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EXPLORING CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM IN GUILIN, CHINA: INSIGHTS FROM THE STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Rural tourism in Guilin, China, is currently transitioning from rapid growth to high-quality and sustainable development. However, several obstacles must be overcome to effectively preserve and incorporate local culture. These obstacles include the underdevelopment of local cultural resources; the commercialization of traditional culture; limited cultural exchange between tourists and locals; and a lack of awareness of local customs. This study uses a qualitative methodology to examine three tourist-oriented villages in Guilin. This includes semi-structured interviews with local authorities, communities, tourism operators, and tourists, as well as open-ended interviews with experts. Thematic analysis is employed to synthesize data and gain insights into obstacles from different stakeholder perspectives. The results emphasize the importance of balancing modern tourism demands with the conservation of traditional cultural integrity. Moreover, it is crucial to implement policy reforms focusing on improving the discovery and use of cultural resources; promoting interactions between tourists and local communities; strengthening community involvement; and providing cultural sensitivity training for professionals in the tourism industry. These measures will facilitate inclusive and sustainable development, improve rural tourism planning, and enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of tourist destinations.

Keywords: Sustainable Rural Tourism, Preservation of Cultural Heritage, Development Barriers, Stakeholder Perspectives, Planning Reform

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable rural tourism is a framework established in rural areas that aims to positively impact social, economic, and environmental factors, ensuring long-term viability and ecological integrity (Roberts & Hall, 2001). Sustainable rural tourism strategies are crucial to protecting the environment and increasing socioeconomic benefits for local communities, ensuring the long-term viability of tourism products. This form of tourism highlights the unique natural scenery, cultural heritage, and traditional lifestyles of rural areas. It emphasizes the importance of responsible travel practices to preserve these valuable resources. In essence, the future viability and growth of the rural tourism industry depend on the implementation and promotion of sustainable practices.

Guilin, located in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region in southwest China, is widely recognized for its rich ecological resources and the distinctive landscape of the Li River. The famous poet Wang Zhenggong praised Guilin in 1201 as having the “finest landscapes under heaven,” thus promoting Guilin’s scenic beauty. In 2014, the karst formations along the Li River were gazetted as a World Natural Heritage site. As a multiethnic region with distinct traditions and customs, its folk villages are also valuable resources for tourism. Guilin, one of the pioneering tourist destinations in China in terms of accessibility to international visitors, has gained significant recognition both domestically and internationally. By the end of 2020, Guilin had established itself as an international tourist destination. From 2015 to 2020, the total number of tourists in Guilin increased from 44.6995 million to 102 million, with an average annual growth rate of 18.03%. Total tourism expenditure increased from 51.733 billion yuan to 1233.54 billion yuan, with an average annual growth rate of 18.98% (Guilin.gov.cn, 2021).

The “Fourteenth Five-Year Plan” for tourism development in China, issued and implemented by the State Council on December 22, 2021, emphasizes the decision to promote Guilin as a world-class tourist city, highlighting its pivotal role in China’s tourism industry. In the Guilin Municipal Government 2020 Work Report, Mayor Qin Chuncheng proposed the construction of key villages for national rural tourism and ethnic characteristic villages. In 2023, the Guilin Municipal Government released the “Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for Cultural and Tourism Development in Guilin (2021-2025)”, clearly outlining the initiative to promote Guilin as a globally recognized rural tourism hotspot. Guilin’s rural tourism sector is transitioning from rapid expansion to a phase focused more on quality and sustainability. However, there remains a significant gap between the objectives of the rural tourism development goals and the current reality. The study aims to identify and analyse cultural barriers in Guilin, focusing on sustainable rural tourism strategies that benefit the local economy, while protecting the cultural ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Heritage in Sustainable Rural Tourism

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines sustainable rural tourism as a type of tourism that considers economic, social, and environmental impacts to meet the needs of tourists, industry, the environment, and local communities alike. Rural tourism involves three main characteristics: the natural ecological environment of a rural area, the local folk culture, and its functions. It uses distinctive natural and cultural landscape resources to satisfy the needs of tourists. Rosalina et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of sustainability in rural tourism strategies for environmental protection and socio-economic benefits.

