

THE RESEARCH OF EXPLOIT PROBLEM AND STRATEGY FOR TU NATION FOLK CUSTOMS TOURISM IN XIAOZHUANG VILLAGE, HUZHU COUNTY, QINGHAI PROVINCE

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Abstract: Great achievements have been made in the folk-custom tourism of Xiaozhuang village in Huzhu County over the past years; however, a variety of problems is still there. Based on the case of Xiaozhuang village, this paper discussed the problems according to the survey; and the possible solutions are also proposed.

Keywords: folk-custom tourism, Tu nationality, Xiaozhuang village, Huzhu County, agritainment

Huzhu, an autonomous county of Tu nationality, known for its splendid rainbow spectacle and distinctive customs of Tu people, is located in the northeast part of Qinghai Province and is regarded as the backyard of Xining, the capital city of Qinghai Province. It played its prominent role as part of the South Silk Road and it is an ideal place for the communication inside the Tibetan Buddhism cultural circle in Tibet and Inner Mongolia. The county is located in the Weiyuan Town, 40miles away from Xining and 240miles away from Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu Province¹.

According to data from the sixth census released by the NBS, the whole population of Huzhu County is 0.375 million, including Tu, Han, Mongolian, Tibetan, Hui and other 11 ethnic groups. Among them, 65 thousand are Tu people, which account for 17.33% of the whole population and 26% of the whole Tu people around China. As the only autonomous county of Tu nationality in China, the county aimed to develop tourism into the top business in the tertiary industry and make it the growth engine of the county's GDP. With its

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¹ “The general situation of the Huzhu Tu Autonomous County” (2009). Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House.

distinctive folk customs of Tu nationality and the great efforts in improving infrastructure and the quality of service, the tourism in the county took a great leap in recent years.

From 1996 to 2002, the revenue in all coming from the tourism of Huzhu County has reached 19.065 million Yuan. In 2003, the tourism was seriously attacked by SARS; nevertheless, its revenue reached more than 7 million Yuan². In 2005, the visitors within and out of Qinghai Province totaled 0.4 million and the revenue measures up to 18 million. In 2006, the figure reached 28.37 million. Based on its distinctive folk customs of Tu, well developed highland ecosystems, solid religious and cultural foundation and the abundant barley wine culture, the folk-custom tourism of Tu has set up a sound reputation in Qinghai Province.

Xiaozhuang village is located in the Weiyuan Town of Huzhu County, one mile away from the center of the town. There are 152 families with the population of 572, which overwhelmingly consists of Tu people (account for 98.6% of the whole population). The total area under cultivation is 827.3 Mu, with the average per capita is less than 2 Mu. Since 1990, apart from farming the villagers started the folk-custom tourism by making use of the advantages in geography and the national minority superiority.

In 2004, Xiaozhuang is honored with a title of the national rural tourism demonstration site by the National Tourism Bureau. Since then, with the great help of the government, county Party committee and the relevant departments, Xiaozhuang village tried to make use of its advantage to carry out some fascinating programs to attract tourists and make more profits and the rural tourism represented by the agritainment has achieved an initial success.

In 2005, as one of the first tourist attraction of rural tourism, Xiaozhuang village attracted 70% of the visitors in the county with a total income of 1.4961 million (0.3036 million from agriculture, 0.2662 from animal husbandry and 0.7216 from tourism) and 2452 Yuan per capita, in which 1312 Yuan from the tourism accounts for 53.3%³. Up to now, the families involving in the tourism business have

² Jin Xinghua, Zhang Xiaoming, and Lan Zhiqi (2008). "The report of the development of *Chinese Ethnic Cultures*. Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House.

³ Valene L Smith (1977). *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Chinese translation by Zhang Xiaoping et al. (2002), Kunming: Yunnan University Press.

reached to 72, which accounts for 49.67% of the whole. The whole income of the village is 4.70 million with more than 8000 Yuan per capita. The income from tourism is 3.60 million, which accounts for 76.6% of the whole revenue and the number of tourists reached 0.103 million. 70% of the population in the village involves in the tourism business. The number of tourists could be expected to increase to 0.12million.

PRESENT DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOLK-CUSTOM TOURISM

The tourism, as one of the labor-intensive industries with broad developmental prospects and great market potential, connects with many other industries and has low resources consumption. Therefore it plays a very important role in the regional economic development. Given that the economic and industrial structure of Huzhu County is undergoing tremendous changes, consumption expansion is a good way to ensure a better and faster growth of the regional economy. So with its continuous growth, the tourism consumption is becoming a new rising industry in the county.

