Conflict in tourism development in rural China

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the phenomenon of conflict in tourism development in rural China. Four cases were selected and analyzed as part of this exploration. The study identified eight major conflict issues: land expropriation, ticket revenue distribution, vending rights, tourism management rights, house demolition, house building, entry restrictions, and village elections. The conflict evolution process indicates that these issues are dynamic and connected rather than static and isolated. Local government was found to be the most important conflicting party for local people due to its authority and economic interests in tourism development. In addition, an often-ignored conflicting party, villagers' committees, was found to have limitations in maintaining local people's interests. The findings of this study shed light on this complicated and sensitive tourism conflict phenomenon in rural China. A couple of practical implications for local authorities and UNESCO are outlined at the end of the paper.

1. Introduction

In mainland China, 52 properties have been inscribed on the list of world heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as of 2018. Most of these have been developed into famous scenic spots (areas) and have attracted large numbers of tourists. In addition, there are thousands of tourist villages in China, and tourism is often regarded as an important tool for alleviating poverty (World Tourism Organization, 2005). In China, a series of government documents have been issued to promote tourism development in rural areas.

Tourism produces positive effects on economy, society, culture, and environment, such as its contribution to GDP (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017), improvements to infrastructure (Bramwell, 2003; Puppim de Oliveira, 2003), the protection and renaissance of culture (Adams, 2006; Dyer, Aberdeen, & Schuler, 2003; Hitchcock & Brandenburgh, 1990), and increases in environmental awareness (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). At the same time, tourism also generates a series of negative consequences which have been identified in a large number of studies, such as price rises (Látková & Vogt, 2012), increased crime (Biagi, Brandano, & Detotto, 2012; Kelly, 1993), traffic congestion (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Brunt & Courtney, 1999), an increase in prostitution (Hesse & Tutenges, 2011; Kibicho, 2005), the degradation of traditional culture (Wall & Mathieson, 2006), and environmental pollution (Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Campbell, Slavin,

Grage, & Kinslow, 2016).

Though many studies of tourism's negative effects have been conducted, as Leung, Li, Fong, Law, and Lo showed in their study (2014), there are only few that have directly focused on conflict in rural China, in particular serious conflict involving local communities. However, there have been media reports on this issue over the past years in China, and some of them were full of descriptions of violence. In 2008, the Fujian *tulou* were added to the world heritage list. Since then, there have been conflicts according to Qu (2011) and Chen (2011). For example, the telephone lines of a tourism company were destroyed, villagers blocked *tulou* entrances to stop tourists entering, and a security booth was burned. Similar conflicts also happened at other world heritage sites (Zhai, 2002; Zhang, 2014; Zhang, 2006) and in ordinary tourist villages (Wang, 2011; Wang & Qin, 2011; Zhou & Lu, 2009). These events show that: First, conflict happens in both ordinary tourist villages and at world heritage sites; second, it is not limited in one area but appears in many provinces of China; third, this phenomenon has lasted for many years; and lastly, some conflicts are serious. Although the existence and extensiveness of conflicts in rural China due to tourism development are grasped through these media reports, we still lack a sociological understanding of the phenomenon. Going beyond the media level description then, our study is an attempt to understand it sociologically using primary data so that the social causes and processes of conflict as well as the relations and motivations of social actors can be understood. Our study is an attempt to understand the dynamics

of conflict, an important topic for theorizing social conflict (Oberschall, 1978, p. 292), in rural China due to tourism development.

Yang, Ryan, and Zhang (2013, pp. 83–84) argue that social conflict has received attention from a variety of disciplines but conflict in tourism has not been systematically investigated by tourism scholars. Derived from current literature, conflict in tourism can be classified into a couple of categories based on major concerns of local communities: socio-cultural conflict (Cornet, 2015; Jones & Shaw, 2012; Maharjan, 2012; Robinson & Boniface, 1999; Suartika, 2015; Yang, 2011), economic conflict (Yang et al., 2013; Zhang, 2006), and environmental conflict (Dredge, 2010). Conflict in tourism involves multiple stakeholders with diverse values and the interaction dynamics can thus be complex (McKercher, Ho, & du Cros, 2005, p. 542). Conflict may happen between local communities and tourism companies (X. M. Zhang, 2006), between local communities and government (Dredge, 2010; Jones & Shaw, 2012), between local people and tourists (Urbanowicz, 1977), between tourism companies and government (Wang, 2011), and within local communities (Chen, 2011). Conflict often arises when different parties have incompatible interests and intend to achieve different outcomes. For example, local government and entrepreneurs may give more attention to economic benefits while local people are concerned more with environment and culture more (Dredge, 2010; Suartika, 2015). Conflict may be just an attitude/value clash (Jackson & Wong, 1982; Jansen-Verbeke, 1998; McKercher et al., 2005), but it may also be a conflict over behavior (e.g., physical conflict) (Wang, 2011). However, the discussion on the phenomenon of behavior conflict has not been well investigated. Though some scholars have mentioned behavior conflicts when discussing tourism's impacts, this has not been their central research focus (e.g., Zhang, 2006).

Furthermore, rural unrest is a sensitive topic in China and fieldwork is full of complications (O'Brien & Li, 2006), which makes researchers hesitate to conduct studies on conflict. It is just in the past few years that tourism researchers have begun to take conflict in China as their main research topic. For example, Cornet (2015) described tensions and resistance in an ethnic minority village of Dong in Guizhou Province; using the theoretical ideas of Coser, Yang et al. (2013) developed a tension-directed tourism development system; Zhang, Fyall, and Zheng (2015) identified the categories and causes of heritage and tourism conflict events at world heritage sites in China. This study is a complement to these studies. It aims to shed light on this complicated phenomenon, help to reduce conflict, and enhance sound tourism development in practice. To achieve these objectives, three questions were proposed: What issues cause conflict; how do these issues evolve and is there any connection among them; and who are the major parties in the conflicts and what roles do they play.

2. Literature review on conflict

2.1. The nature of conflict

Conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence (Olorunfemi & Lukpata, 2014), which "cannot be excluded from social life" (Weber, 1949, p. 26) and is a "general feature of human activity" (Nicholson, 1992, p. 11). As such, conflict has been an important issue in various disciplines and thus it is necessary to situate our perspective on conflict in myriads of ideas of conflict.

A claim of or for different treatment is the precondition of conflict. The target of a claim may be as abstract as interest, or as specific as scarce resources, power, or status. Francis (2006) defines conflict as "the pursuit of incompatible interest and goals by different groups" (p. 20). Incompatibility or contradiction is an important feature of conflict, and it exists when the claims of both parties are incompatible and occurs when there is no choice that satisfies both parties' aspirations (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). Conflict is a process of interaction among different parties who can be either individuals or organizations (Kriesberg, 2003). The inconsistencies in claims can lead to sentiments of hostility,

an attitude and predisposition toward conflict (Merton, 1948). Conflict behavior is an escalation of a disagreement originating from inconsistent claims between conflicting parties for a settlement in their favor through damaging action (Nicholson, 1992, p. 13). In terms of the relationship among the three components of conflict (contradiction, attitude, and behavior), Galtung (1996, pp. 71–72) proposed a conflict triangle model in which contradiction and attitude are the latent side of conflict and behavior is its manifest side. Power is the base of struggle, which can have an effect on the conflict situation (Northrup, 1989). Rummel (1976) argue that conflict is a clash of powers and its process is a balancing of the vectors of powers, and of the capability to produce effects. He further explained that conflict is not equilibrium of powers but a process of finding the balance through "the pushing and pulling, the giving and taking" (p. 238).

In some conditions no obvious claim is shown in a conflict situation, such as the non-realistic conflict classified by Coser (1956/2001) or the venting-anger conflict described by Yu (2008). From the perspective of the aims of conflict, Coser identified two types of conflict, realistic conflict and non-realistic conflict. The former "arise(s) from frustrations of specific demands within a relationship and from estimates of gains of the participants, and that are directed at the presumed frustrating object" (p. 49). It is a means toward the ends of higher status, more power, or greater economic returns. The latter is "not occasioned by the rival ends of the antagonists, but by the need for tension release of one or both of them" (p. 49).