Cultural heritage has historically been a vital component of rural tourism. This incorporates both tangible and intangible aspects of a community's identity, such as customs, traditions, history, and architecture (Song et al., 2020). Lin and Rasoolimanesh (2023) have defined cultural heritage as a collection of buildings, artifacts, and art that helps tourists understand the destination's history, traditions, and values. Moreover, it is crucial for sustainable rural tourism, as it preserves unique traditions, customs, and historical assets, providing visitors with an authentic experience and contributing to rural economic and social development (Randelli & Martellozzo, 2019; Ling et al., 2013; Wijijayanti et al., 2023).

The literature suggests that strategies focusing on strengthening and protecting local culture are more effective than merely utilizing cultural elements to create tourism products. Cerquetti et al. (2022) study on Italy's "Marche food and wine memories" project demonstrates that the use of local intangible cultural heritage, including cuisine, wine, and traditions, can promote sustainable economic, social, cultural, and environmental development. Randelli and Martellozzo (2019) highlighted that damaging rural natural landscapes and cultural characteristics can diminish their attractiveness. Saleem and Umar (2023) found that tourists value authentic cultural heritage experiences, particularly when engaging with local traditions, arts, cuisine, and crafts. Kim et al. (2021) further described the promotion of sustainable development through the interaction between intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and tourism, while also noting that commodification poses a threat to the authenticity of ICH. Song et al. (2020) have asserted that the success of heritage tourism depends on community recognition of cultural assets and motivation to preserve them. Similarly, Brooks et al. (2023) found that host community participation is essential in heritage tourism governance and decision-making processes.

Barriers to Cultural Development

Cultural development is crucial to preserving the authenticity and appeal of rural tourism destinations. However, various obstacles can hinder its sustainability. The

main obstacle is the insufficient development of local cultural resources due to the inadequate allocation and infrastructure of financial resources (Yang & Wall, 2022). Hence, integrating tourism development with the exploration and innovation of local cultural heritage is crucial to attracting tourists and maintaining sociocultural values (Widiastini *et al.*, 2020).

The commercialization of traditional culture is another barrier to the cultural sustainability of tourism. Overdevelopment and commercialization can compromise the appeal and essence of rural areas as ideal tourist destinations (Kim *et al.*, 2021; Mansor *et al.*, 2021). Seyfi *et al.* (2020) emphasize that improper management and commercialization pressures can lead to superficial cultural tourism experiences. Their study explores six factors influencing meaningful cultural tourism experiences: prior perceived significance, authenticity, engagement, cultural exchange, culinary attraction, and service quality. Moreover, Guo and Jordan (2022) and Yang and Wall's (2022) studies suggest that excessive commercialization can lead to dissatisfaction and damage local traditions.

Insufficient interaction between tourists and locals is a third significant barrier to cultural tourism. Cultural tourists want to actively participate in creating their travel experiences, and suppliers should focus on close interaction with consumers to collectively produce high-quality experiences. Similarly, Seyfi *et al.* (2020) and Kastenholz and Gronau (2022) have highlighted that tourists are increasingly seeking authentic experiences, highlighting the importance of host-guest interaction in tourism experiences. Khanom *et al.* (2019) further argue that interactive projects can enhance the authenticity of cultural exchanges and provide tourists with a deeper understanding of local ways of life.

Lastly, a lack of awareness of local traditions can lead to misunderstandings and disrespect for local culture (Nwankwo & Itanyi, 2019), hindering the effective use of cultural resources. Viken *et al.* (2021) emphasize the importance of relational tourism processes, and have proposed a framework for developing tourism services and products that enhance recognition, respect, and reciprocity towards other cultures, in Arctic tourism and beyond. Insensitivity to cultural and ethnic differences also hinders meaningful local participation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a constructivist perspective and employs a comprehensive qualitative methodology to explore barriers to cultural development that affect the sustainability of rural tourism in Guilin, China. As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2017), qualitative research is a suitable approach to exploring complex phenomena within their specific contexts, particularly when seeking a deep understanding of relatively unfamiliar situations. Following Stake's (1995) recommendations, this study utilizes multiple case study approaches to improve the external validity and reliability of the research findings.

