

# Residents' perceptions of tourism and Chinese central policies: the case of Anhui's UNESCO sites

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to identify the attitudes of Chinese residents towards tourists and tourism development. Based on periods of observation, temporary residency and several visits for more than a decade, and supplemented by data collected from 478 residents, the study examines to what extent the rural villagers identify the tourism induced changes as being an outcome of official Chinese policies. The villages, Xidi, Hongcun and Nanping, are three heritage villages in Anhui Province and represent appropriate case studies for such an examination due to their differing histories of tourism administrative procedures. Findings contribute to scholarly knowledge by putting pro-poor tourism and community participation under scrutiny in Chinese context. A change of residents' perceptions towards tourism could



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potentially be consequential for tourists' experience and the sustainability of tourism development, particularly in emerging rural destinations.

**Keywords** Resident perceptions, UNESCO heritage, Tourists experience, Pro-poor rural tourism, Anhui, China

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In recent years, from approximately 2007, there has been a mounting concern on the part of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Chinese authorities that some of the World Heritage sites in China are being threatened by growing numbers of tourists or other forms of development. In particular the issues of resource exploitations, authenticity related to changing anthropological, cultural, environmental and social landscapes, inequality and community marginalization all have become key concerns when tourism was used as a device to alleviate poverty in rural areas. For example, in 2003, the Three Parallel Rivers site was gazetted by UNESCO as meeting all four criteria for being designated as a World Heritage Site. Then, the following year, a "yellow card warning" was issued over the lack of transparency shown by the authorities with the development of several hydro-electricity schemes threatening the UNESCO site. Other sites also received warnings including Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, Lushan Mountain and Wudalianchi Pond, and often because of an over-commercialization associated with the development of roads, hotels and restaurants that changes traditional patterns of life (UNESCO, 2013). Among several others, Gu and Ryan (2008a, 2008b) suggested that local participation in mega tourism development is perhaps one of the important mechanisms that can help retain the delicate balance between commercial tourism development and desires for authenticity. Yet little longitudinal research has examined the extent to which current Chinese policy supports residents' retaining a sense of authenticity of place as part of a UNESCO gazetting. Complementary findings of the current research might shed light on this research issue that is rarely explored with many preferring cross-sectional analyses.

The research *locus* is Anhui, in which three villages, Hongcun, Xidi and Nanping, are the subject of this research paper. Among the famous tourism sites in southern Anhui, the World Heritage Sites of Hongcun and Xidi have attracted significant academic studies into the impacts of tourism (Liu, 2005; Yan and Morrison, 2008; Zhao *et al.*, 2018). They have also been regarded as successful sites epitomizing provincial and municipal tourism policies by which the Chinese authorities combatted past rural poverty through the development of tourism (Zhang *et al.*, 1999; Wong *et al.*, 2023). Hongcun now attracts approximately 1.6 million visitors annually, while similar numbers can be found at Xidi. Therefore, the first two cases have been well established in the academic literature (e.g. Li *et al.*, 2008; Gu and Ryan, 2008a, 2008b, 2010) but, arguably, the third is less well known. Like Hongcun and Xidi, Nanping retains many ancient buildings from the Ming Dynasty. Indeed, with some 300 old buildings, it is larger than its more famed counterparts and it too was used as a site in the Lee (2000) film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* ([www.imdb.com/title/tt0190332/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190332/)). It has also been used in many other films such as *Ju Dou*, *The Sky of the History* and *The Great Transformation*.

The villages have experienced significant changes with the advent of tourism, and one of the key measures assessed by UNESCO is the levels of congestion and whether damage is occurring because of the increasing numbers of tourists (Lu *et al.*, 2004; Adie *et al.*, 2017). Zhao *et al.* (2018) undertook a modelling of tourist flows through Hongcun and concluded that the village was significantly overwhelmed in terms of its physical carrying capacity for

much of the year. The emphasis is understandable in that the 2000 UNESCO accreditation of the village attributed major importance to the Huizhou architectural style but little or no attention was paid to other aspects such as the intangible cultural traditions, or indeed to the social and environmental impacts flows of tourism.

These latter impacts have been the subject of a monitoring programme undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations World Tourism Organization Sustainable Monitoring Programme based at Sun Yat Sen University under the leadership of Bao Jigang. In their 2016 report arising from an eight-day monitoring at Xidi, the group noted that:

On the whole, the environmental protection condition in Xidi is relatively good, but the problem of sewage treatment should be taken and treated seriously. There are no specific wastewater treatment facilities for residents' domestic sewage and students' drawing sewage. Even worse, some sketching students will directly pour their pigment water into rivers or fields, leading to severe pollution to the rivers and fields. According to the interviews with Director of the village committee and managers of scenic areas, more importance has been attached to the sewage treatment problems, and corresponding measures have also been taken to deal with them, for example, a specific sewage sedimentation tank has been built up in transfer station to deal with pigment wastewater, and sewers in the villages are under construction. However, the specific implementation remains to be seen (MCSTO, 2016, p. 2).

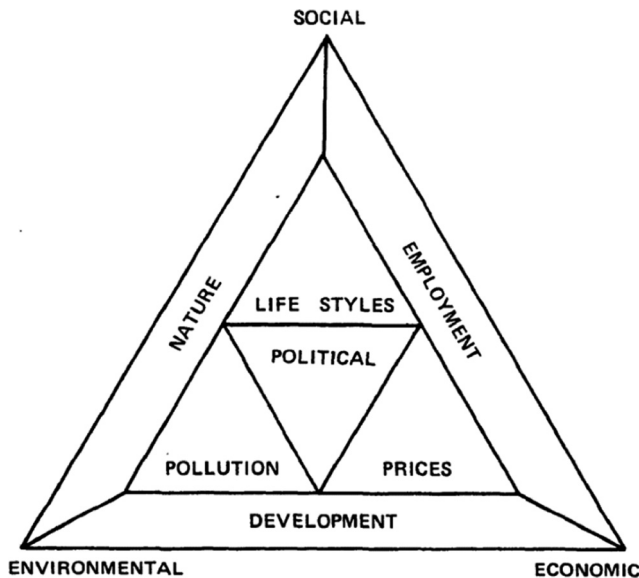
However, in one sense these observations are far from new, and indeed [Gu and Ryan \(2008a, 2008b\)](#) were making similar comments almost a decade earlier when reporting the remarks made by the residents.

