



Progress in tourism management

Assisting the poor in China through tourism development: A review of research

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ABSTRACT

The role of Pro-Poor Tourism has been increasingly studied in China since the 1990s. The research has addressed a broad range of key issues such as the implication of “*fu pin lv you*” (or TAP to use an English acronym arising from the translation ‘Tourism-Assisting the Poor’), governmental roles, local participation and the contribution of rural, natural and cultural resources to TAP. However, there has been a lack of research in some areas such as in the micro-economics of TAP targeting local poor people, quantitative research, case studies and anthropological analysis. This paper reviews Chinese academic literature on pro-poor tourism to provide a clearer picture of current practice and progress in TAP policies and research in China.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, tourism as an instrument to reduce poverty has been an important research topic, particularly in developing countries. In 1999, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) introduced the term “pro-poor tourism (PPT)” to define a specific form of “tourist seeking” that contributes to poverty reduction (Ashley, Boyd, & Goodwin, 2000; DFID, 1999). In 2002, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (WTO) launched its report “Tourism and Poverty Alleviation” at the World Summit on Sustainable Development and announced the development of a programme of work on “Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP)” (Sofield, Bauer, De Lacy, Lipman, & Daugherty, 2004; WTO, 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to examine tourism and poverty alleviation in China by reviewing past research publications relating to policies known as ‘*fu pin lv you*’ (or TAP to use an English acronym arising from the translation ‘Tourism-Assisting the Poor’). The paper will therefore comprise three main approaches: (a) a discussion of the measures of poverty in China with reference to per capita annual income, followed by (b) a listing of publications and their features identified and (c) a discussion of the approaches and themes found within the studies.

1.1. Poverty in China

As the largest developing country, China still retains a huge area of poverty-stricken rural regions in which there are resident over 100 million on incomes significantly below the poverty line (World Bank, 2009), even though significant progress has been made on poverty reduction since the adoption of ‘Open Door’ policies under the late Deng Xiaoping. Tourism has played a role in these policies (Ryan & Gu, 2009). Measured in terms of the World Bank poverty standard of 888 RMB per person per year at 2003 rural prices, China’s poverty reduction performance has been striking. Between 1981 and 2004, the fraction of the population living below this poverty line fell from 65 per cent to 10 per cent, and the absolute number of poor fell from 652 million to 135 million, a decline of over half a billion people. Measured by the new international poverty standard of \$1.25 per person per day (using 2005 Purchasing Power Parity for China), the levels of poverty are higher, but the decline since 1981 is no less impressive (from 85 per cent in 1981 to 27 per cent in 2004) (World Bank, 2009). In 2011 the “China Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Outline (2011–2020)” established targets for future policy after changes that also included an extension of pension rights to the rural population. This was part of a wider economic policy that sought to encourage consumer spending as a source of economic growth in the face of potential lower earnings from exports. At the end of October 2010 the Government proposed increasing the poverty standard to 1500 RMB pa, almost double the 2007 annual per capita income standard. In the interim period, in 2008, the National Bureau of

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Statistics had increased the standard to 1196 RMB pa and in 2010 to 1274 RMB pa, so the issue is one that is continually under review. Lu Mai of the China Development Research Foundation has argued that to reach international standards of poverty definition China would need a level of about 2000–3000 RMB per capita pa, but some argue that such levels would be misunderstood by many (Fang, 2011). Li Shi of Beijing Normal University Institute of Economics and Business Administration has estimated that at 2000 RMB the numbers 'officially' poor would be about 130 million (Fang, 2011).

The issue is far from simple, and the wider debate within China over poverty alleviation also assesses the delivery of the policies. Lin Jialai, of the China Association of Poverty Alleviation and Development, has noted that the focus of policies in rural areas are directed to the village rather than the family as the primary unit, and the Association's 2007 report, "China Development Report 2007: Eradicating Poverty During Development" argued that over-involvement by bureaucracies has created significant inefficiencies in policy delivery while permitting redirection of funds from key areas such as early childhood nutrition (Fang, 2011).

1.2. *Tourism, economic development and poverty alleviation*

Certainly there exists a significant literature on the relationship between tourism and general economic growth, and the terminology of "tourism growth led hypothesis" has become accepted within both the tourism and economic literatures. Among those studies Shan and Sun (1997) and Shan and Wilson (2001) have used econometric techniques within a Chinese context, the latter finding evidence of a re-iterative effect between tourism and trade (imports and exports) as both feed into each other. While their main concern relates to the quality of forecasting techniques and the deficiencies of single equation approaches in tourism forecasting they specifically state that the null hypothesis of no linkages between tourism and economic growth in China as measured by trade can be rejected. At a micro level several descriptive studies exist in Chinese literature that purports to show positive outcomes for rural areas from tourism development. For example, Zhou and Wang (2004), Wu and Wang (2001) and Yin (2004) argue that tourism benefits rural areas while more empirical studies can be found in the English language *Journal of China Tourism Research* (e.g. Gu & Ryan, 2010; Yan, Barkmann, Zschiegner, & Marggraf, 2008), books such as Xie's (2011) *Authenticating Ethnic Tourism* on tourism in Hainan and other sources.