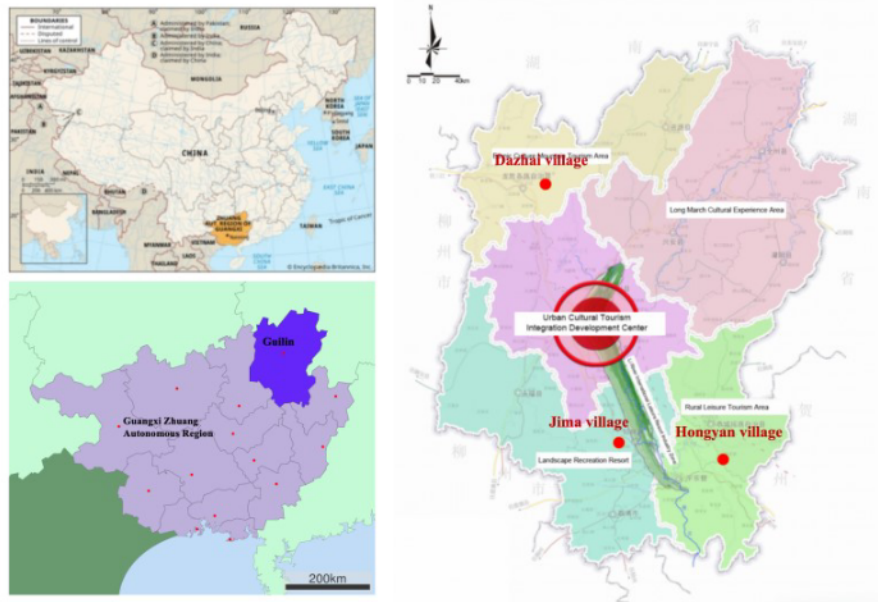


Figure 1: Guilin's Location Map in China and Study Site in Guilin
Source: "14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural and Tourism Development of Guilin City" (2021-2025)



Figure 2: Guilin's Ecological and Cultural Resources
Source: Google Images

The current study focuses on Guilin, a popular tourist destination in China, and which is in a mature transition phase of tourism development. The study encompasses three key Guilin villages, namely Dazhai, Hongyan, and Jima, as subjects for the case study. These villages showcase Guilin's cultural and natural heritage while demonstrating a shift in rural tourism from rapid growth to high-quality and sustainable development. The analysis aims to provide

information on how rural tourism can promote the protection of cultural heritage and sustainable development in Guilin.

The study included semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholders involved in rural tourism in Guilin, including local authorities, local communities, business operators, and tourists, to elicit the dynamics of rural tourism in Guilin. Stakeholders were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement, experience, and expertise relevant to rural tourism development. The interviews began on 1 May 2023 and continued until 18 September 2023 with 30 interviewees (**Table 1**). Respondents among local authorities had leadership roles within the village committee or related governmental bodies; direct involvement in rural tourism planning, policy formulation, or development; and at least a few years of experience working within the village or related areas. Business operators in a village had participated in tourism-related businesses; have at least three years of experience in the rural tourism industry; were natives or had lived and worked in the village for at least three years; and demonstrated a sustained commitment to local tourism. Local communities included residents of the village; those involved in or affected by rural tourism activities; those actively participating in local tourism through homestay operations, cultural performances, or other tourism-related businesses; and those who engage in local collective activities and had a direct understanding of the socio-cultural impacts of tourism in their village. Business operators in a village had participated in tourism-related businesses; had at least three years of experience in the rural tourism industry; were natives or had lived and worked in the village for at least three years; and demonstrated a sustained commitment to local tourism. Tourists included recent visitors, a mix of local, domestic, and international tourists, and individuals or groups with varying durations of stay to provide a comprehensive understanding of tourist experiences. Shorter stays provide insights into initial impressions and immediate needs, while longer stays offer detailed feedback on a wider range of experiences. Additionally, open-ended interviews were conducted with six experts and government officials involved in rural tourism planning and policy making. Experts had a deep understanding and expertise in rural tourism planning, policy formulation, and sustainable development, as well as expertise in infrastructure planning and design within the rural tourism sector (**Table 2**).