The current study adopted the view that resident views are of importance when seeking to assess the sustainability of tourism. As noted by [Murphy \(1985\)](#), it is the residents who live with the consequences of tourism, and who often are used locally by the industry and encounter the tourists. Equally, reverting to the earlier work of [Doxey \(1975\)](#), residents can also shape the experiences of tourists. Consequently, a significant literature exists as to the reaction of residents to tourism, but often it locates residents as a passive, reactive force. This paper seeks to take a slightly different approach to contribute both to the literature about ancient Chinese villages as examples of tourism impacts on heritage sites, and at the same time it adds to the arguments initially postulated by [Gu and Ryan \(2008a, 2008b\)](#) that community resilience in the face of tourist numbers is determined in part by attachment to place, and the extent to which they feel themselves to be effective in shaping policy. Considering the current Chinese Government's approach to tourism, an underlying *lei-motif* began to emerge, and that was the policy of state endorsed enterprises taking an increasingly leading role in village development. It is this factor, it is thought, that helped to explain some of the results that emerged from the study.

The objectives of this research are, therefore, to identify resident attitudes towards tourists and tourism development, and to examine to what extent they identify the tourism induced changes as being an outcome of official Chinese policies. The villages represent appropriate case studies for such an examination due to their differing histories of tourism administrative procedures.

### Literature review

In 1974, Butler sought to provide a holistic perspective as to tourism impacts by presenting the schema shown in [Figure 1](#). The schema is premised on three key dimensions, the economic, environmental and social. Of interest to the authors is that the framework incorporates the political, and a key variable here is that of lifestyles. Past



Source: Figure courtesy of Butler (1974, p. 102)

Figure 1.  
Butler's model of  
tourism impacts

studies of the southern Anhui sites and other Chinese sites (Gu and Ryan, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Tang *et al.*, 2008; Li *et al.*, 2008; and Liang and Hui, 2016) have all emphasized the importance of social interaction and dynamics as a direct and an indirect factor that shapes people's experiences of tourism.

Lifestyle is significantly affected by physical and psychological well-being, and one of the primary motivations for Chinese rural tourism policy is to alleviate poverty in rural areas (Zeng and Ryan, 2012; Zeng *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, in designing the research project, a measurable variable was thought to be resident attitudes towards the effectiveness of tourism in creating income and employment opportunities for them. Following the concepts of exchange theory as suggested by Ap (1990, 1992), if people perceive that they gain benefits from a process or series of events, they are more likely to possess positive attitudes towards that process or activity. On the other hand, the existence of negative consequences of tourism would, *ceteris paribus*, be expected to create negative attitudes towards tourism. This is, of course, a simple exposition of a complicated process. For example, Ryan *et al.* (1998) suggest that attitudes comprise continua of (a) selfish/functional and altruistic components and (b) core and peripheral aspects, and statements as to evaluation can, therefore, change as core values come to be challenged. Thus, if property prices increase, or congestion occurs that impinge on the free movement of residents, then, in the absence of corrective or alternative strategies, residents may become less supportive of pro-tourism policies despite the existence of other benefits (Pizam, 1978; Ryan and Ma, 2021).

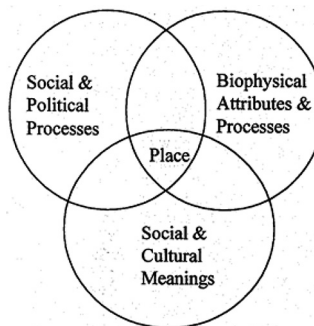
The potential benefits of tourism can also go beyond the economic. It has been suggested that tourism allocates a monetary value to traditional arts and crafts, thereby providing a motivation for a revival of such skills. One of the criticisms made of the UNESCO gazetting of Hongcun is that it made no reference to the intangible aspects of Huizhou culture, and thus this has meant that the Chinese authorities have made little or no effort to promote

traditional arts such as bamboo carving or local traditions of tea leaf deep frying and making (Zhao *et al.*, 2018). One of the consequences of tourism is that it can generate a diversity of activities in a locality and create a sense of purpose in place of the repetitive patterns of agriculturally based life. Many commentators have noted the way in which tourism creates festivals based on traditions that would otherwise fade, which events help bring communities together (George, 2015; Ziakas, 2016). On the other hand, critics have argued that the eventual commercialization of festivals and the staging of performances tend to the creation of spectacle and the emasculating of original meanings behind the performances (Zhu, 2015). This, however, is not an inevitable process, and much can depend upon the senses of local community attachment and strength (Gu and Ryan, 2008a, 2008b; Kim *et al.*, 2013; Yi *et al.*, 2020).

Another factor that can positively or negatively influence place attachment and residents' attitudes towards tourism is the state of the natural and built environment. In the case of the UNESCO villages, the residents have seen some physical improvements in its visual attractiveness. The spaghetti entanglements of telephone wires that used to exist have been replaced by underground wiring when the village was being gazetted to better retain its original appearance. When the authors first visited the village, it was unencumbered by the signs that announced sales of items, or where accommodation or cafes existed. Slowly though, despite controls on such signage, they have appeared, and in several instances, the ground floors of homes have been opened to become retail outlets. Additionally, to the annoyance of locals, the famed system of water drainage characteristic of the village has had to be cleaned more frequently (Zhao *et al.*, 2018).