Based on the literature review above, we regard the nature of conflict as a process of interaction in which incompatible claims between groups and individuals or both lead to hostile attitudes which manifest into conflict behaviors in the end. In this process, the conflict behaviors are taken in order to achieve certain demands of a group or individual. There are also conflict behaviors that do not have any claim to make and therefore just exist to vent anger without aiming for some actual gains. We assume that this type of conflict behavior is not frequent in the conflicts in rural China that occur due to tourism development because all the media reports and academic papers on the issue which we encountered indicate that the stakeholders almost always have incompatible claims.

2.2. Conflict theories

Rahim (2011, p. 2) notes that most contributions to the theory of social conflict originated from philosophy and sociology so a brief review of the major sociological perspectives on the concept of conflict would be helpful to this study.

In Parsonian structural functionalism, social conflict is primarily viewed as abnormal, disruptive, and dysfunctional based on the assumption that "society is innately stable, integrated, and functional" (Rahim, 2011, p. 5). The maintenance of social structures has been a persistent theme in almost all of Parsons' writings, and his concern about social change is marginal even though it is occasionally present in his work (Coser, 1956/2001). Conflict is viewed as a disease (Coser, 1956/2001, p. 20), and the terms found in this medical analogy are often used to describe conflict (e.g. Parsons, 1945; Parsons, 1949a; Parsons, 1949b). To resolve the problem of order, Parsons thought that this would be possible through the normative functions of social structure. As Sipka (as cited in Rahim, 2011, p. 6) notes, Parson's theory "is through and through an equilibrium model and the dynamics of conflict are relegated to the level of 'deviation.'" One of the major criticisms is that his theory is inherently conservative to maintain status quo and is unable to analyze social change and conflict (Coser, 1956/2001; Gouldner, 1970; Rahim, 2011, p. 6).

Dahrendorf, who was influenced by Marxian thought, provided an alternative societal model which is diametrically opposite to the societal model of structural functionalism and which has four essential elements (1958, p. 174): (1) Social change is ubiquitous; (2) social conflict is ubiquitous; (3) every element in a society contributes to its

change; and (4) every society rests on the constraint of some of its members by others. It was also increasingly being recognized that an equilibrium model is not an adequate or comprehensive understanding of our society. By criticizing Parsons' structural functionalism while not totally discarding the functional aspect, Coser explored the functions of conflict and investigated the productive sides of conflict based on Simmel's works. For example, he notes that "Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life" (Coser, 1956/2001, p. 31). He argues that conflict can help to establish "new rules, norms, and institutions, thus serving as an agent of socialization for both contending parties" (p. 128). Generally speaking, Parsons only focused on the negative aspect of conflict and viewed it as being disruptive and abnormal, while Coser pointed out its positive functions. Like Dahrendorf, contemporary scholars usually view conflict as a natural part of social life which can be both functional and dysfunctional (Jehn, 1997; Kelly & Kelly, 1998; Pedersen & Jandt, 1996; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999).

What we have described in this section are the major conflict theories developed in the 40s and 50s when sociologists tried to formulate abstract and general theories of conflict. However, in contemporary sociology, instead of developing abstract theories of conflict, social conflicts in concrete settings are investigated (Katagiri, 2000, pp. 150–151). Thus, in this study, we do not intend to develop an abstract theory of conflict in rural China due to tourism development but try to understand it in its concrete settings. Having said that, it is still necessary to explain our position on conflict theories. As mentioned, our position does not start from abstract theories but from the actual settings of China. We do not see conflict as abnormal but see it as a necessary aspect of social life. We look at conflict mainly from the perspective of peasants,[2] and attention is given to both positive and negative consequences of conflict.

2.3. Conflict in rural China

Fang (2013) notes that peasants' burden of tax, rural land expropriation, and urban relocation are three major reasons for people's resistance after the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. In 2000, the central government started tax reform (Takeuchi, 2014), and the agricultural tax was abolished completely in 2006 (Kennedy, 2007). This policy reduced peasants' burden significantly (Wang, 2010), and the number of petitions concerned with this declined greatly (Yan et al., 2011). Meanwhile, land issues, including land expropriation and house demolition, have gradually become the most prominent problems in rural areas. Yu (2005) states that land problems have taken precedence over heavy taxes as the central issue of peasant resistance. He explains that illegal and compulsory acquisition and low compensation are the main factors contributing to land conflict. The National Bureau for Letters and Visits considers that land acquisition, urban demolition, environmental protection, reorganization and bankruptcy of enterprises, and disagreement over court judgments are the five main fields of complaints in China (Li & Wei, 2007). Resistance to land expropriation and house demolition has produced some extreme incidents in past years, such as self-immolation in Hubei and Hunan in 2011 (Ji, 2011; Yan et al., 2011). In addition, the other common conflicts in rural areas include village elections, cadre corruption, and village finances (Yan et al., 2011). Generally speaking, land conflict, due to land expropriation and house demolition, is a very serious problem confronting contemporary rural China.

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[2] "Peasant" in this paper refers to rural residents, which is a legal category of Chinese people. In Chinese, they are called "nongmin."

2.4. Conflict in tourism in rural China

2.4.1. Conflict related to economic benefit

Economic benefit is a main subject causing conflict in tourism, which has been verified by studies in different tourist villages (Bao & Zuo, 2012; Yang et al., 2013, p. 85; Zhong & Yang, 2014). Ticket revenue is an important form of economic benefit. Conflict arising from ticket revenue distribution happens continuously. In many rural areas, tourist attractions are local villagers' private properties, such as the *tulou* in Hongkeng, Fujian Province and the *ganlan* style buildings in Zhaoxing, Guizhou Province. Local government and tourism companies use local people's properties to earn money but do not share the benefits with them. To defend their rights on ticket revenue distribution, local people use many tactics to resist, such as traffic blockades (Qu, 2011; Wang, 2011; Zhang, 2014). Conflict regarding job opportunities, such as vending, is another issue. The government does not allow local people to sell in their tourist villages to maintain their attractiveness. In Yongding, Fujian Province, an old woman's goods were confiscated while she was vending, which precipitated a physical conflict between local villagers and government staff (Qu, 2011). To express their discontent, the local people closed their gates and did not allow tourists to enter the village.

2.4.2. Conflict due to heritage protection and modern life

Local traditional buildings are important tourist attractions, among which some have even been listed as world heritage. Compared with modern brick and concrete buildings, traditional residences in rural areas have some disadvantages, such as non-durability (Yang, Wall, & Smith, 2008, p. 762). For example, the timber in traditional wooden house is damaged easily by worms and needs maintenance every ten years (Wang, 2008). Due to these disadvantages, many people especially young people, intend to abandon their traditional houses and live in modern buildings. To "maintain the purity" (Cornet, 2015, p. 36) and not "destroy the scenery" (Oakes, 2006, p. 187), local government and tourism companies usually formulate strict regulations on the construction of new buildings in tourist villages, particularly for world heritage sites. There is a dilemma between heritage conservation and the pursuit of a modern lifestyle. In addition, local villagers complain that they are not enjoying the same treatment as tourism companies. For example, the tourism company in Daiyuan, Yunnan Province, used concrete and other building materials to build souvenir stores while local people were not allowed to use these materials (Yang & Wall, 2009, p. 565). All these intensified the strained relationship between local people and other parties (the tourism company and local government). Daiyuan residents destroyed street lights and refused to receive a gift distributed to them during their traditional new year by the tourism company in protest (Zuo, 2012). In Zhaoxing, Guizhou Province, the villagers sent a petition letter to Beijing, capital of China, to show their discontent with a local tourism company's oversized building (Cornet, 2015).