Table 1: Key attributes for respondents in Semi-Structured Interviews with Stakeholders

Representation	No. of Participants	General Profile	Village(s) Involved
Local Authorities	4 (R1–R4)	All male; aged 36–55; village natives or assigned by county; involved in leadership or committee roles; some also run local businesses	Dazhai, Hongyan, Jima
Local Communities	8 (R5–R12)	Mix of age (20s to 70s); includes homestay operators, cultural performers, and part-time workers; mix of native residents and long-term outsiders	Dazhai, Hongyan, Jima
Business Operators	7 (R13–R19)	Mostly male, aged 30s–50s; includes locals and outsiders; manage homestays, cafes, training schools, or restaurants; experienced in rural tourism	Dazhai, Hongyan, Jima
Tourists	11 (R20–R30)	Diverse demographic; solo, group, family, or institutional visitors; from nearby areas, cities, or abroad; durations range from day trips to 3 weeks	All villages (esp. Dazhai)

Table 2: Key attributes for respondents in an open-ended interview with an expert

ID	Interview method	Qualifications and job titles	Areas of expertise and strengths
E1	Telephone	Head of a specific department in the Guilin Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Tourism	The government leader responsible for Guilin's rural tourism planning and policy-making, resource development, and tourism brand creation
E2	In-person	Deputy Director of a Research Department at Municipal Government Work	The government staff involved in Guilin's rural tourism planning and policy recommendations, focusing on policy and folk culture promotion
E3	Tencent meetings	Professor of Environmental Design at a public university in China	Specialized in rural tourism infrastructure planning and design, with extensive experience in research, teaching, and practical project implementation
E4	In-person	Professor at a public university in China with a background in tourism management	Having a comprehensive understanding of Guilin's cultural and historical background and its integration into the tourism industry

ID	Interview method	Qualifications and job titles	Areas of expertise and strengths
E5	Tencent meetings	Professor at a public university in China with a background in tourism management	Having a comprehensive understanding of Guilin's cultural and historical contexts and its integration into the tourism industry
E6	Tencent meetings	Professor in the Department of Environmental Art Design at a specific fine arts academy in China	Focused on sustainable development, conservation, and rural development, with a focus on rural construction

The interviews used a flexible guide questionnaire to allow participants to introduce new topics during the conversations, enriching the research data. The participants were informed of the purpose of the research and consented to it, with privacy and anonymity strictly protected throughout the process. Thematic analysis was used to process the interviews, ensuring the veracity of the research findings. This involved systematically identifying, analysing, organizing, and reporting topics within textual data, ensuring the clarity, intuitiveness, and reliability of the research. The researchers maintained a rigorous analytical position to ensure that the codes and themes extracted accurately reflected the opinions of the interviewees and remained relevant to the research objectives. This method systematically derived themes from the rich interview data, revealing the multifaceted cultural challenges in the development of rural tourism in Guilin. Thematic analysis not only helped researchers better understand the perspectives of stakeholders, but also provided insights into potential impacts on policies and practices, enhancing the theoretical and practical contributions of the research.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Underdevelopment of Local Cultural Resources

Rural tourism in Guilin faces a significant challenge due to the inadequate development of local cultural resources, which directly impacts the attractiveness of tourism and the authenticity of culture. The community's intention to preserve and use traditional culture is influenced by immediate infrastructure needs, such as “...a health clinic that is only staffed by one person every Tuesday...” (R1). This lack of infrastructure leads to insufficient investment and attention to cultural preservation and heritage. This situation necessitates a development strategy involving enhanced investment transmission and rural infrastructure development, focusing on public services like healthcare, education, and transportation for cultural transmission and development.