However, places are more than just the physical collection of natural attributes and buildings. The ways in which buildings are designed and their siting and relationship with the natural is a physical expression of value systems that in themselves are the outcomes of social interactions and the resultant patterns of local hierarchies and power structures (Canter, 1977; Relph, 1976; Sack, 1992) as indicated in Figure 2.

An understanding of place, therefore, incorporates values, from the personal human dimension as well as the social functional perspectives of psychological, sociological and economic change. From the psychological perspective, people derive meanings from where they live and how they evaluate that place (Anton and Lawrence, 2014). Those meanings are also based on the social interactions that they have. As commentators and researchers



**Figure 2.**  
The concept of place

**Source:** Figure courtesy based on Canter (1977), Relph (1976) and Sack (1992)

have noted, the relationship between place and those who live there, are closely related to the sense of place attachment and self-identity (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983; Scannell and Gifford, 2014). Distinctions are made between a sense of place, place attachment, place dependency, place meanings and place identity, but all impact upon senses of self. Gu and Ryan (2008a, 2008b) argued that in places experiencing significant changes due to tourism; such feelings can be challenged as residents see the place literally changing within short periods of time before their eyes. The rapidity of change in places such as Xidi, Hongcun and Nanping as described by them and others (Adie *et al.*, 2017; Xu *et al.*, 2016) establishes these sites as places of interest within which to analyse the concept of place attachment. As noted by Fried (2000, p. 193) "In the extreme, people-place relationships manifest as the profound attachment that people often develop to the places they live in, where they share familial, communal and ethnic or cultural bonds with their neighbors". It is, therefore, valid to enquire what happens when places experience rapid change.

The Poverty Alleviation Tourism Policy was used by the Chinese Government as an important mechanism to alleviate poverty in rural areas in China. Guizhou probably was the first place to experience such policies (Qin *et al.*, 2019). The policy was initiated by Guizhou Province Tourism Administration in 1991 and in 2000, the first National Tourism for Poverty Alleviation Pilot Zone was implemented at Liupanshan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. This has marked a new genre for tourism to be used officially as an economic device in China which was directed by the state authorities in governing and implementing pro-poor tourism schemes in those pilot zones.

For Gu and Ryan (2008a, 2008b), one key factor in the Chinese context was the extent to which people possessed a sense of self-efficacy, that is, to what extent did they feel they had control over events that impacted on their place. The above noted research questions can therefore imply a further question: to what extent do residents wish to have that sense of control?

### *The context of the study*

As noted, this commentary refers to three villages in Southern Anhui Province of China. Xidi was constructed during the period of the Northern Song dynasty (960 to 1127 AD) and was formerly a community based on the extended Hu family. Located by the side of two rivers, over time it grew and subsequently as the home of the former Provincial Governor, Hu Wenguang, built in 1578, it came to symbolize the then prominent status of the Hu family. Another of the major buildings is the Jing'ai Ancestral Temple, located in the centre of the village and covering an area of 1,800 square meters. A recent feature of Xidi's tourism history was that in 2000 the administration of the heritage village and its tourism was left in the hands of the Village Committee. This initially enjoyed significant success in devising an equitable means of income distribution (Gu and Ryan, 2008a, 2008b, 2010), but in 2013 policies were changed and the management of Xidi was handed over to the Huihuang Tourism Group.

Several reasons accounted for this, but one was that the authorities concluded the neighbouring village of Hongcun was more successful in economic terms. Hongcun, also dating from the time of the Song dynasty, is famed for its unique water system, and indeed the design of the village is built to replicate a buffalo's digestive system. Nanh Lake is shaped like the buffalo's belly, Moon Pond is said to represent the stomach, and the channel that feeds the 432 households are said to be its intestines. In 1994 the authorities handed management of Hongcun to the Co. Jingyi Ltd, a subsidiary of private Beijing based tourist company, Beijing Zhongkun Investment Group (Zhang, 2015). It was found that Hongcun eventually generated higher incomes for residents because the private company had better

access to the chain of tourism distribution and was able to negotiate more effectively with travel agents, but as Wang and Zan (2011) noted, seeking hard financial data on the management of heritage sites in China can only be described as “difficult”. An indication of the growth of tourism in these villages is indicated by the two photographs taken in much the same area around the lake in July, 10 years apart (see Plate 1 and 2).



**Plate 1.**  
Hongcun during the  
summer of 2017

**Source:** Plate by the authors



**Plate 2.**  
Hongcun, summer  
2006

**Source:** Plate by the authors

The third village of Nanping differs from the others by its lack of UNESCO attribution, although being just as historic. Indeed, it was the site of a battle during the period of the Three Kingdoms (220–280 AD). The levels of visitation are not so high as in Xidi and Hongcun, but the numbers of tourists coming to Nanping have noticeably increased since 2011. Ironically much of this visitation is thought to have been motivated by tourists wishing to have a more “authentic” experience of a historic Southern Anhui village, but there exists a high probability that the patterns of Hongcun and Xidi will come to be repeated at Nanping with all the advantages and disadvantages described by various researchers (Gu and Ryan, 2008a, 2008b, 2010).

### *The research process*

A panel of five tourism scholars are the authors of the current research and the villages have been used as case studies for more than a decade. Frequent visits were made by the panel members to Anhui. In particular, the first author is a native of the area and has lived in Huangshan for much of her life. The second author has visited the area and the villages several times for more than a decade and has researched China’s tourism policies for almost two decades. The third author lived in the villages during a six-month period of research. The paper, therefore, incorporates not merely the data that is reported but is also a distillation of experiences and views born of continuous personal monitoring of the villages. Indeed, two of the authors are planning a book describing the changing patterns of events, which should be completed in 2024.

