to expansion and innovation in research into PPT, and can enrich the theoretical research foundation of the PPT literature. In addition, because this study was established under the government-led administrative system, it can provide policy-makers with guidance on how to approach the next step. For example, policy-makers should try to increase the income of tourism practitioners while stabilizing the implementation rules of the policy. In addition, efforts should be made to ensure fairness and openness in the implementation of policies and to reduce conflicts between different stakeholders. This research can also provide some useful lessons for the governments of

other countries about the role and position of governments in the PPT field. Policy-makers in other countries can refer to China's experiences and thus avoid the same problems, while also promoting tourism for the purpose of reducing poverty worldwide.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Acknowledgement

References

Ap, J., & Crompton, J. L. (1998). Developing and testing a tourism impact scale. *Journal of Travel Research, 37*(2), 120–130.
Ashley, C., Boyd, C., & Goodwin, H. (2000). *Pro-poor tourism: Putting poverty at the heart of the tourism agenda.* London, UK: Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
Ashley, C., & Roe, D. (2002). Making tourism work for the poor: Strategies and challenges in southern Africa. *Development Southern Africa, 19*(1), 61–82.
Bolwell, D., & Weinz, W. (2008). *Reducing poverty through tourism (No. 994246573402676).* Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization.
Bowden, J. (2005). Pro-poor tourism and the Chinese experience. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, 10*(4), 379–398.
Brau, R., Lanza, A., & Pigliaru, F. (2007). How fast are small tourism countries growing? Evidence from the data for 1980–2003. *Tourism Economics, 13*(4), 603–613.
Butler, R., Curran, R., & O'Gorman, K. D. (2013). Pro-poor tourism in a first world urban setting: Case study of Glasgow Govan. *International Journal of Tourism Research, 15*(5), 443–457.
China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) (2014). *A Summary of National Tourism Poverty Alleviation Work.* Retrieved from: http://dj.cnta.gov.cn/html/2014-10/1596.shtml, Accessed date: 17 October 2014.
Christie, I. T. (2002). Tourism, growth and poverty: Framework conditions for tourism in developing countries. *Tourism Review, 57*(1/2), 35–41.
Croes, R. (2014). The role of tourism in poverty reduction: An empirical assessment. *Tourism Economics, 20*(2), 207–226.
Croes, R., & Vanegas Sr, M. (2008). Cointegration and causality between tourism and poverty reduction. *Journal of Travel Research, 47*(1), 94–103.
Department for International Development (DFID) (1999). *Tourism and poverty elimination: Untapped potential.* Retrieved from: http://www.propoortourism.org.uk/dfid_summary.PDF, Accessed date: 29 August 2004.
Drisko, J. W., & Maschi, T. (2015). *Content analysis.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Francis, J. J., Johnston, M., Robertson, C., Glidewell, L., Entwistle, V., Eccles, M. P., et al. (2010). What is an adequate sample size? Operationalising data saturation for theory-based interview studies. *Psychology and Health, 25*(10), 1229–1245.
Gery, R., & Russel, B. H. (2000). Data management and analysis methods. *Handbook of qualitative research, 32*(3), 125–139.
Hebei Statistics Bureau (HSB) (2014). *Hebei Economic Yearbook.* Retrieved from: http://www.hetj.gov.cn/res/nj2014/indexch.htm.
Inner Mongolia Statistics Bureau (IMSB) (2014). *Inner Mongolia Statistics Yearbook.* Retrieved from: http://tj.nmg.gov.cn/Files/tjnj/2014/indexch.htm, Accessed date: 13 August 2019.
Lapeyre, R. (2011). The Grootberg Lodge partnership in Namibia: Towards poverty alleviation and empowerment for long-term sustainability? *Current Issues in Tourism, 14*(3), 221–234.
Liu, Z. H., & Jenkins, C. L. (1996). Country size and tourism development: A cross-nation analysis. In L. Briguglio, B. Archer, & J. Jafari (Eds.). *Sustainable tourism in islands and small states: Issues and policies.* London, UK: Pinter.
Liu, J. C., Sheldon, P. J., & Var, T. (1987). Resident perception of the environmental impacts of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research, 14*(1), 17–37.
Manyara, G., & Jones, E. (2007). Community-based tourism enterprises development in Kenya: An exploration of their potential as avenues of poverty reduction. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 15*(6), 628–644.
Mbaiwa, J. E. (2005). Enclave tourism and its socio-economic impacts in the Okavango Delta, Botswana. *Tourism Management, 26*(2), 157–172.
Mbaiwa, J. E. (2011). Changes on traditional livelihood activities and lifestyles caused by tourism development in the Okavango Delta, Botswana. *Tourism Management, 32*(5), 1050–1060.
Medina-Muñoz, D. R., Medina-Muñoz, R. D., & Gutiérrez-Pérez, F. J. (2016). The impacts of tourism on poverty alleviation: An integrated research framework. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 24*(2), 270–298.
Mekawy, M. A. (2015). Smart tourism investment: Planning pathways to break the poverty cycle. *Tourism Review International, 18*(4), 253–268.
Mensah, E. A., & Amuquandoh, F. E. (2010). Poverty reduction through tourism: Residents' perspectives. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Research, 77*.