2.4.3. Generalizing conflict in tourism development in China

Some attempts to generalize the conflict in China due to tourism development have been made in recent years. Here, two important studies are summarized. Yang et al. (2013) proposed a new tension-driven social conflict tourism development model based on ethnographic data collected in the Kanas Scenic Area in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region where the Tuva and Kazakh people live. This model has four components. The first component is a tension-directed evolution of some ethnic tourism areas which explains that a source of tension differs by the stages of tourism development. In the three stages of exploration, involvement, and development, tension is mainly caused by incompatibility of values and beliefs, resources, and power, respectively. The second component identifies four stakeholders in tourism development, that is, governments, tourists, entrepreneurs, and locals. The third component is a community tension-directed

mechanism of tourism impact which explains that the intra- and inter-group conflicts that are developed in tourism development can cause changes in community structures. The fourth component is an inter-personal tension-directed mechanism of tourism impact which indicates that when behavioral, demographic, and structural differences exist in the destination, tourism impact may cause tensions among stakeholders and create behavioral and attitudinal changes. The J. J. Yang et al. study was an attempt to develop a general model of conflict in tourism development in China to overcome the specificity of case studies. The contribution of this study was twofold: First, it situated this topic in the major sociological theories; and second, it provided a framework to compare cases. However, this study had some limitations. First, there is disjuncture between ethnographic data and model construction. Second, it takes an opposite direction to the normal approach in the discipline of sociology that moves away from abstract and general theory building.

Another important study was carried out by Zhang et al. (2015) that tried to understand heritage and tourism conflict within world heritage sites in China. This study analyzed 431 online media reports between 2000 and 2010 and identified four categories of conflicts at world heritage sites. The first is the constructive destruction events that are conflicts caused by the improper construction behaviors of developers. The second is the operating destruction events that are conflicts caused by improper management or operating behaviors that result in damage to heritage sites. The third is the tourism destruction events that are conflicts caused by inappropriate commercial use of heritage resources, the improper behavior of tourists, and excessive tourism marketing activities. The fourth is the value conflict events that occur among stakeholders due to different values. The advantage of this study is its generalizability based on longitudinal and nationwide data. Thus, the four types of conflicts can represent the heritage and tourism conflicts occurring at heritage sites in China. However, this study may not be inclusive in capturing conflicts in China for two reasons: First, the censorship of the government excludes some conflicts that cannot be reported; and second, the media tends to select major incidents that have news value.

In summary, our study of conflict in tourism development in China is situated in the context of sociological conflict studies like that of J. J. Yang et al. However, the analytic level is not as abstract as their study in order to maintain the richness of our qualitative data. Also, our study focuses on peasants' attitudes toward incompatible claims and conflict behaviors from the insider perspective which was not sufficiently described in the study of C. Z. Zhang et al.

3. Research methods

This study is based on the constructivist paradigm which views nature of knowledge as subjective, regards truth as context dependent, and is supported by hermeneutics and phenomenology. Under this paradigm, the purpose of research is to understand and describe human nature and its methodology is usually qualitative (Chilisa, 2011). Our study was aimed at understanding the conflict in rural China that emerges when tourism development is carried out. Specifically, we examined the social causes and processes of conflict mainly from the perspective of local peasants as well as the relations and motivations of social actors involved in conflict.

In this study, we developed one main case and three supplemental cases. In the main case study, we identified the actors and the issues in conflict as well as its evolution process in tourism development in rural China. After identifying these, we assessed whether the same actors and issues of conflict can be found in other localities in rural China by carrying out three supplemental case studies. These cases are located in different provinces, and include both world heritage and non-world heritage sites, and both ethnic minority and non-ethnic minority villages.

Both primary data and secondary data were collected in this study.

For the primary data collection, unstructured interviews and participant observation were used. Who should be interviewees? A phenomenological study usually identifies and locates individuals who have experienced or are experiencing a phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Following this principle, we tried to locate people who were closely connected to conflict at these sites, including people who had participated in conflict activities directly or knew of them clearly without direct participation, including conflict activity organizers, villagers' representatives, vendors, company management and staff, and villagers whose land was expropriated or whose houses were demolished. Snowball sampling is a major method adopted to locate key informants in the process. There are two advantages to the use of this method. The first is that it is easy to locate relevant informants because rural China is an acquaintance-based society (Fei, 2005). Local people have been living in their villages since they were born and they know each other very well. Therefore, many peasants know what happened in the villages and who got involved in any conflict. This saved the first author much time in the process of seeking proper interview targets. The second is that it can help to establish trust with potential interviewees rapidly, especially when involving sensitive topics.

The data were collected through two rounds of fieldwork (September 14–24, 2015 and March 1-April 2, 2016) in which 61 people were formally interviewed, including 37 people in Hongkeng, nine in Likeng, six in Hongcun, and nine in Zhaoxing. All the interviews were conducted in their villages except for two Hongkeng villagers who were working in Xiamen, capital of Fujian Province. During the field study at the four sites, the first author chose to live with local people, especially with the key informants. This helped the informants to understand the first author and the study better. In this study, participant observation was mainly used to collect data in the following two situations. The first was casual interviews with local peasants on the street. Sixteen people were interviewed casually, including fourteen in Hongkeng and two in Likeng. The second was in observing and verifying the events described by interviewees, such as the car entry issue in section 5.1.7. Secondary data were mainly collected through newspapers, magazines, TV programs, uploaded Internet videos, and the official websites of government.

Data analysis of the main case study was conducted as follows. First, all the interview data and field notes were transcribed in a Word format. Then, the transcript was carefully read, and words/sentences that indicate conflict behaviors were selected and sorted out (Section 5.1). Each sorted-out cluster was again analyzed and labeled as an issue. Then, each issue was put in one matrix which was arranged by time sequence. Based on the events in each issue (each issue may be composed of a series of events), a pattern of the development of each conflicting issue began to appear. Through analyzing the connections of events between issues, the evolution among issues become apparent (Section 5.2). In addition, each conflicting party with peasants in each matrix was listed and the role they played in the conflict was analyzed (Section 5.3).

Hongkeng Village was the site for the main case study. It was chosen because conflict really happened at this site (Chen, 2011; Han, 2014; Qu, 2011), but also because Hongkeng is a world heritage site. Only properties with outstanding world value can be inscribed as world heritage, but as we know conflict is the result of the pursuit of interest by different parties (Francis, 2006), and world heritage sites usually have immense popularity and can attract many tourists and bring much economic interest due to their outstanding value. Yang et al. (2013) note that economic interest has been a major subject of conflict in tourism due to its uneven distribution among different stakeholders. The issue of economic interest, therefore, may trigger conflict at world heritage sites. The conflict phenomenon at these sites is likely to be clear, comprehensive, and representative. In addition, heritage preservation is an important topic in tourist destinations. When short-term economic interest is pursued, preservation may be ignored or not be given enough attention in some places. This contradiction is likely to be

observed more clearly at world heritage sites because heritage protection and conservation has been a central theme in these places. Therefore, world heritage sites can help to create a better understanding of conflict phenomenon in the field of tourism.

This study aims to explore conflict phenomenon in the field of tourism. Considering the prevalence of conflict in tourism and its features, three supplemental case studies with different features were also included to give a better understanding of this phenomenon and to make the conclusions more reliable. There were three sub-aims for the inclusion of the three supplemental cases: (1) to identify major issues and conflicting parties more accurately and relatively completely; (2) to verify if the major issues in the main case study have appeared in the supplemental case studies through comparison; and (3) to see if there is any difference among the four cases. To ensure the representativeness of selected sites, three criteria were applied in the selection process: (1) cases should be located in different provinces, and non-world-heritage sites should be included; (2) some sites should be located in ethnic minority areas, and most villagers should belong to ethnic minority groups; and (3) conflict at these sites should have occurred. The selected villages were Likeng, Hongcun, and Zhaoxing. Though they are supplemental cases, we tried to interview people who were familiar with conflict in their villages. For example, a couple of protest activity organizers/leaders were located in Likeng. In this way, a lower number of interviewees in the three supplemental cases would not affect the identification of major conflict issues and conflicting parties.