The populations of Xidi, Hongcun and Nanping villages have households of 320, 432 and 300 people, respectively. Data were collected from the village from 2022 to 2023 including holiday periods when many members of the extended family returned to the village. A self-administered questionnaire was randomly distributed based on the spatial configuration of the village, and it should also be noted that these were distributed by members of the village community. A total of 450 questionnaires were handed out (i.e. 150 for each village), and 428 valid responses were returned – namely, 142, 141 and 145 for Xidi, Hongcun and Nanping, respectively.

The questionnaire contained the items listed in [Appendix](#), and it can be seen that items were divided based on proposed dimensions of potential economic and impacts created by tourism, the respondent’s degree of dependency on tourism, possible positive and negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism on the villages and senses of continuity and identity with the village including ancestral linkages. Finally, questions pertained to residents’ perceptions of tourism. A five-point scale was used with “5” representing the highest level of agreement with the item and “3” being the mid-point of neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Data were collected by ten trained students from Huangshan University accompanied by the first author. Random sampling was used based on a map of the village, and the data were collected in the evening as well as during the day. This was made possible by the investigative team staying in the village for much of the two months. Staying in the village and becoming familiar with villagers through informal conversations was an asset within the research, as the questionnaire was relatively long and there are varying degrees of educational attainment and literacy on the part of the residents. Hence, equally, it needs to be noted that some care was undertaken in the training of the students to ensure that in no way did they lead respondents and respondents were reminded that they did not need to answer every question.

This face-to-face approach has the benefit of ensuring that respondents carefully assessed their answers, but there is a cost in that the numbers of missing responses tend to be high. For example, while all 428 answered the item that tourism provided an incentive for the conservation of heritage buildings, 283 respondents failed to reply to the item “My village should become more of a tourist destination.” While that may be thought to be significant in the light of Chinese policies, it should be noted that almost all the other

questions were answered by practically all respondents including statements of opinion over other controversial issues such as ownership of businesses and distribution of incomes. It has also been suggested to the authors that, being pragmatic, villagers know that the above question lacks meaning as government policy means the villages are tourist destinations – hence the end of argument – and the real issues relate to the consequences of that policy. The data were interpreted in the light of the researchers' experiences as described above and with reference to past published and unpublished materials collected by the team.

### Findings

In terms of the nature of the sample, in each village, the mix of genders was approximately equal, and a chi-squared test showed no statistical difference between the three villages with reference to socio-demographics, although some differences existed. For example, [Zhao et al. \(2018\)](#) suggested that Hongcun was becoming populated with more people who had spent less than a decade as the village attracted entrepreneurs because of its popularity, while also retaining a higher proportion of older people who either lacked the means to leave, or who had a strong attachment to their ancestral homes. Comparing expected to forecast counts indicated some support for this, but the same pattern was not evident in Xidi where the overwhelming majority indicated residency of between 20 and 40 years. [Table 1](#) provides details of the sample's periods of residency in each of the villages.

It was noted above that one of the motives for promoting tourism is to address issues of rural poverty. [Xu \(2015\)](#) indicated that several provinces now release income figures and that in Anhui the average non-private sector annual income is approximately RMB 51,000 (US\$8,199). Over 20% of the current sample reported higher incomes than this, with a median income of about RMB 30,000 being estimated. [Huang \(2011, p. 217\)](#) estimates that in Anhui per capita rural income in 2000 was about US\$1,935 (about RMB 16,000). While this implies an annual rate of growth slower than that of the Chinese economy for the period, it needs to be remembered that the rate of growth has accelerated significantly in the last five years. In short, there is both visual and statistical data that points to some success in the Chinese policies in tackling rural poverty through tourism, although care needs to be taken because of issues of equitable distribution.

[Table 2](#) provides details as to the specific items used and the descriptive statistics for each of the three villages.

Examining the descriptive statistics leads to some immediate conclusions. Firstly, there is a recognition that tourism has and can bestow benefits in terms of jobs and income across all three villages, including Nanping where tourism is less developed. Those findings merely

Descriptors	Xidi	Hongcun	Nanping	Total
<i>How many years have you lived in this village?</i>				
Less than 10 years	11	20	6	37
10–20 years	33	14	36	83
21–30 years	22	28	39	89
31–40 years	35	30	23	88
41–50 years	26	20	21	67
More than 50 years	15	29	20	64
Total	142	141	145	428

