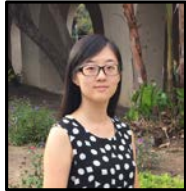


The Transformation of a Rural Village in China



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China has been experiencing rapid modernization and urbanization over the past three decades. Along with its unprecedented economic growth, the country's traditional culture and social fabric are undergoing irreversible changes. In rural China, traditional customs, social norms, local folk arts, and geographic specific agricultural knowledge are under increasing threat of disappearance. In the summer of 2014, I conducted my dissertation fieldwork in Chongdu Valley, China where rural tourism has taken the place of agriculture to become the dominant economic driver in the last fifteen years. My experience with the village indicates that tourism has played a momentous role in the transformation of the village's standard of living, local culture, indigenous knowledge, and social configuration.

Chongdu Valley is a rural village located in central China. It is surrounded by 500 to 1,000 meter mountains with only one access road to the outside. Due to limited workable land within the Valley, local residents opened up farmland in the surrounding mountains to grow wheat and beans and have developed a sophisticated knowledge of mountain farming. Since the village drew its first tourist in 1999, the community has changed dramatically. Currently, about 95 percent of local residents work in the tourism industry and about 90 percent of households have turned their houses into farmhouses for tourist accommodations. None of the locals rely on agriculture, and only a few of them still grow vegetables in their backyards. Tourism has increased the annual household income from an

estimated 400 yuan in 1999 to an estimated 100,000 yuan in 2014. The development of tourism has also led to improvements in the village's infrastructure, including transportation, garbage disposal, water supply, and the living environment.

To uncover the changes in the local culture and residents' mindsets, I conducted fifty semi-structured interviews with local residents from June 2014 to August 2014, covering approximately 13.6 percent of the total households. I also conducted ten unstructured interviews with non-locals who live and work in Chongdu Valley. During my stay, I lived in five different farmhouses to observe the family members' daily activities and interactions and communicated with them informally nearly every day to triangulate my data and verify the facts provided by local residents.

What I found is that tourism has facilitated an appreciation of the rural environment and rural culture that has been devalued for decades in contemporary Chinese dominant discourse. In China, rural areas have long been portrayed as backward, dirty, and disorderedly, and rural people are thought to be undereducated and of low-quality (Jacka 2013, 983-1007; Whyte 2010). The same perception was true in Chongdu Valley where, before 1999, local residents were enduring extreme hardship due to limited farmland and minimal disposable income. Since the advent of tourism, they have experienced huge improvements in their livelihoods and household incomes, which has endowed them with freedom from hardship, as well as a mindset to cherish the rural environment they and their ancestors have been blessed with for hundreds of years. They have come to appreciate the amenities of living a rural life: a natural environment, organic food, close social ties, and unpolluted air.

In terms of the rural culture, many aspects of local tangible and intangible cultural heritage have been carefully preserved for the gaze of tourists and as a form of local pride. Tourists come to Chongdu Valley and share compliments about the village, which signals to local residents that there is something special about their village. Therefore, the locals have preserved local cultures and artifacts, including farming tools; wine-making equipment and techniques; ceramics-making techniques and bamboo artifacts such as chairs, baskets, and curtains, turning them into tourist objects and souvenirs. For example, wine making is performed on a fixed daily schedule, so tourists can see how wine is made in the traditional way and purchase freshly made wine after each performance. Tourists are invited to

make pottery items using ceramics-making equipment and are allowed to take home their own handmade pottery. Traditional clay houses are preserved, and farming tools and agricultural processing equipment are displayed in the yards of houses. Many old men and women sit beside the village's major roads and use bamboo to make a variety of artifacts, which they sell to tourists.

Overall, tourism has provided an alternative way of living for the locals so that they can enjoy rural amenities, cherish rural culture, and live a decent life. However, despite all these positive changes, tourism has also brought a number of challenges to the community that threatens the sustainability of rural culture and indigenous knowledge. I have discovered two major challenges that the community is now facing.

The first challenge is the loss of local knowledge and traditions. As mentioned previously, Chongdu Valley residents have made their living through agriculture for hundreds of years. They have developed sophisticated knowledge and skills that were used specifically in growing crops in mountainous areas. Now, however, all this skill and knowledge is on the edge of disappearance. The elders and middle-aged villagers who are skilled at mountain farming have failed to pass their knowledge on to the younger generations. My interviewees told me that most young people under the age of twenty have never worked on farmland, and consider farm work to be laborious and boring. Because of the boom of the tourism economy, Chongdu Valley residents of all ages are devoting their efforts to developing tourism-related businesses and are acting more like businessmen than farmers.

Although some parts of the rural culture are treasured and proudly shown to tourists, others are gone. Younger generations, drawn to popular music, movies, and urban culture, have lost interest in traditions, such as local operas, which used to be the most popular form of entertainment for Chongdu Valley residents. Along with the loss of agricultural knowledge and skills, there is also a loss of the labor and resource sharing system. Before the development of tourism, Chongdu Valley residents were very poor and the resources they owned were limited. Thus, they had developed a set of labor and resource sharing rules to plant, grow, and harvest crops. For example, in the harvest season, the local residents always set up a plan for crop harvest, so that workers from several households could work together and use less time to harvest crops. This sharing system was extended from agriculture to other situations, such as building a house, travelling outside the village, and

addressing family emergencies. The destruction of this system came along with the development of tourism. Local residents have increased their family income and are getting used to the power of money; if they find that spending money can solve their problems, they will likely hesitate to ask for help from others. Another plausible explanation for the loss of this system is that neighbors are no longer viewed simply as neighbors, but also as competitors in their tourism-related businesses (e.g., the farmhouse business). So, when it comes to business-related work, families prefer to rely on themselves instead of seeking help from others.

Another challenge is the threat of urbanization. Tourism development has largely blurred the division between rural and urban landscapes in Chongdu Valley. Some residents complain that Chongdu Valley is too “urbanized” to be considered a rural community. The village now has a karaoke store, a lake-view hotel, a movie theater, fast food restaurants, and a performance plaza. Hundreds of non-locals live and run tourism-related businesses in Chongdu Valley, complicating the social fabric and interaction of the villagers. During weekends in the summer, the influx of thousands of tourists into Chongdu Valley turns the quiet, small village into a populated, noisy mini-city.

Furthermore, local residents have started to act like urban people. Some of them have bought second homes in urban areas so that they can live in urban areas in the off season. Private cars have become a new product for demonstrating social status, and many residents choose to buy cars that are beyond their budget. Due to the effect of tourists and peer pressure, the younger generations are likely to buy expensive and high-quality products that they cannot afford. As entrepreneurs instead of farmers, the residents of Chongdu Valley have been gradually integrated into the free market, the service economy, and the financial systems of a modern society. Their life has shifted from a pristine, pure, and simple one, to a modern, pressed, and complicated one. The old, peaceful life has gone forever.

In conclusion, my study reveals that the process of modernization has permeated the remote rural areas of China via tourism (Oakes 2012, 380-407). On one hand, rural tourism is revitalizing Chongdu Valley; it has generally improved the standard of living of local residents and elicited a sense of pride in local culture and indigenous knowledge. On the other hand, tourism is also transforming Chongdu Valley, leading to an increased urbanization of rural space and the rural way of life. The continuity and stability that the countryside of China used to represent does not hold true in the new era of modernization and urbanization;

rurality is now characterized by change and dynamism.

To view Lan's seminar on Chinese rural transformation, [visit the ICIK website](#).

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