Village committees and tourists in Guilin are concerned about the superficial nature of cultural activities, as the need for distinct local cultural characteristics hinders their appeal. From a local management perspective, R4

noted: *"The development of cultural tourism may still be a lack of local cultural characteristics. We have the 'Eternal Love' performance here and so does Hangzhou. The locals do not even manage these cultural activities"*. Experts emphasize that the development of cultural tourism in the area is not very deep, and there may still be a lack of local cultural characteristics. It is important to develop unique local cultures to attract tourists, such as ancient architecture, rural culture, and local customs, such as the 9 September Festival of Respect for the Elders. Tourists seek experiences beyond superficial sightseeing and truly reflect local culture. The R22 discussion highlights the tourist desire for a deeper cultural engagement: *"In addition to sightseeing, I am quite interested in the local customs here"*.

Experts also highlight the problems with Guilin rural tourism due to inadequate excavation and integration of local cultural resources. The expert explains: *"This area rich is in cultural resources, such as ancient bridges from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, but the villages are not aware of these resources, indicating that these resources are underutilized. Achieving cultural diversity of different customs every ten miles in the rural areas of Guilin is very challenging due to the serious homogenization issue"* (E2). Similarly, Experts E4 and E3 highlight the insufficient integration of cultures into rural tourism, with activities mainly limited to routine activities. They argue that there is a lack of special local cultural experiences, such as the Yao people's culture and intangible cultural heritage, which are not adequately represented in rural tourist spots. This underutilization of cultural resources not only homogenizes tourist experiences, but also diminishes the uniqueness of each location, reducing the likelihood of repeat visits.

Moreover, traditional local cultures, including languages and clothing from ethnic minorities, are being replaced by modern lifestyles, causing the loss of valuable traditional cultural resources. The discussions reveal this transformation: *"Our area is a mixed settlement of Han and Zhuang ethnicities... Zhuang people rarely speak their language and rarely ever wear their traditional clothing"* (R4); *"Yao ethnic clothing is expensive and time-consuming to produce. The younger generation is no longer skilled in these crafts"* (R6). The decline in traditional culture in China impacts authenticity and the community's ability to maintain and showcase its culture.

To address these issues, rural tourism development strategies should focus on improving the unique cultural aspects of each village, fostering the in-depth development of specific cultures. This involves *"focusing on a culture, specializing, and refining it to achieve sustainability"* (E2). *"For example, a village with a unique story of the long march of the Red Army crossing the Xiang River can become a core cultural resource, showcasing its uniqueness, and enhancing tourism appeal"* (E3).

Stakeholders recommend organizing specialized teams to conduct extensive excavation and research, innovate, and develop unique cultural tourism products. A systematic mechanism for managing and developing cultural resources should be established through cooperation between governments and communities, in order to promote the diversity of cultural displays and the deep transmission of heritage and ensure the sustainable development of rural tourism.

Commercialization of Traditional Culture

Commercialization in the context of globalization and modernization has a dualistic impact on traditional cultures. While it allows some cultures to survive and propagate, excessive commercialization can lead to the loss of cultural essence, particularly when cultural displays are transformed into tourist attractions. Stakeholder interviews have revealed that commercialization can increase local economic income by providing cultural festivals that attract large numbers of tourists, leading to a spike in demand. The discussion confirms this opinion: *"The Clothes Drying Festival on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month creates a significant buzz. During these two days, it is nearly impossible to find accommodation in Dazhai Village"* (R1); *"Here, the Persimmon Festival is held annually... Normally, few guests stay here, but during the event, homestays are almost always fully booked"* (R2); *"Many rafts are arranged to form the shape of a dragon, an event held annually ... much liked by tourists"* (R4). However, preserving local culture is often overlooked, revealing that stakeholders prioritize economic gains over an authentic and deep cultural representation of these events.