**Table 1.**  
Duration of residency  
in the villages

**Source:** From the authors' work

Measurement items	Xidi	Hongcun	Nanping	F-ratio	Prob
Tourism has increased job opportunities for the residents of this village	3.46	3.87	3.49	8.80	<0.001
Tourism is useful for promoting local products	3.82	3.94	3.76	1.78	0.170
Tourism has increased the quality of life of the residents	3.77	3.42	3.49	5.43	0.005
Tourism has given economic benefits to small businesses	3.77	3.62	3.71	1.06	0.347
Tourism attracts more investment in this village	3.54	3.33	3.39	1.49	0.227
Most of the money earned from tourism in this village ends up going to non-village/province companies	3.61	3.84	3.57	2.80	0.062
Non-residents owned business are beneficial for the village's tourist industry	3.13	3.52	3.16	6.67	0.001
My job is closely related to the tourism industry	3.15	3.40	2.77	11.53	<0.001
My household income is closely tied to the tourism industry	3.11	3.38	2.77	10.37	<0.001
Tourism creates more jobs for foreigners than for local people in this village	3.58	3.31	3.21	5.03	0.007
Tourism has increased the inequality of economic gain (income) among residents	3.87	3.70	3.53	4.41	0.013
Tourism has encouraged residents' participation in cultural heritage activities (i.e. crafts, arts and music)	3.51	3.72	3.74	2.74	0.066
Tourism has increased (name of village) cultural heritage identity	3.54	3.89	3.88	7.25	0.001
Quality of life of the residents has improved because of tourism facilities	3.33	3.45	3.34	0.31	0.733
Tourism has increased prostitution in this village	2.37	2.05	2.30	3.36	0.036
Tourism has reduced local safety and security in this village	2.73	2.63	2.76	0.52	0.597
Tourism has overused the resources of this village	3.30	3.54	2.95	11.59	<0.001
Tourism has increased our awareness of protection for cultural heritage resources	3.50	3.87	3.78	6.54	0.002
Tourism has made transport more accessible in this village	3.34	3.33	3.76	7.31	0.001
Tourism provides an incentive for the restoration and conservation of ancient houses	3.65	3.88	3.63	3.18	0.043
Tourism has caused more traffic congestion and parking problems in the village	3.61	3.92	3.19	17.56	<0.001
Tourism has caused more litter and pollution in the village	3.70	4.06	3.05	30.10	<0.001
The construction of tourism facilities has destroyed the ancient features of the village	3.46	3.67	3.14	7.95	<0.001
I support tourism and would like to see it become an important part of this village	3.85	3.82	3.72	0.86	0.421
I am against new tourism facilities which will attract more tourists to our village	3.25	2.88	3.04	4.73	0.009
Tourism activities should be more encouraged in this village	3.50	3.57	3.62	0.709	0.493
The city government should not support the promotion of tourism in this village	2.99	2.92	2.94	0.148	0.862
The positive impacts outweigh the negative impacts of tourism on the residents of this village	3.47	3.30	3.48	1.45	0.225
It is important to develop long term plans by city officials to manage the growth of tourism in this village	3.30	3.87	3.81	14.07	<0.001
Tourism benefits a small group of people in this village	3.73	3.64	3.96	4.01	0.190
Non-residents should be allowed to develop tourism attractions in this area	3.57	3.52	3.35	2.01	0.135
The residents should have control over the tourism development	3.75	3.77	3.94	0.38	0.683

(continued)

**Table 2.**  
Descriptive statistics  
– comparison of  
mean scores between  
the villages

Measurement items	Xidi	Hongcun	Nanping	F-ratio	Prob
The positive impacts outweigh the negative impacts of tourism on the entire residents of Huangshan City	3.69	3.87	3.99	3.95	0.020
The view in this village is beautiful (i.e., distinctive Huizhou architecture, mountains, lake/pond)	4.08	3.93	4.09	1.80	0.166
This village is a special place for my family	3.99	3.89	4.07	2.06	0.129
I feel a sense of connection to my ancestors	3.80	3.79	4.05	4.87	0.008
“Returning to their roots” is an important Chinese philosophy that I want my child to live by	4.00	3.85	4.06	2.66	0.071
Many important family memories are tied to this village	3.89	3.87	4.10	3.58	0.029
This village is special because it was built during Ming and Qing dynasties	3.69	3.43	3.86	8.74	<0.001
There is no resident’s control over tourism management in this village	3.45	3.79	3.81	5.19	0.006
This village is important because it represents the historical and cultural value of the place	4.00	4.22	4.03	4.40	0.013
This place contributes to Huangshan City’s economy	3.85	4.13	3.83	6.34	0.002
I am myself when I am in this village	3.37	3.30	3.65	5.86	0.003
It is important that wisdom, traditions and residents’ way of life in this village is passed on to future generations	3.85	4.06	3.97	2.37	0.095
I take a great pride being a resident of this village	3.70	3.46	3.70	3.61	0.028
This village has inherent value because it is part of the natural environment	3.74	3.94	3.74	2.81	0.061
I identify strongly with this village	3.73	3.48	3.65	2.91	0.055
It is a terrible feeling to live in this village because residents are not friendly	2.96	2.50	2.68	5.33	0.005
This place will allow the future generations to know and experience the village as they are now	4.12	4.31	4.21	0.314	0.731
This village protects and preserves the distinct ancient features which Huanshan City is known for – Huizhou architecture and interesting landscapes	3.92	3.80	3.56	6.47	0.002
There is a sense of community togetherness in this village	3.62	3.33	3.67	6.63	0.001
This place is merely a place to do business	3.07	2.54	2.64	8.97	<0.001

Table 2.

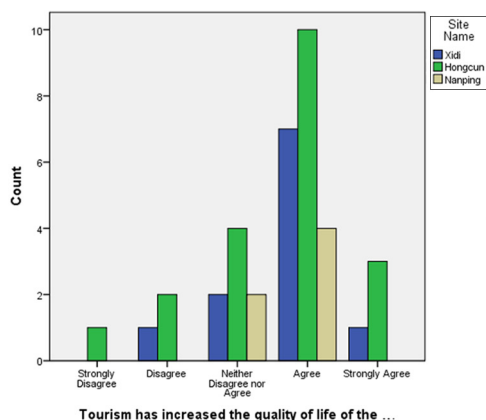
Source: From the authors’ work

conclude that Chinese rural policy statements have been heeded by local communities, and indeed their daily experience of the flow of visitors is a continuous reminder of the importance of tourist numbers and expenditure.