That there is such interest in China is of little surprise when considering the growth of tourism as both a destination and tourist generating country. Its size of population of 1.3 billion people approximately, the double figure growth in Gross Domestic Product for almost two decades and the resultant growth of domestic tourism (numbering 1.6 billion travelers in 2007) and inbound tourism (19.73 million visits in the 12 months to February, 2009) according to China National Tourism Administration data (<http://en.cnta.gov.cn/html/2009-3/2009-3-25-14-48-14525.html>), are sufficient data to explain the academic and policy interest in tourism. Additionally, as noted by several commentators, the central government has specifically used tourism as a means of developing an infrastructure to complement other rural economic development policies to address issues of income disparities between rural and urban zones, and between east and western China (Ryan & Gu, 2009; Wu, 2004).

As part of this total growth of tourism, rural tourism has been increasing steadily. It is estimated that in 2008 rural tourism received more than 400 million tourists and created more than RMB60 billion of revenue, which took around 23 per cent and 8 per cent respectively of the total national tourism data on numbers of

visitors and expenditure (Guo & Han, 2010). It has been suggested that tourism has contributed directly to around 10 per cent of the reduction in numbers of those below the official poverty line (CNTA, 2009; Shi, 2003).

In China, such tourism development specifically targeted at the reduction of rural poverty has been known as "*fu pin lv you*" or "*lv you fu pin*", which could be translated in English as "Tourism-Assisting the Poor", or abbreviated as TAP, which term will be generally used in this paper. In assessing and distributing TAP research findings from China to the English-speaking world there have been the conventional linguistic and possibly conceptual difficulties of translation, although a large volume of literature has been available in Mandarin. Added to this was also a lack of awareness on each side of work completed in this area, but in recent decades, academic institutions and government agencies throughout China have had access to English-language literature across a broad range of fields and disciplines including TAP, through either an active and widespread translation program, or the work of Chinese researchers fluent in English. In contrast, their counterparts in the Western countries have had no access to Chinese-language literature unless they themselves are individually fluent in written Chinese, while it is almost only in the last few years that western academics have been able to more easily access Mandarin journals through the internet. As a consequence the large volume of literature related to pro-poor tourism produced in China has, for the most part, not been acknowledged internationally.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to review this literature of the last two decades and provide a clearer picture of the research progress in tourism-assisting the poor (TAP) ("*fu pin lv you*" or "*lv you fu pin*") in Chinese, and thereby perhaps develop a better understanding of the current position in China among western colleagues. As such the paper seeks to make a contribution to a literature that is described by Zhao and Ritchie (2007) thus: 'Despite the potential of tourism as a development tool and the worldwide mushrooming interest in tourism-based poverty alleviation initiatives, the relationship between tourism and poverty alleviation largely remains *terra incognita* among tourism academics' (p. 10).

2. Methodology

Ding (2004), Zeng (2006) and Li, Zhong, and Cheng (2009) have analyzed the TAP related literature and summarized progress until 2007. Since then, more research has been published and indicated new directions and progress when compared to the past. Additionally, some of the past reviews, such as that of Zeng (2006), were more concerned with general issues relating to rural tourism than simply poverty reduction, which is the primary concern of this paper. The amount of literature published before 1990s was very small (Li et al., 2009), and hence this paper focuses on publications since 1990. To that end major databases in both Chinese and English were used.

China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (www.cnki.net) is the most powerful engine to search Chinese academic publications. It integrates journal papers, degree theses, conference proceedings, books and newspaper articles into one database protocol. This database was searched using the combination of keywords "*lv you* (tourism)", "*pin kun* (poverty)" and "*qiong ren* (poor)" (in Chinese), from 01/01/1990 to 25/08/2010 (<http://epub.cnki.net/grid2008/index/ZKCALD.htm>). A total of 366 Chinese publications were collected. For the English literature, the major databases searched included EBSCOhost and ISI Web of Knowledge. In addition the search engine Google Scholar was used to identify any literature that might have been missed from the other databases. In the latter cases the search terms included the keywords

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