Likeng is a village in Wuyuan County, Jiangxi Province, and "Li" is the family name of most people living in this village. Likeng is well known for its *Hui* style architecture (one of the major architectural styles of ancient China) and its beautiful landscape. In 2003, this village was put on the list of famous historical-cultural villages by the Jiangxi Provincial Government. Since 2001, the tourism in this village has been developed by tourism companies. Due to dissatisfaction with the companies, the villagers held three big collective protest activities in the form of traffic blockage.

Hongcun is in Yi County, Huangshan City, Anhui Province and had a population of 1680 in 2016. In 2000, this village was inscribed on the world heritage list due to its well preserved traditional settlement, including 137 old buildings which date back to as early as the 14th century. This village began to develop tourism in 1986. In the first ten years, the tourism was managed by the local tourism administration (Liu, 2004), but at the Hongcun villagers' strong request they were allowed to develop tourism by themselves in 1997 (Zhai, 2002). However, this lasted for only one year. In 1998, the local government signed a contract with a tourism company without local villagers' agreement. Since then, this company has been running Hongcun's tourism.

Different from the other three villages, Zhaoxing is an ethnic minority village. Almost all the people in the village are Dong, one of China's fifty-five official ethnic minority groups. Surrounded by beautiful mountains, Zhaoxing is situated in Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in southeastern Guizhou Province. This village is famed for its drum towers and wind-and-rain bridges which are important tourism attractions. Kam Grand Choirs, a unique form of polyphonic choir sang by Dong people, is an important cultural treasure which was added to the list of world intangible cultural heritage in 2009 (Ingram, 2012). In 2005, Zhaoxing was rated as one of the six most beautiful villages in the Country by the *National Geography of China* (Cornet, 2009). Tourism in this village started in the 1980s, but due to its isolated geographic location and inconvenient transportation services, the pace of development was slow until the arrival of a tourism company in 2003.

4. The main case study

Hongkeng Village is in Yongding County, Southwestern Fujian Province and had a population of 2992 in 2015. The local villagers are called the *Hakka people*, a subgroup of Han Chinese, who are believed to

Fig. 1. Hongkeng's *tulou*: Zhencheng Lou.
Source: the first author (September, 2015).

have originated in Northern China (Constable, 1996). A small stream passes through the village, along which are local villagers' traditional residences having a unique construction style, the *tulou* (Fig. 1).

Tulou, literally meaning "earth building," is usually a large enclosed building of three to five stories with circular, rectangular, or square shape, which can house up to several hundred people. Featuring tall fortified mud walls, the Fujian *tulou* were originally built for defensive purposes around a central communal courtyard. It is usually occupied by a large family clan of several generations and divided vertically among families with one or more rooms on each floor for each household. The courtyard and communal facilities such as water wells are shared by all residents of the building. The Fujian *tulou* are recognized as an exceptional example of human settlement embodying harmonious relationship between man and environment. In 1993, Hongkeng village received the title of China's Hakka Folk Culture Village (The State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China, 2008). In 2001, Zhencheng Lou, Fuyu Lou, and Kuiju Lou, three of Hongkeng's dozens of *tulou* buildings, were proclaimed as major historic sites under national protection by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. In July 2008, the Hongkeng *tulou* cluster was listed by UNESCO as world cultural heritage.

Hongkeng's tourism development started in the 1980s. Cooperating with the local township government, a villager opened a folk culture exhibition room in 1986 (Ji & Wu, 2007). In September 2007, the Fujian Hakka *Tulou* Tourism Development Co., Ltd. (*Tulou* Company), a county-owned enterprise, was established, and since then it has been leading Hongkeng's tourism. In 2011, Hongkeng was rated as "National 5A-rated Tourist Attraction," the highest level of a tourist attraction in China, by the National Tourism Administration.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Conflict issues

In this study, we look at conflict behaviors that are the manifestation of attitudes. The behaviors include disruptive protests, such as traffic blockades and riots. Non-disruptive actions such as petitions are also viewed as signs of conflict. This study focuses on the conflict between local peasants and other parties, so intra-party conflict is not discussed in this study except where it can help to understand inter-party conflict. Seven specific conflict issues were identified in the main case study: house demolition, land expropriation, house building, vending rights, ticket revenue distribution, village elections, and entry restrictions.

5.1.1. House demolition

According to Hongkeng villagers, the earliest demolition started around 1992. Since then, large scale house demolition has taken place several times until around 2010. In the village, local people especially young ones, built brick and concrete houses that tie in with modern

lifestyles. They built them because the *tulou* are incompatible with small families and modern lifestyles that require privacy. However, the application for world heritage demanded the modern houses to be torn down and the *tulou* buildings maintained. There is thus a contradiction between world heritage application (cultural protection) and the pursuit of a modern life. A similar phenomenon is observed in other regions (Yang et al., 2008). Demolition was also implemented to develop tourism which involves the construction and/or improvement of tourist facilities and infrastructure. Thus, many houses were demolished and replaced with roads and parking lots. In reality, the main aim of heritage application is also for tourism development, which applies to many other areas especially developing countries (Caust & Vecco, 2017; Li, Wu, & Cai, 2008; Ryan, Zhang, & Deng, 2011). A series of conflicts happened in the process of house demolition between local peasants and local authorities. Local villagers petitioned a couple of times. However, this did not work. A villager said:

> We went to the (Yongding) County Government. It was useless. Then, we went to the Longyan Prefectural Government, held banners, and knelt there.

5.1.2. Land expropriation

Land here mainly means farmland. Land expropriation was carried out for the construction of infrastructure and commercial facilities. The timeline of land expropriation is similar to house demolition, which began in the 1990s and lasted until around 2010. Many villagers lost as much as 70% of their farmland in the process. In order to develop tourism, farmland was expropriated by local government, but the compensation was low and unreasonable, which triggered continuous conflict between local people and the county and township governments. The following excerpt is from a telephone conversation between a villager (V) and a staff member of the Fujian Provincial Bureau of Land and Resources (LR):

> V: What is the compensation standard according to the regulation of the (Fujian) provincial government?
>
> LR: Between ¥26,000 ($3,963.41) and ¥40,000 ($6,097.56) (per *mu*).[3]
>
> …
>
> V: … That means the compensation of ¥6000 ($914.63) (per *mu* we received from the county government) was too low.
>
> LR: … We once sent a working group to Yongding County to inquire into this matter and required the Bureau of Land and Resources of Yongding County to advance the compensation standard.

This matter has not been resolved even after this conversation. To prevent their farmland being expropriated, villagers even stood in front of an excavator.

5.1.3. House building

Building modern houses has not been allowed since the beginning of the 21st century for obtaining the status of world heritage. However, the need for modern houses has been pressing. First, the population growth increases this need directly. In 2005, Hongkeng's population was 2413 (The State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China, 2008), but it increased to 2992 in 2015 (from a notice of the Hongkeng villagers' committee). This is a 24% increase in 10 years. Second, the pursuit of a comfortable modern life further stimulates it. Similar to villagers in other areas (Yang et al., 2008), many people do not like to live in their traditional residences due to inconvenience and lack of privacy. The tradition of marriage in rural China makes this issue more severe. Usually, a groom has to provide a new house. A new house may

even decide whether a male can find a wife (Chen, 2011). A villager said:

> We want to support tourism development, but resettlement should be the bottom line. In rural areas, living conditions are poor. Who will marry you without a new house? Who wants to live in an old house with you? It is ridiculous.