The accommodation for tourists begins to take shape

In recent years, with the rapid development of the tertiary industry, the tourism market system is improved. The tea plantation economy development characterized by eating farmer's meal, staying at farmer's house and enjoying the happiness of farmers' life has become the indispensable source of income for villagers, and gradually the mind and ideas of the local and neighboring residents have been affected. In view of the great improvement of the villagers' living standard by accommodating tourists, county Party committee and the government decide to incorporate the tourism of Xiaozhuang village into the overall planning of tourism in the county and aim to build the village into a famous folk tourist attraction of Tu nationality based on the local traditional folk culture. Since 1996, the County Tourism Bureau and other relevant departments have invested nearly 500 million Yuan for village renovation, courtyard reconstruction, infrastructure construction, industrial training, publicity planning and other projects, which almost have achieved the desired effects. Meanwhile, in order to promote local economic development, county Party committee and the government of Huzhu carried forward the characteristics and culture of the Tu nationality and regarded the folk tourism expansion as a basic task. For example, they timely launched the special foods and the folk

traditions and culture of the Tu nationality. Since then, Xiaozhuang village has basically established its unique management model of agritainment marked by tasting snacks of the Tu nationality and enjoying its traditional culture. Therefore, the accommodation for tourists in Xiaozhuang begins to take shape.

The visible tourism seasonality in the number of tourists

Affected by geographic location of Huzhu County, the number of visitors displays an uneven seasonal distribution each year, and with the increasing recognition of its folk custom tourism, this gap would be even larger. Generally speaking, the agritainment tourism of Xiaozhuang village starts from the second day of the second lunar month each year, and the tourist season falls in the mid-June. During this period, visitors from the local and the neighboring areas pour in the village including some doing research on the folk customs. Most of the farmhouses are overcrowded with visitors and the various service facilities and resources are almost overused. Meanwhile, the tourist commodities with national characteristics have also headed for their selling season. However, the number of tourists is markedly reduced in autumn and most of the visitors are local people coming here for leisure. In particular, there are nearly no visitors from other places in winter and so the folk-custom tourism begins to enter the off-season. As the Spring Festival draws near, the majority of the farmhouse runners will shut down their business to make a summary of their operation over the past year and make a good preparation for the coming year. During this time, a large number of the facilities in this village leave unused, the groups of folk acrobatics are also dismissed and the tourism in the village as a whole is almost at a standstill.

The saliency of the contracted management

The contracted management of the local tea plantations has become one of the trends of agritainment development in Xiaozhuang village. With the rapid increasing popularity of folk custom tourism, more and more out-comers show great interest in the tea plantation economy. These people are keenly aware that developing agritainment is of great significance for improving the standard of living and increasing income and hence hope they can obtain a share of profits from the development of folk-custom tourism. In addition, operating agritainment is time-consuming and labor-intensive and many local residents are unable to operate due to the lack of labor force caused by

the few family members or migrant workers outside. In this case, the local people are more likely to leave their farmhouses to contractors who are responsible for the house renovation and operation and they themselves just collect the rents as their important source of daily income. According to the survey, there are now 72 agritainment operators in total, among which 51 come from other places and the ratio is as high as 70%. Most of these contractors are Han people from other villages of Huzhu County and only a few come from other counties and cities. Unlike most of the local operators' model, these contractors hire chiefs and waiters from other places and pay them salary on a monthly basis. The arrival of the foreign contractors gradually intensifies competition among the agritainment operators, which also means a higher development level of the agritainment operation from another perspective.

EXISTING PROBLEMS IN THE FOLK-CUSTOM TOURISM As the famous American scholar, Fox said, "Tourism is like a fire which can cook meals and burn houses at the same time⁴." With the rapid development of the folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang village and its neighborhood, the negative impact of tourism on the traditional culture and living environment has already emerged. At present, the village has gradually lost its eminence in the folk-custom tourism and started to enter a relatively difficult transformation period. Hence, the research on how to maintain the characteristics against the background of developing tourism in the whole county and to promote the folk-custom tourism development of the minority is of great significance. Therefore, this research group have visited many operators of the agritainment and made a more detailed research on this issue.