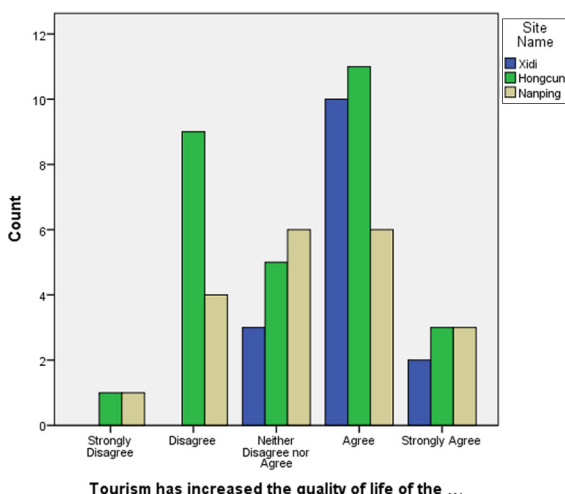
A second finding is that Nanping does tend to score significantly different from Xidi and Hongcun because of different numbers of tourists drawn to the former two villages. Hence, while Nanping’s residents believe that tourism can and has brought them benefits, it can be noted that they score lower on items that ask whether they personally derive much of their income from tourism or whether their jobs are associated with tourism.

A third finding is that villagers tend in all three villages to moderately agree that their village should be conserved, that their heritage has importance and possesses unique architectural features. Indeed, the mean score for the item “This village is important because it represents the historical and cultural value of the place” had a value exceeding 4.0 in all three villages (see Figure 3).

A fourth finding is that differences exist between Xidi and Hongcun, and these differences are consistent with a hypothesis that the former system of village management in Xidi has had an impact on the wish of local residents to have a role in management. For



Patterns of scores of those who have resided for more than 50 years in the village.



Patterns of scores of those who have resided in the village for less than 10 years.

**Figure 3.** Comparison between villages, duration of residency and perception of quality of life

example, the last two items in Table 2 possess interest. It can be argued that the loss of control has meant that Xidi residents will now be sensitive to the item for they see the village as a place of business when compared to Hongcun (which has been under corporate control for much longer). For the same reason for those in Hongcun tend to score a sense of community togetherness a little lower. In both cases, the differences are at levels with  $p$  equal or less than 0.001.

However, analysis of variance is not only a test of measure of the difference between mean scores but of distribution. It has been suggested that period of residency and whether one is an “external” entrepreneur can impact attitudes. Clues of social change exist within the data set. For example, Figures 3 and 4 compares the levels of agreement with the item that tourism has improved the quality of life within the village between those have resided in the village for more than 50 years (the higher of the two bar charts) with those who have lived in the village for less than ten years. What emerged from an analysis of the relationship between years of residency and perception as to whether tourism improved that

quality of life was that the relationship was not linear by tended to an inverted broken “W” shaped curve whereby those resident in the villages between 20 and 30 years, and over 50 years score lower on this question. However, the relationship was found to be shaped by other factors such as employment patterns, the degree to which the source of income was derived from tourism and the village in which the informant was living. Reformatting the data and using multinomial logistic regression using potential determining factors revealed a Nagelkerke pseudo coefficient of determination of 0.17, but with only one statistically significant variable, namely, the village in which the informant lived.

From the processes of data collection and the direct knowledge that the authors have of the villages and conversations with residents over several years, it is suggested that the level of place attachment expressed by residents is shaped by the history of tourism evolution, the attitudes of on-site tourism planners and the general tourism plans as undertaken by governments. As shown in [Appendix](#), place attachment is measured by variables such as the village being the place in which residents’ ancestors lived, its association with memories, senses of continuity and also as a place in which villagers feel they have some control. In their study of Shi Chi Hai Beijing hutong, [Gu and Ryan \(2008a, 2008b\)](#) noted that efficacy, that is, the sense that residents felt their views were of importance and would be listened to, was highlighted as a critical component in place attachment in that example. [Table 2](#) indicates that on such items there were statistically significant differences between the villages on these items. Nanping, which has the least tourism development scored more highly on items such as “I feel a sense of connection to my ancestors” and “Many important family memories are tied to this village” than those resident in Xidi and Hongcun. The same is true of the item “I am myself when I am in this village.”

On the other hand, the status of being a World Heritage Site is shown to impact marginally more on the residents of Xidi and Hongcun. Thus, they tend to emphasis more the view that “This village protects and preserves the distinct ancient features which Huanshan City is known for – Huizhou architecture and interesting landscape” than do those living in Nanping. Additionally, it is notable that Hongcun has the highest score on the item “This place contributes to Huangshan City’s economy” (4.13) while Xidi and Nanping scoreless at 3.80 ( $p = 0.002$ ). This is suggested, because Hongcun from its outset as a promoted tourism destination, has been managed by incorporated companies external to the village. Under such circumstances, the primary rationale for denying local control is that the economic returns are higher under externally imposed management; although often the means of distributing these returns are subject to dispute.

## Discussion

What seems to emerge from the statistics is that the individual circumstances that surround the development of tourism in a village play just as an important role in the development of attitudes as do the more generic factors continually identified since the pioneering work in the tourism literature by researchers such as [Sheldon and Var \(1984\)](#). In the earlier period, researchers tended to concentrate on the specifics of the host–tourist relationship with reference to tourists’ personal reasons for visitation and the residents’ modes of reception and the consequences that flowed from those visits.

The subsequent advent of Chinese research writing has reinforced a trend that was already occurring in English language-based scholarship, which was to perceive impacts as part of a wider system. Chinese scholarship has tended to such a perspective due to the more collective and gestalt heritage of classical Chinese culture, and this has taken Chinese

scholarship into a systematic and more holistic analysis of subjects such as tourism flows (Bao and Ma, 2011), and socio-environmental systems of interaction (Xu and Chung, 2014).