Therefore, young people of this village need new houses badly. A ban on building new houses by local government without providing alternative measures makes local villagers quite discontented. In addition, several newly built houses were demolished, which intensified the tensions between local people and local government. Actually, house building is a common issue and can be seen at other tourist sites (Dong, 2011; Han & Zhang, 2011).

5.1.4. Vending rights

Local villagers were not allowed to sell (vend) along the street until 2013. According to a local official, local villagers set up stands everywhere without order and make streets dirty (Chen, 2011), affecting the experience of tourists. Before 2008, there were not many vendors and government inspections were not strict. After gaining world heritage status in 2008, vending was banned. Vendors' stands were often thrown away, damaged, or confiscated. A serious conflict happened in 2008: A vendor was beaten by government staff (it is called a "vendor incident" here), and this triggered local villagers' anger. They blocked the entrance to the village in protest. According to local people, young people can find jobs in cities, but for old or disabled people, after losing their farmland, it is difficult to find jobs inside and outside the village. Thus, vending provides them with an alternative income source, but they were not allowed to do that. A vendor said:

> In 2009, I was hit by a car and the driver ran away. … Look at my leg (showing me her leg). Due to this accident, I cannot do heavy work and cannot do farming work anymore. Then, I began to vend.

For local government, how to attract and keep more tourists and bring more revenue are their major concerns. Therefore, a game of "cat and mouse" often happened between vendors and the authority but ended in 2013 through a concession from local government.

5.1.5. Ticket revenue distribution

The distribution of benefits from tourism has become a focus of social concern (Zuo, 2016, p. 12), within which fair ticket revenue distribution is particularly important. In Hongkeng, local people think that they deserve to receive a certain share from ticket revenue because the arrival of tourists disturbs their normal life; the attractor, the *tulou* buildings, derives from their ancestors and is their private property; and they sacrificed many things for tourism, such as land and houses. However, local government and the *Tulou* Company refused to share the benefit with them while using their resources. As a result, the anger broke out and a resistance form of traffic blockage was used when a vendor was beaten in 2008. Coser (1956/2001, p.128) notes that conflict can help to create and modify current rules and norms. After this conflict, the county government began to implement ticket revenue distribution, with eight percent going to the villagers (The Yongding County Tourism Industrial Development Committee, 2014a) and two percent going to the villagers' committee (The Yongding County Tourism Industrial Development Committee, 2014b). This plan was decided by the county government without the participation of local people. About the distribution of ticket revenues, one villager expressed his opinion:

> Last year (2015), we just got ¥620 ($94.51).[4] There are 365 days per year and less than ¥2 ($0.30) for each day. How can I live (with such

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[3] One *mu* equals 667 square meters.

[4] The exact amount of ticket revenue distribution per villager in 2015 was ¥624. The exchange rate between US Dollar and Chinese Yuan is $1 = ¥6.56 (on May 25th, 2016).
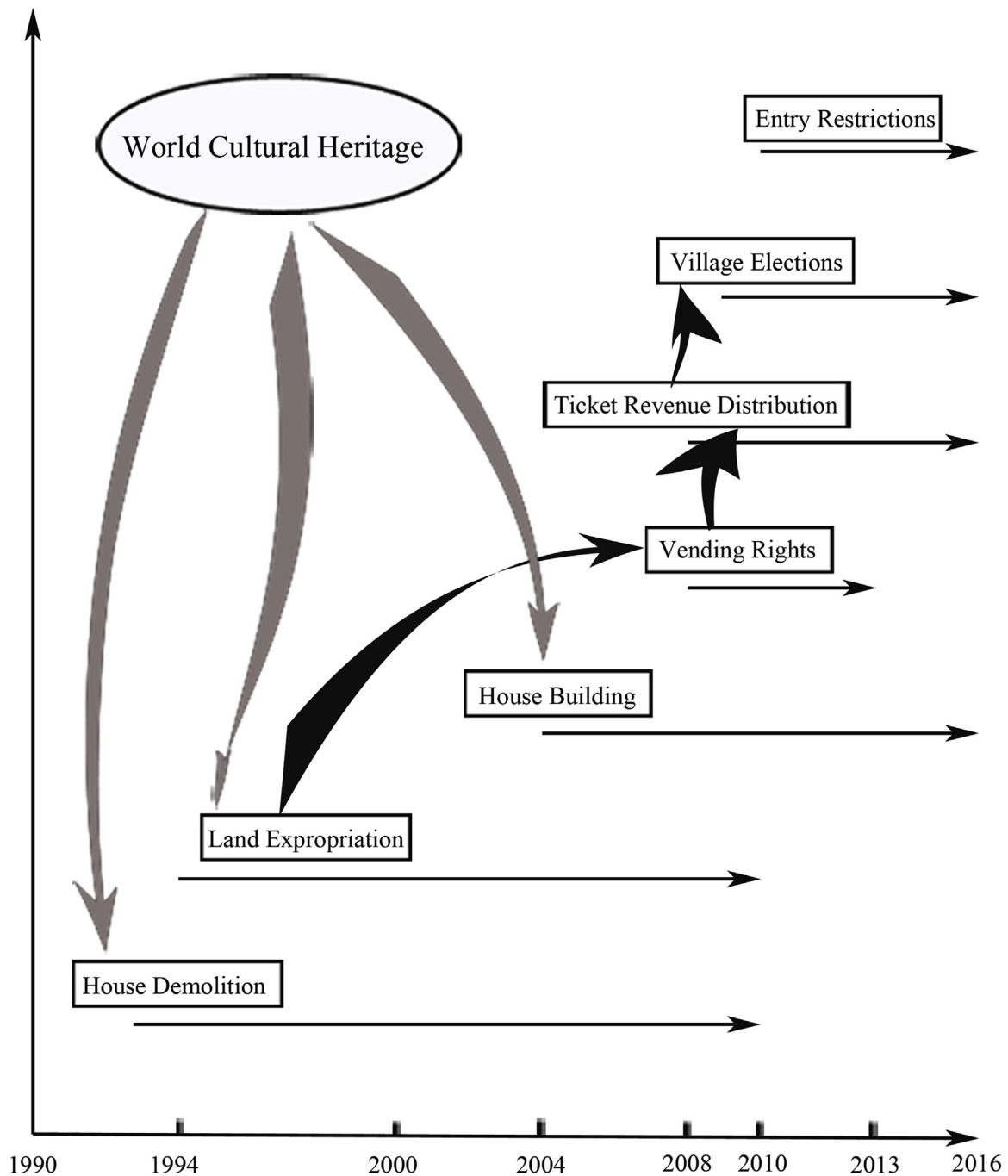
Fig. 2. The evolution of conflict.

little money)? … Mount Wuyi is a world heritage site, so is Hongkeng. Mount Wuyi is a 5A-rated (tourist attraction), so is Hongkeng. (But) Our distribution is not enough for living expenses.

Besides their dissatisfaction with the low distribution rate, villagers believed that corruption concerning distribution existed. Thus, some villagers petitioned a couple of times on this issue.

5.1.6. Village elections

According to the distribution plan, two percent of revenue is distributed to the villagers' committee that has the power to decide how to use it. Because the benefits mainly accrue to the committee head from its utilization, the two percent triggered fierce election campaigns and caused conflict. According to Yu (2015), economic interest is the most important motivation for villagers to compete for the post of the

villagers' committee head. Besides vote buying, violence occurred during elections. For example, a female candidate had urine poured over her by her competitor. For the two percent, the township government even interfered with village elections and dismissed an elected villagers' committee head illegally, which made local villagers angry. The following part is excerpted from local villagers' petition material:

× × ×, the villagers' committee head of Hongkeng, is an impartial and upright comrade, who served the villagers diligently and conscientiously. But such a good person was removed from power by the Hukeng Township Party Committee and there was no document from the (Yongding) County Committee (of the CPC) on her dismissal. Please return us the election right and justice.