The disappearance of cultural characteristics of Tu nationality caused by the lack of awareness

For thousand of years or more, people of Tu nationality have created a unique but colorful folk culture of their own in the long-term productive work. They not only made good use of their wisdom, but also adopted the essence of the Han, Tibetan and other ethnic folk cultures. The culture of Tu nationality both embodies their own value of life and a unique national style and displays the cultural blending

⁴LiCanJin, LuoMingJun (2003). "Lugu Lake tourism development and development potential". *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities: Humanities and Social Sciences* (1).

features of the Central Plains, the Qiang and Tibetan. It is not so much a reflection of the national character of Tu nationality as a scroll of historical life of its long-term communication and integration with Han, Tibetan and Qiang nationality. However, with the continuous development of the folk-custom tourism in recent years, the operators of the agritainment always pursue their economic interests at the expense of exploiting the folk culture. They lay too much emphasis on the number of visitors and their material enjoyment. So the original culture is badly damaged and the folk-custom tourism loses its aboriginality, which makes more and more tourists choose other tour attractions as their first priority rather than Xiaozhuang village; at the same time, their well-established recognition of the folk-custom truism is greatly impaired.

The study found that with the rapid development of the tourism in Xiaozhuang village, a large number of foreign tourists pour in this area. So their original culture and customs are gradually assimilated by various kinds of culture, ideology, values and customs, and even tend to be extinct. In recent years, almost all the villagers who make a living by running agritainment disregard for traditional architectural style and randomly expand building. Except some warehouses, all the traditional houses built with wood and mud are converted into bungalows or buildings of brick and concrete structure. The modern necessities are displayed in the room instead of traditional national costumes, pictures and handcrafts. In addition, there are only a few operators who believe in religion still preserve the Panchen portrait and shrines and other religious artifacts, but their housing structure and home furnishings have no difference with the local Han farmers. Therefore, Xiaozhuang has nearly lost its unique original cultural significance as a primitive village of Tu nationality completely. The original residential structure of Tu nationality has been changed which makes some researchers (including the writer) feel pity on that.

Besides, as an ethnic village of Tu, Xiaozhuang is confronted with another problem that the national spiritual culture begins to lose its distinctive ethnic flavor and faces extinction. As many old experienced singers who are familiar with the culture of Tu nationality have passed away, many songs with a long-standing history, a complicated melody and deep cultural significance cannot be circulated. As a result, more and more individual business prefers not to choose the traditional way of toasting the guests in with songs during the off season. According to a man of Tu nationality who has

run agritainment for many years, more and more of the young these years leave the village to study or work outside and they are not interested in the circulated traditional hymn of Tu in and around this village, let alone their consultation from the experienced singers. Because of the lack of singers, the man's farmhouse does not toast its guests in with songs during the off season until the arrival of the tourist season in June. In the high season, his farmhouse will only toast the honored guests in with songs performed by the entertainers employed from the House of Culture in the county or the villagers who are good singers and graceful dancers. However, because these performers have never been trained with the traditional folk songs of Tu, their songs are mainly with single tones and simple lyrics, among which even the original aria and lyrics have been somewhat changed arbitrarily, so that the folk song of Tu in Xiaozhuang village begins to lose its distinctive primitive flavor.

A vicious circle of more folk-custom gardens and more cultural missing

Starting by the middle of 1990s, the folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang village originated the agritainment tourism in Huzhu county and Qinghai Province. With the development of folk-custom tourism here and the support from the county government, many folk-custom gardens financed by the foreign investment began to emerge around the village, so that the folk-custom tourism of Tu was not specific to Xiaozhuang village anymore.⁵ For instance, as the reception of the Native Soil of Tu, a national 4A scenic spot, the Nadun Park is famous for the folk custom of Tu. Visitors there can feast their eyes on the traditional vintage workshop of Tu, the traditional architecture, i.e., the Tusi building, the diet tradition of Tu, i.e., people are seated in a circle at a banquet, the wedding ceremony of Tu, Anzhao dancing and Lunziqu, a kind of recreational sport, etc. Taking up an area of 3400m², the Nadun Park can accommodate 500 visitors together for taking dinner, with a professional performance team, souvenir shops, restrooms and the parking lot. The foreign financed gardens develop special marketing strategies in the development scale, the sanitary condition and the service items, which is unfavorable to the family-run agritainment operation in Xiaozhuang village, so the villagers have to

⁵ LvDa.TangWeiDong (2009). "The influence of tourism theory of folk custom - Case study of the Lugu Lake Mosuo culture". *Knowledge and Economy Journal* (10).

compromise to attract different visitors in order to relieve the stress from competition.