While not part of the original research objectives the authors concluded that a key determinant of residents' attitudes, although rarely mentioned, was the influence of central government. Perhaps somewhat oddly, there has not been a significant amount of literature (at least in the English language) showing how political factors have influenced tourism developments on the ground other than a general recognition that tourism is a pillar in the Chinese economy. Zeng and Ryan (2012) conducted a bibliometric analysis of articles related to pro-poor tourism and poverty alleviation, they reported that among the 366 Chinese publications, the research by and large paid much more attention to the exploration of theoretical issues, such as models, conceptual bases and mechanisms. Little attention was focused on assessing the actual benefits or the degree of participation of local poor people and local communities. There are, of course, some exceptions. Bao and Zuo (2012) provide a commentary on corruption in tourism development. Li *et al* (2016) allude to the problems caused by changing management patterns at Qiyunshan, also in Anhui. Similarly, Xu and Sofield (2016) note political changes in terms of how Chinese policy perceives sustainability, and a small but growing number of papers are increasingly recognizing the importance of political activity at the local level (e.g. Zuo *et al.*, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2017). Perhaps most specific is the paper by Gao *et al.* (2019) that directly addressed the politicization of tourism policies in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province. Findings of the current paper corroborate Gao *et al.* (2019)'s findings with an additional supplement showing how residents react to tourism development and they do wish to "have control" in the tourism development.

These articles suggested, in part due to a recognition of a change in Chinese policies towards the best means of developing rural communities and creating higher incomes. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, one now observes time and time again a movement towards the establishment of more professional and commercial modes of management in rural tourism with the intervention of state-owned enterprises that are usually partnerships between private and public sectors. As noted above, this has been observed in Xidi. It is understood from interviews with various managers that one reason for the decision to change the administration of the village was that, in comparison with Hongcun, Xidi was deriving in recent years a smaller revenue. This was due to the lack of direct connections with travel agents and operators located within the primary tourism generating areas, and a feeling that Xidi's village committee was unable to compete with the capital and other assets available to the Huihuang Tourism Group. The interview data indeed are in line with the descriptive statistics. Villagers in all three villages similarly agreed with the statement that "residents should have control over the tourism development". There is no statistical difference among the groups as reflected in the F ratio (0.38), suggesting that all group means are the same, even though the three villages have different paces of tourism development. In other words, villagers held the same opinion that they should play a bigger role in tourism development. Findings as such also implied that villagers did not have much say in those mega plans of the pro-poor tourism campaigns. While the villagers in all three villages by and large agreed that the positive impacts brought about by tourism outweighed the negative impacts, they nevertheless agreed strongly that tourism benefited only a small group of people in their villages. Their concern indeed was reported too by Zhou (2002) that how tourism revenues reached the poor indeed was the core issue in pro-poor tourism research and practice.

Elsewhere in Anhui, at Qiyunshan, a similar process has led to significant changes since 2014. A boutique hotel of three to four-star standard has opened while other hotels are planned. Fortune tellers for a time dressed in official white uniforms and organized tai chi

exercises welcoming tourists. A visit in late 2023 also revealed the employment of actors and actresses to role-play Taoist routines for visitors. The village is increasingly influenced by the policies of the Sunriver Holding Group, a company specializing in cultural tourism. Similarly, Wuzhen in Zhejiang, has become in effect a company owned and managed under the auspices of another SOE, the Wuzhen Tourism Co. Ltd with its major shareholders being Sino CYTS Tours Holding Co., Ltd. and Tongxiang Wuzhen Town Tourism Investment Co., Ltd. and is thus a joint venture with local authorities. The same has occurred in Xishuangbanna where the Golden Peacock Company, a subsidiary of yet another SOE with part local authority ownership has significantly impacted on the lifestyle of some of the ethnic minorities.

In each of the study villages, tourism has brought additional income and employment opportunities. It has also created a more geographically proximate, local and lucrative market for local agricultural produce. If therefore, one seeks to explain the statistically significant different results between residents of villages that are similar in terms of ethnicity, culture and relative size, all of which are classified under the Chinese tourist grading as locations of high heritage and cultural value, then it seems pertinent to look for other than immediate local factors that might account for these differences in perceptions. It is suggested that such a factor is the policies of the Chinese central authorities that have been promoted with the creation of income to enable China to become the 'moderately prosperous nation' of Xi's 'Chinese Dream.'

It is apparent that Chinese central government is taking the lead of national tourism development and those pro-poor alleviation projects. Xidi, Hongcun and Nanping have had recent distinctive histories in terms of running their tourism policies. Xidi's villagers were, until 2013, in control of their own destiny. Hongcun has a history that includes taking legal action against local jurisdictions but has since experienced significant increases in tourist expenditures that has benefitted many members if not all the village. Nanping has thus far experienced a light hand of tourism management, but that may yet change. Yet underneath this, there is a feeling that for many villages they still lack that efficacy that was also characteristic of the Shi Cha Hai hutong residents reported by [Gu and Ryan \(2008a, 2008b\)](#). One can conclude that pro-poor tourism does not equate to [Murphy's \(1985\)](#) concepts of community tourism, which was based on a Canadian premise of the direct involvement of residents in decision making. If then, villages cannot determine their own processes of change, the challenge for the Chinese tourist authorities becomes one of easing communities to transform through periods of change. That may be an even more complex challenge as China seeks to find its own way through an economic and social transformation while retaining a constant role for the Communist Party of China. Thus, these three small villages exemplify the tourism evolution when the Communist Party of China seeks to advance China into the 21st century.

