



## Differentiated Path of Rural Tourism: The Yangtze River Delta in China as a Case

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### Abstract

As living standards improve, the tourism industry flourishes, with more rural areas engaging in "rural tourism" to create unique attractions for visitors. This study focuses on the Yangtze River Delta region in China to analyze its current differentiated development challenges, and corresponding strategies. The findings reveal that various rural areas are addressing issues like limited tourism diversity and low repeat visitation by developing red historical tourism and distinctive cultural experiences. Additionally, local governments provide policy support to ensure a more robust differentiated development path.

**Keywords:** Rural Tourism, Differentiation, Yangtze River Delta

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### 1. Issues in the Development of Rural Tourism in the Yangtze River Delta

In recent years, the implementation of rural revitalization strategies and reforms has spurred the development of rural tourism. The Yangtze River Delta, as a developed and densely populated region in China, recognizes the positive impact of rural tourism on local development and uses it to promote economic growth. However, as differentiated development in rural tourism progresses, emerging issues have become increasingly apparent and cannot be ignored.

#### 1.1. Monotonous Tourism Forms and Insufficient Cultural Exploration

The rapid rise of rural tourism has led some regions to blindly imitate successful business models<sup>[1]</sup>. While this approach can attract tourists and boost the economy in the short term, its "one-size-fits-all" nature may cause aesthetic fatigue and even aversion among visitors, hindering future transformation and sustainable development. Moreover, this imitation overlooks deep cultural exploration, resulting in an overemphasis on singular forms like agritourism and commercial streets.

#### 1.2. Insufficient Human Resources and Weak Service Capacity

Rural tourism requires a significant workforce; however, rural populations mainly consist of the elderly and children, leading to a lack of service awareness and innovation capabilities. Consequently, local services fail to impress tourists, making projects less attractive and slowing down industry growth. Additionally, many high-level talents are reluctant to move to rural areas compared to cities. A survey indicates that only 18% of rural residents have college degrees<sup>[2]</sup>, highlighting a shortage of human resources. Thus, the situation of "unable to retain internally or attract externally" severely restricts differentiated development paths.

#### 1.3. Low Repeat Visitor Rates and Lacking Sustained Appeal

Low repeat visitor rates are common across various attractions but are particularly pronounced in rural tourism. Many rural sites seek differentiation yet still lack unique local experiences, leading visitors to feel they are "not much different from other attractions." Furthermore, during their pursuit for uniqueness, some places neglect public facilities such as restrooms and seating

areas that impact visitor experience negatively. Lastly, with new attractions constantly emerging, tourists tend to prefer exploring new locations rather than revisiting old ones; thus, many established sites face challenges regarding sustained appeal. These issues need urgent resolution for effective transformation and innovation.

## 2. Differentiated Development Paths for Rural Tourism in the Yangtze River Delta

In response to the varied tourism development in rural areas of the Yangtze River Delta, localities are actively exploring strategies, which can be categorized into five main types.

### 2.1. Rural + Sports Tourism: Leisure and Recreation Pathway

The diverse terrain of the Yangtze River Delta allows many villages to leverage local natural conditions for sports activities. For instance, mountainous regions offer extreme sports like paragliding, cliff swinging, and bungee jumping; villages near water bodies provide boating and fishing experiences; while pastoral areas open up family farming and fruit-picking activities. A notable example is Anji Yunshang Grassland in Shanchuan Township, Huzhou City, Zhejiang Province, located at about 1200 meters above sea level. It utilizes its natural mountains and winter snowfall to offer over 30 projects including skiing and outdoor adventures, filling a gap in nearby urban sports offerings and attracting numerous visitors.

### 2.2. Rural + Patriotic Historical Tourism: Educational Pathway

Patriotic education is the core of Chinese national spirit. Some rural areas, as red memorial sites, leverage their historical significance through immersive performances and science popularization bases to vividly present history, attracting many families and history enthusiasts. For instance, the Shajiabang Reed Marsh Scenic Area in Changshu, Jiangsu Province, is a classic red tourism site featuring immersive performances based on the Peking opera model play "Shajiabang" and real wartime history, enhanced by emerging technologies to draw large crowds. This innovative transformation of red history into an immersive experience not only holds profound educational value but also resonates emotionally with audiences<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 2.3. Rural + Cultural Tourism: Intangible Heritage Pathway

Intangible cultural heritage is a precious legacy of the Chinese nation and a global cultural treasure. Villages with unique local customs attract tourists and promote cultural transmission through intangible heritage experiences and workshops. Chengkan Village in Huangshan, Anhui Province, offers not only feng-shui customs but also hands-on experiences like making fish lanterns and wood carving. Visitors can participate in traditional fish lantern parades while dressed in ancient costumes, immersing themselves in historical culture. Additionally, the rich cultural atmosphere draws film crews for shooting, increasing awareness and interest among potential visitors.