According to *the Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees*, no

organization and individual has the right to designate, appoint, and replace the villagers' committee head. Dismissal of the villagers' committee head is unlawful, but it is not a unique case as it happens in other areas. According to a survey in Qianjiang, 57% of elected village heads were dismissed by local government within a three-year term from 1999 to 2002 (Huang & He, 2002).

5.1.7. Entry restrictions

Yongding County residents can enter Hongkeng village free of charge with their Identification Cards, and entrance is also free for the friends or relatives of Hongkeng villagers. To block out the tourists who pretend to be local villagers' friends or relatives, the *Tulou* Company took some measures such as requiring villagers to pick up their guests at the gate and questioning the guests and villagers. These procedures brought much inconvenience to local villagers. In addition, the attitude of the security guards toward local people and their behavior made Hongkeng villagers uncomfortable and angry. For example, some villagers might help tourists evade tickets (with the help of the security guards), and then they share the gain with the security guards. Some villagers can earn money through "cooperating" with security guards, but others need to be interrogated, which makes local people angry and heightens the tension between local people and the security guards. A villager who "worked" with the security guards to help tourists evade tickets mentioned that:

> You have to provide them (the security guards) with wine and dine and bribe them. They are very corrupt. I only treat and bribe their chief.

Meanwhile, local government issued a regulation that the villagers could not drive their cars inside the village from 10am to 4pm on ordinary days and from 9am to 5pm in national holidays, which also caused the villagers to complain. First, this regulation brought them much inconvenience. Second, their dissatisfaction arises from the company's unfair treatment when they drive their cars into the village: Some people were allowed to enter during the above time periods while others were not. However, the first author carried out observations at noon on March 16, 2016 for about half an hour and found that all cars were allowed to enter easily. Conflict between local villagers and the company employees thus often happened. To express their discontent with the company, villagers destroyed its telephone lines and burned a security booth secretly (Chen, 2011). Also, a security guard was beaten half dead by some unknown person(s) in the night according to local people.

5.2. Conflict evolution

Conflict is not a static but dynamic process, which evolves over time (Northrup, 1989; Pondy, 1967). Azar (1986) indicates that it is not sufficient to understand conflict as discrete actions because such recognition will lose much contextual information of a particular conflict. To have a clear understanding of conflict in tourism development, we explored a conflict evolution process at this world heritage site. Fig. 2 illustrates explicitly the timeline of conflict issues and their intrinsic relations.

Though the Fujian *tulou* were inscribed on the world heritage list in 2008, the preparation for registration by the Yongding County Government dates back to as early as the 1990s, and a special agency was established for its application (Zhu & Yu, 2008). The whole application process lasted over ten years. The first three conflict issues started before its successful inscription. To obtain world heritage status, Hongkeng villagers' houses were demolished, land was expropriated, and new houses were not allowed to be built, which triggered a series of conflicts. After successful inscription, the conflicts around the three issues did not disappear. To facilitate tourism development and generate profits from years' hard work on application, a new scale of construction, including commercial facilities, office buildings, and

infrastructure, were implemented, which caused continuous conflicts. As shown in Fig. 2, the conflicts on land expropriation and house demolition ended in 2010. However, they may reappear in the near future if local government plans to start a new round of construction and continues to ignore local villagers' interests. A strict regulation on construction was imposed on core and buffer zones of the world heritage site, so it is almost impossible for ordinary villagers to build new houses in the village. The draconian policies of local government (no resettlement measure and restriction on building new houses) made the house building issue worsen. The current evidence indicates that the need for houses remains the main cause of the house building conflict issue. If the situation continues without any improvement, serious conflicts might happen in the future.

Another feature is the concentration of conflicts around the inscription year of 2008. Land expropriation robbed local villagers of their farmland, an important security guarantee for them. Young people can move to large cities for work but this is not realistic for vulnerable groups, such as old people and disabled people. The influx of tourists brought them a business opportunity, vending, which does not need much capital or special skills. However, local government prohibited them from vending in the name of beautification to attract tourists. Instead of finding a way to benefit both sides, they just banned it outright. As a result, a game of cat and mouse happened between the vendors and the government staff, which did not end until 2013 with the concession of the latter. A "vendor incident" occurred in 2008, which caused a traffic blockade and also contributed to the birth of the ticket revenue distribution indirectly.

Since the 1990s, local government has been selling entry tickets. Initially, the Yongding Tourism Administration was in charge of the ticket sales, then the *Tulou* Company took over this task after its establishment in 2007. Thus, local government has been using Hongkeng villagers' private property to get revenue but refused to share economic benefits with them before the "vendor incident". Later, eight percent of the ticket revenue was finalized to distribute to Hongkeng people, but they were dissatisfied with the percentage as well as the total amount which was perceived to be less than what they were entitled to receive due to corruption. Meanwhile, two percent went to the villagers' committee, which caused nasty competition for the villagers' committee head. Previously, very few people were interested in this position but since the two percent distribution, election campaigns have become fierce and a series of illegal election activities occurred, such as vote buying and threats. The interference in village affairs by the township government intensified the conflict and made it more complicated.

From the evolution of the conflict issues shown in Fig. 2, we can see that each issue is not isolated but connected with other issue(s). The application for world heritage caused house demolition, land expropriation, and house building issues. A direct result of land expropriation was the loss of farmland, an important security guarantee for peasants, which caused the occurrence of the vending issue. The "vendor incident" triggered a traffic blockade and promoted the distribution of the ticket revenue indirectly. The distribution of the ticket revenue intensified the competition for the villagers' committee head and caused the village election issue.

Farmland supports peasants' basic means of production, houses are peasants' basic means of livelihood, and the distribution of the ticket revenue is basic compensation for using local villagers' private property. Vending on the other hand is a direct response for losing farmland, the right to vote is a peasants' basic political right, and fair elections are also the foundation of fair economic distribution. The entry issue is thus more an expression of dissatisfaction with the above conflict issues. Accumulated discontent over the years was released when the villagers met with arrogant security guards. This is a non-realistic conflict as Coser mentions. These issues are related to local peasants' basic needs and rights. Therefore, it is understandable that conflict happened when these basic interests and rights were infringed.
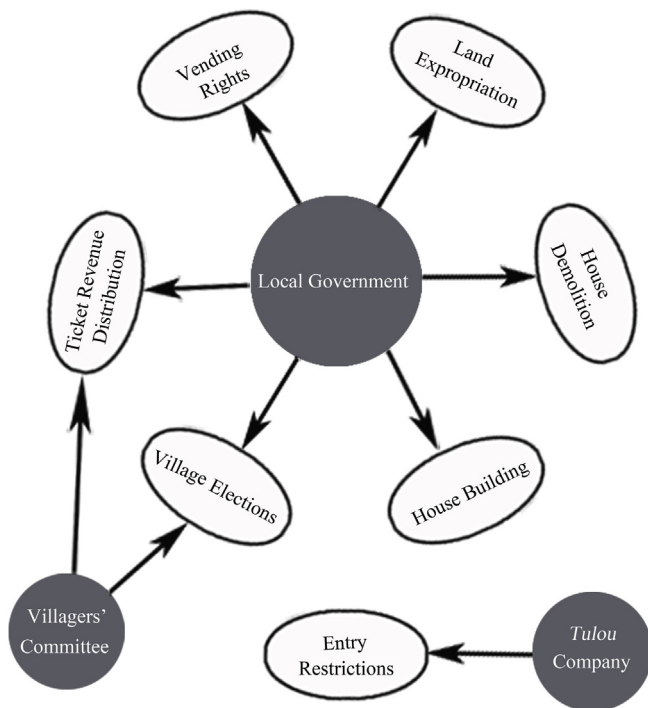
Fig. 3. The main conflicting parties in each issue with the local peasants.

5.3. Core conflicting party

In section 5.1 the relevant parties involved in these conflict issues were identified. They include Hongkeng peasants, the *Tulou* Company, the villagers' committee, and local government (the Yongding County Government and the Hukeng Township Government). The relationship between the conflicting parties and the conflict issues that impact on the Hongkong villagers are depicted in Fig. 3.