As has been said by a young man who runs agritainment, the market scope of Xiaozhuang village covers only Huzhu County and its surroundings, reaching as far as Xining, Qinghai Province, moreover, the tourists are mainly the old customers. In other words, the farmhouse runners turn to carry out the entertainment of country style aiming at the visitors from the surrounding area and give up the folk-custom tourism and guests from out of the town. According to him, due to the lack of money and hardware facilities, Xiaozhuang village is not competitive compared with the big folk-custom gardens. With the more and more visitors intending to enjoy the folk custom do not come here anymore, the guests in the village are mainly the people around who would like to appreciate the country style absent in cities. The visitors in Xiaozhuang village actually are not interested in the folk custom, but the entertainment atmosphere and the leisure facilities, such as poker card game and mahjong, so the villagers begin to pay more attention on the leisure facilities, rather than spend money on the show of folk customs. As far as the agritainment runners in the village concerned, aiming services at such tourists from the surrounding area both can relieve the competitive pressure and keep a stable number of tourists. In the end, a vicious circle forms that the loss of the distinctive features in the farmhouses changes the tourist structure, which in turn leads to the disappearance of the national characteristics of Tu gradually. The temporary profit-making in Xiaozhuang village will certainly result in the development dilemma in its longer term.

The increase of operating difficulties of the farmhouses due to capital scarcity

The farmhouses in Xiaozhuang village are operating in family units nowadays and they have small scales, small investments and weak risk resistance capacities. The single channel of funding sources of the farmhouses necessarily hinders its enlargement of the operating scale. The more investments, the more operating risks, so the runners usually refuse to empty their purses into the farmhouses, because running farmhouses is only a way of getting a higher income rather than a way of earning their breads. As a result, the runners will not have to worry about the poverty due to the failure in running agritainment, because they can make a living in their original way once the running difficulties arise.

According to Zhao, a young man who takes charge of Changling Farmhouse, farmhouses which are run based on the folk custom of Tu and try to stand out among others have to handle the contradictions properly between the traditional specific architecture of Tu and the comfort inside, as well as the customer satisfaction. The traditional buildings of Tu made up of mud bricks and lumber cannot ensure the comfort inside, so the rebuilding of these houses and the household decorations, such as Panxiu, a kind of embroidery specific to Tu nationality and the special furniture, as well as the staff training will cost no less than 20 thousand Yuan, which are a great expense of each family. On the contrary, only 30 or 50 thousand Yuan is needed to run a farmhouse based on the entertainment of country style and the stable profit-making can be ensured for quite a long time. The villagers here are careful about the investment in agritainment, which makes them capable of resisting risks in the short term but the development will certainly remain at a relatively low level as a whole in the long term.

The inefficiency of government and the outdated management idea

As a brand of folk-custom tourism in Huzhu County, the tea plantation economy has greatly attracted the government and county Party committee. For example, the relevant departments assumed more and more responsibilities in details, such as the planning and designing of villages and regulating the price of vegetables.

Moreover, the local rules and regulations about the folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang village have been improved. Nevertheless, according to the study, relevant departments of the government talk more than what they perform in managing the farmhouse business because of the capital scarcity and unqualified staff, etc., although they have fully realized the significance of the overall planning for rural tourism.

The fact that regulations are not fully observed and difficult to be carried out became a bottleneck for the development of folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang village. Furthermore, the problem that the committee in the village cannot work together with the relevant departments effectively due to its limited power for a long time, as well as the absence of the Agritainment Management Committee and the rough and cruel way of management together pose a great difficulty for the folk-custom tourism in the village.

According to He from Huzhu Tourist Bureau, in order to supervise the agritainment operation in Xiaozhuang effectively, the county government and county Party committee tried their best to introduce experience from developed areas and pursued several strategies and they have been successfully applied in practice. For instance, the service quality of every farmhouse is evaluated and the relevant departments examined the sanitary condition, meal quality and the attitude toward customers comprehensively and divided all the farmhouses into four levels from bottom to top, represented by one star to four stars respectively. The better the service is, the more stars farmhouses will get. Besides, a free training was provided every year for the staff, like the cook and waiters. The staff can attend the training voluntarily and learn how to cook farmer's meals and the basic quality as service personnel, etc. Moreover, the regulations about the price of the dishes and the storefronts are unified.