### 2.4. Rural + Characteristic Industry Tourism: Integration Pathway

Industrial development refers to the process of emergence, growth, and evolution of industries, including the transformation of individual sectors. Different rural areas

possess unique advantageous industries such as handicrafts and manufacturing. Many villages combine these strengths with tourism to create a new model that promotes production through travel and vice versa. For instance, Linqiao Village in Chuzhou, Anhui relies on its nursery industry, which occupies 90% of its land area. The region not only exports seedlings but also transforms high-quality seedlings into tourist-friendly agricultural attractions. This initiative boosts local tourism while enhancing the value of seedlings, facilitating mutual promotion between characteristic industries and rural tourism<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 2.5. Agricultural + Industrial Tourism: Fun Travel Pathway

China's rural areas have made significant progress in agriculture, particularly in the economically developed Yangtze River Delta region, where agricultural practices are more advanced. Many villages in this area adopt an "Agriculture + Industry" model to boost both sectors and promote local tourism. For instance, Xiaozhi Town in Taizhou, Zhejiang, has a century-old rice noodle processing industry alongside its unique straw hat craftsmanship. To better showcase local specialties, the region established a team called "Help Farmers," transforming old granaries into direct sales stores that integrate display, sales, and experience. Here, visitors can purchase local agricultural products and participate in straw hat weaving activities while gaining deeper insights into Xiaozhi Town's rich folk culture<sup>[5]</sup>.

## 3. Guaranteeing Differentiated Development of Rural Tourism in the Yangtze River Delta

To effectively promote differentiated development in rural tourism across the Yangtze River Delta, it is essential to leverage the collaborative advantages of "government-enterprise-individual" alongside the five strategies mentioned above, providing a solid foundation for diverse development paths.

### 3.1. Government Support

In recent years, the Yangtze River Delta region has introduced several policies related to rural tourism development. In 2019, representatives from 28 cities and districts signed the "Cooperation Agreement of the Rural Revitalization Regional Cooperation Alliance in the Yangtze River Delta," enhancing collaboration on key issues and providing new ideas for rural tourism development<sup>[6]</sup>. In 2023, cultural and tourism departments from Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui launched a new round of key tasks for high-quality integrated development in the Yangtze River Delta, strengthening connections between rural areas to facilitate mutual visitor exchange and promote rural tourism growth.

### 3.2. Corporate Participation

Corporate participation is a key driver for the differentiated development of rural tourism. For instance, in 2021, Ctrip Group launched "Ctrip Holiday Farm," with its first location in Dawan Village, Jinzhai, Anhui. This initiative improved the quality of nearby homestays and better met the needs of mid-to-high-end tourists, significantly enhancing customer satisfaction<sup>[7]</sup>. In 2016, Zhouzhuang Tourism Co., Ltd. partnered with Qibang Village in Kunshan City, Suzhou to establish a new company that transformed idle houses and land into a fresh homestay brand equipped with visitor

service centers and farming experience areas, revitalizing this previously declining village <sup>[8]</sup>.

### 3.3. Villagers' Quality Improvement

Villagers' quality improvement is the foundation of differentiated rural tourism development and a key variable. Enhancing farmers' skills contributes to significant advancements in products, services, and marketing. For instance, Xuancheng in Anhui conducts over 3,000 training sessions annually for migrant workers to elevate villagers' overall quality, laying a solid foundation for rural tourism <sup>[9]</sup>. <sup>[10]</sup>. In Jiaying, Zhejiang provides local farmers with practical training courses in live-streaming e-commerce, agritourism services, and rural study programs to support rural revitalization and promote high-quality rural tourism development.

### 4. Conclusion

The Yangtze River Delta region has a solid foundation for differentiated rural tourism development. Despite challenges such as limited tourism variety and insufficient human resources, villages are leveraging their strengths and addressing challenges with government support and business involvement. For well-developed villages, it is essential to amplify advantages and utilize resources like the internet to promote "high-level" development based on differentiated paths; while relatively underdeveloped villages need to identify specific difficulties and tackle them one by one. Successful case studies can be referenced, with adjustments made according to local conditions, while actively seeking assistance from the government and national authorities.

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