Local government is the most important conflicting party that participated in all the conflict issues with local peasants except the entry issue. The villagers' committee was involved in the issues of village elections and ticket revenue distribution while the tourism company was associated with the entry issue. Why is local government the most important conflicting party? In most of these conflict issues, only local government has the authority and ability to implement and finish relevant tasks. The *Tulou* Company and the villagers' committee do not have authority according to the law. For example, it was the county government which made decisions on house demolition and land expropriation. Many Hongkeng peasants did not want to move out, did not want their land to be expropriated, or were not dissatisfied with the low compensation offered. Local government set the specific compensation standards which were thought to be low and unfair by local peasants. But they were powerless to stop the actions of local government.

During land expropriation, a large group of police were deployed to maintain the order. In local peasants' eyes, this was a threat. The county government also issued a series of regulations to restrict local people from building houses. However, when we consider the preservation and conservation of world heritage and its surroundings, banning the construction of new houses is reasonable to some extent. And, only local government has the authority to examine and approve applications for building new houses. The key here is how to resettle those peasants who need houses badly.

In terms of vending, again only local government has the law enforcement power to deal with this issue. As for ticket revenue distribution, the county government makes the plan, which can be attested from a series of government documents, such as No.: Y. L. F. W. [2013]

14, No.: Y. L. F. W. [2009]. 6, and No.: Y. L. Y. G. Z. [2009] 2. Here, the local government involved in these issues included the Yongding County Government and the Hukeng Township Government. Actually, the county government plays a critical role and the township government, as its subordinate, has to follow its orders and finish the tasks assigned by it.

The entry issue on the other hand is mainly a result of the *Tulou* Company's management failure. But, to some extent, it is also related to local government because it is a county-owned enterprise and the general manager of the company is also the director of the local tourism administration. Furthermore, it was the county government that issued the regulation on the entry of cars, which caused the friction. Too many cars entering the village means that it is not safe for both villagers and tourists, especially during holidays. Therefore, this regulation is reasonable to some extent. The key is how to reduce the inconvenience brought to villagers. Generally speaking, the entry issue is a matter of management.

The villagers' committee got involved with the issues of ticket revenue distribution and village elections. For the former issue, the conflict is about how to use the two percent ticket revenue distributed to the committee. Local villagers commonly thought that there was corruption in its usage. A villagers' committee is a self-governing organization according to *the Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees*. Self-governance promised by law is conceived as having the abilities of democratic election, decision making, management, and supervision (O'Brien & Han, 2009). Therefore, such decisions as whether, when, and how to develop tourism should be made by local peasants instead of local government. Similarly, democratic elections should be held by local peasants and local government should not interfere with them. In other words, local peasants should have the right to manage their village affairs by themselves. They should play an active and major rather than passive and negligible role. However, in reality, local government sometimes deprives local peasants of these rights. It is therefore hard for villagers' committees to be independent and represent local villagers' interests. O'Brien and Han note that villagers' committees may be influenced by township governments, village Party branches, clans, and criminal gangs. In this study, Hongkeng villagers' committee was influenced at least by local government.

"Stakeholder" has been a lively topic which has much literature. Local residents and tourists are two important stakeholders in tourism (Byrd, Bosley, & Dronberger, 2009; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2003; Ryan, 2002; Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013; Yang, Zhang, & Ryan, 2016). Based on the discussion above, we know that the villagers' committee plays a certain role in tourism development and the distribution of benefits, be it positive or not. Though the members of the villagers' committee are also local residents, they are different from ordinary residents and their interests are often not consistent with them. There is a popular saying in rural areas that "the Centre is our benefactor, the province is our relative, the county is a good person, the township is an evil person, and the village is our enemy" (O'Brien & Li, 1995, p. 778; Zhang & Meng, 1993). To some extent, this saying can also reflect the difference between them. Hence, it is necessary to distinguish villagers' committees from ordinary residents. However, in reality, researchers rarely discuss these separately when investigating relevant issues involving rural tourism in China. Ignoring the role of villagers' committees or equating villagers' committees with local communities (Ying & Zhou, 2007, p. 103) is not appropriate because it may lead to an incomplete and biased analysis which results in impractical suggestions and recommendations. In addition, tourists in this study are only regarded as a tool by local villagers for pressuring local government. To some extent, they are often victims of conflict. For example, after a vendor conflict, tourists were not able to enter Hongkeng because the villagers blocked the entrance. Tourists whose access was denied due to blockage also occurred in other places. In Mount Emei, a world heritage site in Sichuan Province, hundreds of local people blocked the road due to their discontent with the decision of the

Table 1
Comparisons among the four tourist villages.

	Hongkeng	Likeng	Hongcun	Zhaoxing
Location	Fujian	Jiangxi	Anhui	Guizhou
World heritage	YES	NO	YES	NO
Ethnic minority	NO	NO	NO	YES
Main conflict issues	House building; Ticket revenue distribution; Vending rights; Entry restrictions; Land expropriation; House demolition; Village elections	House building; Ticket revenue distribution; Vending rights	Vending rights; Tourism management rights	House building
Other issues		Entry restrictions; Land expropriation; Village corruption	Entry restrictions; House building	Entry restrictions; Land expropriation
Main Conflicting parties	Peasants versus local government	Peasants versus local government	Peasants versus local government	Peasants versus local government

Note. We categorize an issue into "other issues" if it is just an isolated incident and does not cause much influence for the village or it is hard to judge whether it is related to tourism or not based on the information we collected.

Emei Scenic Area Administrative Committee (Zhang, 2014). And, in Likeng, Jiangxi Province, villagers blocked the entrance because they were dissatisfied with the ticket revenue distribution. (Wang, 2011; Wang & Qin, 2011).

Community participation is widely regarded as an effective way of developing tourism. However, there exists difficulty in adopting this method in rural China because it is hard for local people to participate in the process of decision-making. Power distribution plays an important role and even a decisive role in community participation, and tourism development in rural China is a power game to grab benefits among government, tourism companies, local communities (Bao & Zuo, 2012), and village committees.

5.4. Comparisons with the supplemental case studies

Many conflict issues are thought by peasants to be butter and bread issues and have a great influence on their life. These characteristics indicate that these issues are the most likely sources of conflict and that they would also appear in other places if they are ignored by local government. Table 1 shows the major conflict issues and conflicting parties among local peasants. House building, ticket revenue distribution, and vending rights are three relatively common issues among the four sites. All the major conflict issues in the three supplemental case studies were found in the main case study except for the issue of tourism management rights in Hongcun, which refers to the right of controlling and managing their property by the peasants themselves. Actually, how to develop tourism should be a village affair, and they have the right to decide the mode of tourism development according to the law. To some extent, the tourism management rights can determine the distribution of ticket revenue so it has a direct influence on local villagers' economic interest.

There were small variations in the specific conflict issues and evolution process among the four tourist villages. First, not all the conflict issues appeared at each site. If a village initiated tourism a long time ago and does not have many modern buildings which are inconsistent with traditional ones, house demolition might not exist or not be severe. If local government was forward-looking and negotiated reasonable arrangements for villagers in the beginning, conflict would possibly not happen. Second, issues not covered in Fig. 2 might appear in other areas. For example, a struggle to get control of the management right happened in Hongcun, which lasted for a couple of years. Third, the sequence of appearance of conflict issues may be different. For example, though a riot happened in Zhaoxing due to the issue of house building, the vending issue has not appeared because there are few people selling souvenirs along the street.

Land expropriation and house demolition, two major issues in rural China, also appeared in tourist villages. The difference is that, in rural China, these issues mainly appear in the process of urbanization, while in tourist villages they are manifested because of world heritage status and tourism development. Yu (2005) notes that illegal acquisition and low compensation contribute to conflict in rural China, and similar things also happened in tourist villages. In addition, village elections, another common conflict source in rural China, were found in the tourist village of Hongkeng.