Based on our study, the runners who come either from the village or from out of town do not think highly of or even resist against the management measures of the government. As the first to receive visitors, the runners expect the government to play the role fully in planning and designing the village, advertising, garbage disposal, the construction of sewage lines, rather than only focus on the face-works. He said, 'the funds cannot be effectively used and the government officials do not know what on earth Xiaozhuang village is lack of.' Some other problems are also there that some farmhouses operate with no valid documents, the ecological system has been damaged thanks to the improper garbage disposal and the advertisement does not conform to facts. Moreover, the inefficiency of the government and the outdated management ideas hinder the further development of folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang.

SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS IN THE FOLK-CUSTOM TOURISM OF XIAOZHUANG VILLAGE

Currently, the folk-custom tourism of Xiaozhuang is in a rather tough transformation period. The management without unit and effective principles has caused its deviation from the development plan made by the government. Therefore, how to take effective measures to prevent the vicious trend has become the most urgent issue for the local government. As the government reduces its special investment, the rumor has it that the government will abstain from making the folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang as a part of the comprehensive tourism

planning of the county, instead, they will start a new tourist attraction of Tu folk customs in Donggou district. However, without the effective measures to solve the problems that constrain the development of Xiaozhuang folk-custom tourism, all the efforts and investment in starting a new project of folk customs will be in vain.

The constrains in the development of Xiaozhuang folk-custom tourism development are mainly the damage of the ethnical culture caused by out-dated management styles, the investment limits on the household basis, lack of effective government management on the decentralized operation and the low efficiency of the relevant departments. So a specialized agritainment operation with a certain scale is desperately needed. Based on this, the local government of Huzhu County should encourage the qualified foreign investment, make a comprehensive blueprint and set up a trinity management system involving the villager, government and company to promote its specialization and management of scale.

The inheritance and protection of the ethnical culture with an advanced management model

The ethnical culture is the foundation of the folk-custom tourism in Huzhu County. How to cope with the relationship between tourism development, the protection and inheritance of the ethnical culture has always been a trouble for the scholars and the relevant departments. Under the pressure of many professional folk-custom gardens nearby, the agritainment runners ignore the protection of the ethnical culture due to their eagerness for quick success and instant benefit as well as the short-sightedness.

The engagement of the foreign enterprise with an advanced management model could help to set up a trinity management system involving the villager, government and company. So the disciplined, professional measures can be imposed on the operation abide by the agreement between the enterprise, local government, and the villagers. It could help Xiaozhuang village adjust to the local conditions, map out a comprehensive development planning and come back to its pre-defined trail.

Although these measures could not necessarily provide a completely successful solution to the loss of ethnical culture, the rate of loss can be greatly slowed down.

Making use of the foreign investment to achieve the advantage transformation

Financial support is the prerequisite for a sustainable development of tourism. The amount of the investment is the decisive factor for the development of folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang. The engagement of the foreign enterprise with sufficient fund supporting could fundamentally solve the problem of capital shortage. Based on that, the enterprise could bring the impetus of the transformation from the advantage of the funding to the advantage of the production, in order that the saliency of the ethnical characteristics of the Tu nationality can be achieved, which is beyond the ordinary farmhouse runners' ability. In terms of the income, it can be distributed in accordance with their shares. A reasonable distribution system will ensure the shareholders including the local government, the villagers and the enterprise to benefit from the operation.

Setting up an intermediary agency to reduce the government's pressure from management

The decentralized layout of the farmhouses in Xiaozhuang village makes it difficult for the government to carry out a unit plan. Due to the lack of an intermediary agency like 'the Agritainment Management Committee', the local government and county Party committee have to employ individual supervision on each farmhouse. Besides, the committee in Xiaozhuang village cannot work effectively with the government due to its limited administrative power and all the efforts of the local government have been wasted on the triviality of management.

The foreign enterprise with much experience on management could better optimize the agritainment operation. The local government could authorize the company to be in charge of the management and operation and emphasize its role in macro-administration like the policy making, which can both reduce the amount of work and raise the efficiency. The local government and the company perform their own functions respectively to realize the prosperity of the tourism in Xiaozhuang village.

Attaching importance of the leading role of the local government and improving its efficiency

There is no doubt that the sound development of folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang could never go without the local government playing an

active leading role. In view of the expectations from the agritainment runners, the government of Huzhu County in the future should also give up the out-dated ideas and make suitable policies for the sound development of folk-custom tourism. Besides, they should listen to the company and the farmhouse runners tentatively and take their reasonable suggestions, cultivate good manners of the staff when dealing with issues and enhance their implementation of the policies and laws. High efficiency of the local government and the strict implementation of the policies and laws are critical for the development of the folk-custom tourism in Xiaozhuang village.

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