Second, although commercialization enhances traditional cultures' visibility and economic value, it can also lead to the loss of cultural essence, especially when culture is presented as a tourist product. The interviews show that some traditional cultural activities have shifted from community interactions to commercial events, marginalizing their traditional significance and social functions in the community. *"Previously, 6 June (Red Yao Clothes Drying Festival) was more ceremonious than New Year, with many relatives visiting each other and sharing communal meals...Now, these activities are organized to attract tourists, serving as marketing gimmicks"* (R6). Commercialization can alter or modify traditional cultural activities, leading to a superficial treatment of culture and posing a significant negative impact. R13 and R15 noted that while tourism preserves superficial symbols of traditional culture, such as attire and hair customs, it does not penetrate the core of the culture: *"We wear turbans as required, tie our hair as needed, and wear ethnic clothing..."* (R13); *"Only during certain events, when hosting guests, do we need to wear distinctive Yao attire and hats"* (R15). Similarly, the commercialization of culture can lead to a neglect of the depth and essence of the culture, as traditional knowledge and skills are lost, and cultural elements are no longer seen to be a part of everyday life.

Balancing commercialization benefits with maintaining cultural authenticity is a complex but crucial issue in rural tourism and cultural preservation. *“The transformation of some traditional festivals and cultural elements into partially commercialized events is still positive from a tourism perspective... During these transformations, it is essential to clearly explain to tourists the traditional significance and correct practices of these activities to ensure that the authenticity of cultural events is not misunderstood or simplified”* (E5). This expert further emphasizes: *“Core cultural elements that should not be changed must be preserved. We can increase promotion and visitors can come during the appropriate seasons”*. Therefore, policymakers and cultural planners must create an environment that meets commercial demands, while also respecting and protecting cultural heritage to ensure the authenticity of core cultural activities.

Furthermore, Expert E6 proposes a *“performative residency”* concept, which allows natives to sustain themselves through traditional activities such as cooking, working, and smoking, while offering tourists an authentic cultural experience. Although these activities may not completely reflect the daily lives of natives, they offer a way for tourists to experience and learn about traditional cultures. By involving natives in these performances, the culture displayed will remain authentic and accurate, rather than being simplified or misunderstood.

Similarly, Expert E4 suggests that local elders discussing the history and development of terraced fields can enhance cultural authenticity and stimulate residents’ pride and awareness of their culture. Finally, expert E3 highlights the importance of protecting the authenticity of rural areas and proposes a proper mechanism: *“Our rural communities or the rural agriculture department of the government should propose some laws and regulations to protect the authenticity of rural areas.”*

Overall, commercialization positively enhances cultural visibility and economic benefits, but its potential impact on the essence of culture must be managed through effective strategies and policies. This includes maintaining the integrity of traditional cultures through education, community involvement, and cultural preservation measures. By implementing such measures, rural tourism can be used effectively to promote cultural heritage rather than just for economic growth.

Limited Cultural Exchange between Tourists and Locals

The lack of interaction between tourists and locals is another barrier that significantly reduces the potential for cultural education and deep experiential learning in rural tourism. The interviews indicate that rural tourism sites often promote various activities, including festivals and traditional handicraft displays, allowing tourists to engage with local culture. The R13 business operator

emphasizes: *“In our tourist area, different villages host different seasonal festivals...the Long Hair Festival in Huangluo Yao Village on March 3, the Ancient Zhuang Village Plowing Festival around May Day, and the Su Yang Festival in Pingnan in early June...”*. These festivals showcase cultural diversity and highlight the unique aspects of the local culture. *“The Long Hair Festival in Huangluo Yao village showcases the village's long hair and Yao culture, which has been recognized by the Guinness World Records”* (R13). However, these festivals often need in-depth explanations of their cultural background and significance; otherwise, they remain a superficial tourist experience.

As tourists note *“...there is still a lack of cultural depth in rural tourism, as tourists often need to look up culture online. The traditional clothing worn by the older generation is quite charming, but rented clothes are not handmade...”* (R24). While tourists engage with traditional elements through photo opportunities, they must fully understand local lives and traditions to fully appreciate the educational value and cultural depth of the experience. This obstacle challenges the authenticity of cultural transmission.