As with the main case, the most important conflicting party in the supplemental cases was local government (county and township governments). On the issues of land expropriation and house demolition, the main conflicting party with local people was also local government. However, some media reported that villagers' committees participated in land expropriation and house demolition in non-tourist villages (Hua & Sun, 2016). This discrepancy partly comes from insufficient information on the role the village committees played in land expropriation and house demolition in our study. Regardless of villagers' committees' involvement in these issues, local government remains the most important conflicting party in this study.

6. Conclusions

This paper has explored the conflict phenomenon in the field of rural tourism in China. Our theoretical position is that we regard Chinese society as a social system in which conflicts occur due to incompatible claims among stakeholders in the tourism development process, and this has both positive and negative consequences for the system and individuals. Rural China has been an agrarian based social system. When tourism development occurs, the equilibrium based on agricultural production and the social relationships that are necessary to carry it out is destabilized as the social system shifts toward a tourism based one. Local government that promotes tourism demolishes houses and expropriates the land of peasants. When tourism development occurs at World Cultural Heritage sites, preservation of local culture is required and local government may prohibit peasants to build new houses. These measures by local government deprive peasants of their means of livelihood and deny them a better life. When peasants, especially vulnerable ones, lose farmland, they must seek alternative livelihoods, and they have found that vending to tourists can generate income. However, local government prohibits peasants to sell as it negatively affects tourist experiences. Peasants also seek for income from ticket revenue distribution which is influenced by the outcome of village elections. But this area also becomes a conflict issue as local government wants to maintain a high percentage of ticket revenue. Villagers' committees work as a supplemental force for local government in these issues. Entry restrictions are implemented by the *Tulou* Company to ensure order at the destination, but these too reduce the quality of life of the peasants. Thus, conflicts arise in these identified

issues because peasants and local government have incompatible claims between the agrarian economy and the tourism based economy. At a system level, conflict destabilizes the social system in the short run as the social order is disrupted, but in the long run conflict brings a social system in which the economic base is composed of both agriculture and tourism. At the individual level, peasants face tensions when they act but they will have some economic gains from tourism such as a higher percentage of ticket revenue distribution.

From the perspective of local peasants, eight categories of conflict were thus identified from the four case studies: land expropriation, ticket revenue distribution, vending rights, tourism management rights, house demolition, house building, entry restrictions, and village elections. Because we mainly looked at conflict from the peasants' viewpoint, and Zhang et al. (2015) focused on heritage and tourism conflict in general, only the half of our conflict issues are in common with their categories of conflict. Ticket revenue distribution, tourism management rights, and entry restrictions are equal to their category of operating destruction events. Conflict due to construction is a common issue that damages the environment including the landscape. However, who causes the damage is different. In our case, peasants want to build houses that cause landscape destruction. When local government regulates this, their favoritism angers the peasants. In constructive destruction events, developers are the ones who cause the environmental damage that becomes the basis of conflict.

Besides conflict identification, a more important contribution of this study lies in the exploration of the relationships among these conflict issues, as they are not isolated but connected with each other and evolve with time. Three conflicting parties with local peasants were identified: local government, tourism companies, and villagers' committees. The idea of the stakeholder is an important concept, and stakeholder theory is often used to analyze studies concerning tourism impacts, collaboration, and development. However, the importance of each stakeholder has been rarely studied in the context of the conflict over tourism development. This paper identified the most important stakeholder in such conflict, that is, local government. Only local government has the authority and power to implement relevant work concerning the conflict issues, among which county governments play an important role while township governments, as subordinates, follow orders from county governments. In previous studies, local communities, an important stakeholder, were often treated as a whole. This study found that villagers' committees, the members of which belong to local communities but are different from ordinary local residents, should be separated from local communities as an independent stakeholder. These findings can help to further improve stakeholder theory and to make it more useful in guiding tourism planning and management in rural China and/or other areas.

Among the conflict issues in the main case study, only the vending issue has been resolved. Land expropriation and house demolition have ended only temporarily, and the rest of the issues still remain. If there is no improvement on these issues, serious conflict may happen in the future especially over house building and ticket revenue distribution because the need for extra housing is urgent in Hongkeng and the villagers have been complaining of the low distribution percentage of ticket revenue passed to them. The village election issue is not limited to Hongkeng but often happens in other rural areas. Conflict over village elections in Hongkeng will continue in the future and the competition for the position of the villagers' committee head will probably still be fierce as it may bring substantial benefits to the winner due to the two percent distribution rule.

Local people took different ways to try to maintain their rights and interests, such as petitions and traffic blockages. To achieve their goals, tourists often became victims of the conflict between local people and other stakeholders. Parsons views conflict as a disease and it is disruptive and dysfunctional while Coser sees its social functions. Though their requests were not met in many cases after much effort and some facilities were destroyed in the process, we can still see the functions

and positive aspects of conflict for the locals in this study as Coser noted. For example, local government began to distribute ticket revenue to Hongkeng villagers after a vendor incident, and local people were allowed to vend along the street after many years' resistance. More changes might come through the consistent conflict between local people and other stakeholders.

As Rummel (1976) notes, conflict is a clash of powers and a process of balancing powers. A reason why local government is the most important conflicting party lies in their excessive power. To reduce conflict and promote sustainable tourism development, the power of local government should be clarified and restricted. For example, villagers' committees' members should be provided with a channel of appeal through legal action when being dismissed unlawfully by local government. In addition, as decision makers, local government officials should realize that peasants' basic needs will not disappear by administrative orders. Therefore, local government should make scientific tourism plans in the long run in advance, such as zoning proper areas for vending and resettling peasants who need houses before the influx of tourists. To sustain property as living units instead of museums, appropriate installation of modern equipment such as air conditioners is necessary while protecting the outstanding value. On the one hand, these can satisfy local people's need for living a modern life, which will help to avoid local people moving out. And, it can relieve the intense housing need.

According to the main case study, many conflicts were related to the application for world heritage. The main aim of world heritage is to protect property with outstanding universal value. However, if the obtainment of this title is based on infringement upon local peasants' basic rights and interests, it is against the spirit of benefiting local people. We need to develop tourism by embracing the following points. First, local people have the right to live a modern life. Second, without the sincere participation and cooperation of local peasants, world heritage will be inauthentic and its integrity will be questioned, and heritage protection may not be implemented smoothly. To avoid conflict happening at world heritage sites, it is necessary for the conferment party, the UNESCO world heritage centre (committee), to take effective measures. For example, methods of protecting local people's rights and interests relating to world heritage application should be included in the contents of the nomination document especially in the aspects of land expropriation, house demolition, and resettlement.

The exact role that tourism companies played in the process of conflict was not clear from our study and their relationship with local government should be studied further in the future. The questions will be how do tourism companies, especially private companies, negotiate with local government on ticket revenue distribution? Is there any connection between tourism companies and villagers' committees on conflict happening? In addition, villagers' committees were identified as an important conflicting party against peasants, but this has often been ignored in the field of tourism research. Hence, it is necessary to study it, especially in relation to the issues involving benefit distribution, land expropriation, and house demolition. In the villages of China, there is another important and powerful organization, the village Party branch. However, the members of villagers' committees do not necessarily belong to village Party branches. Therefore, the role played by village Party branches in conflicts in tourism should also be given more attention in future research. Finally, this study was conducted based on the context of China. Whether the findings in this study apply to other areas needs more research. For example, is it necessary to further classify local communities when using stakeholder theory to analyze conflict in tourism in other countries or areas?

Author contributions

Liguo Wang conceived the presented idea, designed the study, and collected data. Liguo Wang and Yukio Yotsumoto contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the data. Liguo Wang wrote the

manuscript and Yukio Yotsumoto revised it critically. Both of us approved the final manuscript.

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