Mitchell, J., & Ashley, C. (2010). *Tourism and poverty reduction: Pathways to prosperity.* Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Moli, G. P. (2003). Promotion of peace and sustainability by community based heritage eco-cultural tourism in India. *International Journal of Humanities and Peace, 19*(1), 40–46.

Muchapondwa, E., & Stage, J. (2013). The economic impacts of tourism in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa: Is poverty subsiding? *Natural Resources Forum, 37*(2), 80–89.

National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC) (2017). *Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2016 National Economic and Social Development.* Retrieved from: http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/201702/t20170228_1467503.html, Accessed date: 13 August 2019.

Ningxia Statistics Bureau (NSB) (2001). *Ningxia Statistics Yearbook.* Retrieved from: http://nxdata.com.cn/files_nx_pub/html/tjnj/2001/indexch.html?1=1&h=0, Accessed date: 13 August 2019.

Novelli, M., & Hellwig, A. (2011). The UN Millennium Development Goals, tourism and development: The tour operators' perspective. *Current Issues in Tourism, 14*(3), 205–220.

Poultney, C., & Spenceley, A. (2001). *Practical strategies for pro-poor tourism, wilderness safaris South Africa: Rocktail Bay and Ndumu Lodge.* (Maputaland: PPT Working Paper).

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., & Elam, G. (2003). Designing and selecting samples. In J. Ritchie, & J. Lewis (Eds.). *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 263–286). London, UK: Sage.

Scheyvens, R., & Russell, M. (2012). Tourism and poverty alleviation in Fiji: Comparing the impacts of small- and large-scale tourism enterprises. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 20*(3), 417–436.

Slocum, S. L., & Backman, K. F. (2011). Understanding government capacity in tourism development as a poverty alleviation tool: A case study of Tanzanian policy-makers. *Tourism Planning & Development, 8*(3), 281–296.

Spenceley, A., & Goodwin, H. (2007). Nature-based tourism and poverty alleviation: Impacts of private sector and parastatal enterprises in and around Kruger National Park, South Africa. *Current Issues in Tourism, 10*(2–3), 255–277.

Spenceley, A., & Meyer, D. (2012). Tourism and poverty reduction: Theory and practice in less economically developed countries. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 20*(3), 297–317.

Stonich, S. C., Sorensen, J. H., & Hundt, A. (1995). Ethnicity, class and gender in tourism development: The case of the Bay Islands, Honduras. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 3*(1), 1–28.

Su, B. J. T. M. (2011). Rural tourism in China. *Tourism Management, 32*(6), 1438–1441.

Torres, R. (2003). Linkages between tourism and agriculture in Mexico. *Annals of Tourism Research, 30*(3), 546–566.

Truong, V. D., Hall, C. M., & Garry, T. (2014). Tourism and poverty alleviation: Perceptions and experiences of poor people in Sapa, Vietnam. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 22*(7), 1071–1089.

Veal, A. J. (1997). *Research methods for leisure and tourism* (2nd ed.). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.

Zeng, B., & Ryan, C. J. T. M. (2012). Assisting the poor in China through tourism development: A review of research. *Tourism Management, 33*(2), 239–248.

Zhang, R. (2018). A study on the gap between urban and rural wealth in China. *Advances in Social Sciences, 7*(07), 951.

Zhao, W., & Ritchie, J. B. (2007). Tourism and poverty alleviation: An integrative research framework. *Current Issues in Tourism, 10*(2–3), 119–143.

Dazhi Qin, PhD candidate of College of Tourism and Service Management in Nankai University. Her research focus on sustainable tourism, tourism economy and tourism enterprises strategy.

Professor Hong Xu, PhD, has an education background of both management and economics. Her main interest areas are tourism industry ecology, tourism destination competence, tourism supply-chain management, tourism enterprises strategy and innovation management, and service management and financial management.

Yeasun Chung, PhD, is associate professor in School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Oklahoma State University. Her research focuses on corporate finance, asset management, and strategic investment decision making in the hospitality industry. She is currently researching the importance of ownership structure on corporate decision-making and performance, evaluation of multinational operations, and strategy choices over the hospitality industry cycle. She is also interested in the effects of health and safety strategies and environmental, green, strategy on firm's value creation.