Similarly, Tourist R30 and Tourist R21 experienced a local villagers-run fashion show in Dazhai village, showcasing Yao women's hair and agricultural tools. However, the show left a superficial impression, suggesting that while these activities increase interactivity and visibility, they need to be strengthened to convey deep cultural values. Language barriers and inadequate cultural explanations also limit the depth of cultural exchange. Tourist R21 from Japan found that they could not understand the event's meanings due to the language barrier and a lack of explanatory context. Therefore, more optimization, such as multilingual interpretation services, is needed to enhance the understanding and appreciation of these cultural performances among tourists from diverse backgrounds.

The natural beauty of Yangshuo's Jima village is largely attributed to its landscapes, but there is a need for effective integration of cultural elements into the tourism experience. The business operator suggests *“...hiring professionals to plan cultural activities and enhance interactions between tourists and locals...”* (R18). The respondent also recommends that professional planners should promote joint participation and experiences between tourists and the local community.

Experts suggest that enhancing the interaction between tourists and locals is crucial to improving cultural understanding and appreciation. Expert E1 emphasizes the importance of deeply showcasing everyday culture, such as traditional attire and dietary habits, and integrating these elements into tourism activities to attract tourists, particularly younger ones. He advocates for *“participatory activities like handicraft making and agricultural experiences to give tourists a deeper understanding of local culture.”* Furthermore, experts E2

and E4 suggest enhancing cultural activities through storytelling, emphasizing local narratives about history and culture. In rural tourism in Zhejiang, residents express pride and passion through sharing their village's development stories. This emotional conveyance enhanced the tour experience, making cultural transmission more natural and effective for tourists.

Similarly, experts E4 and E5 state that cultural activities can be improved by incorporating emotive presentations and strengthening tourist-community interactions. They suggest inviting local elders to narrate the history of terraced fields, which conveys cultural information. These expert recommendations emphasize the need for strengthening tourist-community interactions to improve tourists' understanding and appreciation of local culture. Furthermore, E5 proposes *“using innovative festival activities to increase cultural interaction opportunities, emphasizing clear communication of cultural background and significance”*.

Therefore, it is crucial to transform traditional sightseeing activities into deeper cultural interaction experiences to improve the cultural exchange and educational value of rural tourism. This requires collaboration between tourism planners, members of the local community, and government agencies. Strategies including educational outreach, storytelling, and innovative experience design can foster connections between tourists and local cultures, enhance tourist experiences, and promote sustainable development and cultural protection.

Lack of Awareness about Local Traditions

Despite a rich cultural heritage and unique traditions in Guilin and other rural areas, there is generally a need for more awareness and commitment to preserve these traditions. The interview with R11 highlights the neglect or destruction of cultural activities and facilities in a village due to a lack of community involvement and adequate decision-making support. The village committee members demolished a house used for colourful folk singing without the village's consent, demonstrating an inefficient attitude toward preserving cultural heritage. This highlights significant shortcomings in managing traditional cultural preservation.

Furthermore, modernization and commercialization have led to a gradual decline in traditional culture, particularly among the younger generation. Interviews reveal that *“as living standards improve, families send their children to cities for education, and the ethnic language has gradually disappeared. Yao embroidery and red Yao clothing are now considered intangible cultural heritage, with older people still practicing these crafts, but younger people hardly”* (R1); *“Cultural elements are rare; for example, the Zhuang people rarely speak their dialect, and Zhuang attire is no longer worn, with modern fashion prevailing instead”* (R4). These descriptions reveal that traditional

languages and crafts are declining due to modern lifestyles and educational backgrounds. This lack of traditional consciousness not only affects cultural transmission, but also harms the cultural confidence and identity of the community. The decline of traditional elements and the shift to modern fashion further highlight the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