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#### Further reading

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Factor	Dimension	Items	Sources
Positive tourism impacts	Economic opportunities in tourism	Tourism has increased job opportunities for the residents of this village Tourism is useful for promoting local products Tourism attracts more investment to this village	Modified from: Perdue <i>et al.</i> (1990) Lankford and Howard (1994) McGehee and Andereck (2004) Huh and Vogt (2008)
	Positive economic impacts	Tourism has increased the quality of life of the residents Tourism has given economic benefits to small businesses Most of the money earned from tourism in this village ends up going to non-village/province companies Non-resident owned business are beneficial for the village's tourist industry	Adopted from: Bellisle and Hoy (1980) Haralambopoulos and Pizam (1996) Lankford and Howard (1994) Liu and Var (1986) Milman and Pizam (1988) Pizam (1978)
	Economic dependence on tourism Positive socio-cultural impacts	My job is closely related to the tourism industry My household income is closely tied to the tourism industry Tourism has encouraged residents "participation in cultural heritage activities (i.e. crafts, arts and music)" Tourism has increased (name of village) cultural heritage identity Quality of life of the residents has improved because of tourism facilities/settings	Adopted from: Perdue <i>et al.</i> (1990) McGehee and Andereck (2004) Adopted from: Cooper <i>et al.</i> (2008) Liu and Var (1986) Lankford and Howard (1994) Liu and Var (1986) Milman and Pizam (1988) Pizam (1978)
Negative tourism impacts	Positive environmental impacts	Tourism has increased our awareness of protection for cultural heritage resources Tourism has made transport more accessible in this village Tourism provides incentive for the restoration and conservation of ancient houses	Adopted from: Liu, <i>et al.</i> (1987) Liu and Var (1986) McCool and Martin (1994)
	Negative economic impacts	Tourism creates more jobs for foreigners than for local people in this village Tourism has increased the inequality of economic gain (income) among residents	Modified from: Perdue <i>et al.</i> (1990) Lankford and Howard (1994) McGehee and Andereck (2004) Lindberg and Johnson (1997)

(continued)

**Table A1.**  
Sources of information used in questionnaire construction

Table A1.

Factor	Dimension	Items	Sources
	Negative socio-cultural impacts	Tourism has increased prostitution in this village	Adopted from: Dogan (1989)
		Tourism has reduced local safety and security in this village.	King and Stewart (1996)
		Tourism has overused the resources of this village	Adopted from: Liu <i>et al.</i> (1987)
		Tourism has caused more traffic congestion and parking problems in the village.	Liu and Var (1986)
Negative environmental impacts	Tourism has caused more litter and pollution in the village	McCool and Martin (1994)	
	The construction of tourism facilities has destroyed the ancient features of the village		
Place meanings	Ancestral identity	This village is a special place for my family	Adopted from: Moore and Graefe (1994)
		I feel a sense of connection to my ancestors	Williams <i>et al.</i> (1992)
Continuity		“Returning to their roots” is an important Chinese philosophy that I want my child to live by	
		Many important family memories are tied to this village	
		This village is important because it represents the historical and cultural value of the place	Adopted from: Gustafson (2001)
		It is important that the wisdom, traditions and residents’ way of life in this village is passed on to future generations	
		This place will allow future generations to know and experience the village as they are now	
		I am myself when I am in this village	Adopted from: Manzo (2005)
		I take great pride being a resident of this village.	Williams and Patterson (1999)
		I identify strongly with this village.	Smith <i>et al.</i> (2011)
		There is a sense of community togetherness in this village	Adopted from: Smith <i>et al.</i> (2011)
		This place contributes to Huangshan city’s economy	Adopted from: Gunderson and Watson (2007)
Economy	Historical legacy	This village provides a stable economy for the residents	
		This village is special because it was built during the Ming and Qing dynasties	
		This village protects and preserves the distinct ancient features which Huizhou architecture Huangshan city is known for- and interesting landscapes	

*(continued)*

Factor	Dimension	Items	Sources
	Nature	The view in this village is beautiful (i.e. distinctive Huizhou architecture, mountains, lake/pond) This village has inherent value because it is part of the natural environment This village contributes to the conservation of natural resources like water and air quality There is no resident's control over tourism management in this village It is a terrible feeling to live in this village because the residents are not friendly	Adopted from: Eisenhauer <i>et al.</i> (2000) Kyle and Chick (2007) Gunderson and Watson (2007) Wynveen <i>et al.</i> (2012)
	Negative place meanings	This place is merely a place to do business I support tourism and would like to see it become an important part of this village Tourism activities should be more encouraged in this village My village should become more of a tourist destination (for Nanping group)	Adopted from: Wynveen, Kyle and Sutton (2012)
Resident attitudes towards tourism development	Resident support and encouragement for tourism	This place is merely a place to do business I support tourism and would like to see it become an important part of this village Tourism activities should be more encouraged in this village My village should become more of a tourist destination (for Nanping group)	Modified from: Perdue <i>et al.</i> (1990) Lankford and Howard (1994) McGehee and Andereck (2004)
	Optimistic attitude towards tourism development	The positive impacts outweigh the negative impacts of tourism upon the residents of this village The positive impacts outweigh the negative impacts of tourism upon the entire residents of Huangshan city It is important to develop long-term plans by city officials to manage the growth of tourism in this village Non-residents should be allowed to develop tourist attractions in this area.	Modified from: Perdue <i>et al.</i> (1990) Lankford and Howard (1994) McGehee and Andereck (2004)
	Resident attitudes on tourism control and development	Non-residents should be allowed to develop tourist attractions in this area.	Adopted from: Perdue <i>et al.</i> (1990) Lankford and Howard (1994)
	Non-supportive resident attitudes towards tourism	The residents should have a control on the tourism development I am against new tourism facilities which will attract more tourists to our village The city government should not support the promotion of tourism in this village Tourism benefits a small group of people in this village	Adopted from: Perdue <i>et al.</i> (1990) Lankford and Howard (1994)

Source: From the authors' work

Table A1.

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