Despite these challenges, some business operators and community leaders recognize the importance of improving traditional cultural awareness in tourism development. In an interview, R13 emphasized the importance of promoting culture through practical activities and special events, such as wearing traditional clothing and performing traditional skills during festivals. He believes that tourism can improve tourist experiences and provide a deeper understanding of local culture. R13 also states that *“tourism serves as an excellent tool to protect and preserve traditional culture, especially in scenic areas where local customs are declining...this place still acts as a living museum for the ethnic groups Zhuang and Yao. We often tell them that they are amphibious farmers who pick up a pole to farm and put it down to participate in tourism. We encourage residents to wear turbans, tie their hair, wear ethnic clothing, and carry baskets to work in the fields when needed...”*. The interviewee suggests that tourism can effectively preserve traditional culture through activities such as traditional attire and hairstyles, preserving its authenticity. He also proposes the *“amphibious farmer”* model, which allows villagers to combine tourism, agriculture, and daily life while maintaining the authenticity of community culture as much as possible.

Similarly, R3 highlights the impact of tourism on traditional culture in villages. During peak tourist seasons, some villagers wear Yao clothing, enhancing their identification and participation in traditional culture. However, modern lifestyles have diluted cultural traditions. R3 hopes that *“tourism development will motivate more villagers to wear ethnically distinctive clothing, not only for economic benefits but also to maintain and showcase our rich ethnic culture...”*. This approach demonstrates the dual value of tourism in cultural preservation, economic development, and strengthening cultural identity. Tourists often find the presentation of local culture lacking depth, despite their interest in traditional attire and long hair. The history and significance of these garments are often tailored to satisfy tourists' desires for photo opportunities, and hair styling is no longer popular among young people.

The experience of understanding the meaning and background of these traditions is often superficial, lacking a comprehensive understanding of their deeper meanings and historical contexts. This superficial cultural experience fails to meet tourist desires for deeper engagement. Despite the attraction of traditional cultural elements to tourists, the younger generation's regard for these traditions is gradually decreasing, making cultural integration and transmission in modern society challenging.

However, to preserve and transmit culture effectively, systematic integration, education, and community participation are crucial to fostering cultural pride and responsibility among residents. Expert 2 emphasizes the importance of boosting cultural confidence by training locals to become narrators of their culture through storytelling. This strengthens cultural transmission, and education and improves the identity and responsibility of tourism professionals towards local culture. He argues that *“the primary responsibility of the works of rural tourism must be a passion, strong cultural identity, and cultural responsibility to truly integrate with local culture”*.

Similarly, he proposes the exploration and integration of rural cultural resources to preserve cultural stories and traditions, particularly in regions lacking mechanisms for cultural transmission, such as Guilin. *“As times change and modern culture encroaches, much has already been lost. We are at a critical stage where it needs to be excavated and protected. There is no team to integrate this; we require the government to establish one”* (E2). Modern culture has led to a significant loss of local culture, necessitating the establishment of a government team to protect and excavate it. This will require a deep understanding of local culture and the transmission of knowledge. The government and relevant organizations should support the excavation and integration of cultural resources. Additionally, E3 suggests guiding *“villagers and locals to preserve the authenticity of the cultural resources, necessitating the establishment of a proper mechanism”*.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the sustainability of rural tourism in Guilin, China, focusing on cultural development barriers. Key challenges include the underdevelopment of local cultural resources, commercialization of traditional culture, limited cultural exchanges, and lack of awareness about local traditions. These challenges highlight the conflict between the economic benefits of the tourism industry and the preservation of cultural integrity. To achieve the sustainable development of rural tourism, the study proposes several strategies such as improving cultural resource management, promoting local education and community participation, developing tourism products aligned with sustainable practices and cultural preservation, strengthening stakeholder collaboration, and formulating cultural heritage protection laws and policies. These strategies emphasize a holistic approach towards promoting sustainable rural tourism that balances economic growth and the transmission of cultural heritage. The study also emphasizes the need for policymakers and tourism planners to incorporate cultural heritage protection into tourism development strategies, strategically allocating resources, and promoting cultural sensitivity and sustainable tourism practices through educational programs. Future rural tourism planning should balance economic,

cultural, and social integration to ensure sustainable development and cultural diversity preservation.

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