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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT IN TOURISM INDUSTRY FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION IN TIBET

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Abstract

Since 2013 China has implemented the TPA (Targeted Poverty Alleviation) strategy to ensure that the remaining rural poor move out of poverty by 2020. Through eight years of hard work, China achieved eliminating extreme poverty, a key goal for the new era of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. Using various data sources, this paper described the success story of poverty alleviation and cultural preservation in Tibet through a high-quality development tourism industry. In numerous developing countries, tourism is considered an effective, responsive, and cost-efficient method to reduce poverty. Chinese tourism significantly and positively affects poverty reduction, reflecting the great value of executing pro-poor tourism programs. The stories about poverty alleviation through the tourism industry from Tibetan peoples can be an inspiration for international society, especially in many developing countries.

Keywords: Poverty Alleviation in Tibet, Tourism Industry, Cultural Preservation, Inspirational Stories.

Abstrak

Sejak tahun 2013, Cina telah menerapkan strategi TPA (Targeted Poverty Alleviation) untuk memastikan bahwa penduduk miskin pedesaan yang tersisa dapat keluar dari kemiskinan pada tahun 2020. Melalui kerja keras selama delapan tahun, Cina berhasil menghapuskan kemiskinan ekstrem, sebuah tujuan utama dalam era baru membangun sosialisme dengan karakteristik Cina. Dengan menggunakan berbagai sumber data, tulisan ini menggambarkan kisah sukses pengentasan kemiskinan dan pelestarian budaya di Tibet melalui pembangunan industri pariwisata yang berkualitas tinggi. Di berbagai negara berkembang, pariwisata dianggap sebagai metode yang efektif, responsif, dan hemat biaya untuk mengurangi kemiskinan. Pariwisata Tiongkok secara signifikan dan positif mempengaruhi pengurangan kemiskinan, yang mencerminkan nilai besar dari pelaksanaan program pariwisata yang pro-masyarakat miskin. Kisah-kisah tentang pengentasan kemiskinan melalui industri pariwisata dari masyarakat Tibet dapat menjadi inspirasi bagi masyarakat internasional, terutama di banyak negara berkembang.

Kata kunci: Pengentasan Kemiskinan di Tibet, Industri Pariwisata, Pelestarian Budaya, Kisah Inspiratif.

1. Introduction

1.1 Long Journey of Poverty Alleviation in China

Poverty alleviation has always been a goal and a fundamental human right of all people in their pursuit of a happy life. Eliminating poverty has become a significant challenge faced by every country in the world (Bapna, 2012; Glauben *et al.*, 2012). Poverty was initially defined as an economic phenomenon, a condition in which the income of an individual household does not meet the basic standards of living (M. Liu *et al.*, 2019). With social-economic development, the definition of poverty has gradually changed from the shortage of an economic income to a multidimensional measurement, including the lack of access to education, medical care, housing, and other social deprivation (M. Liu *et al.*, 2019).

The official poverty line in China is calculated based on the cost of maintaining a person's basic life over a certain period, including food, other consumption, and social services (Xian *et al.* 2016). In September 2022, the World Bank's international poverty line was set at \$2.15 per day for extreme poverty (<https://www.worldbank.org/>). This means individuals living on less than \$2.15 per day are considered to be in extreme poverty. According to China National Bureau of Statistics (<http://www.stats.gov.cn/>), accessed in 2023, the poverty standard is defined as the annual living standard for rural residents below 2,300 yuan (0.86\$ per day). The difference between China's poverty line standard and international poverty line standards lies in the contextual factors, economic conditions, and living costs specific to each region. China's poverty line is determined by the national government based on its understanding of domestic economic conditions, social development, and the cost of living. The criteria may be influenced by factors such as regional disparities, urbanization rates, and the overall economic landscape within the country. On the other hand, international poverty line standards, often established by organizations like the World Bank, consider a global perspective and attempt to set a benchmark that is applicable across diverse economies. These international standards may take into account variations in purchasing power, inflation rates, and currency exchange rates.

Over the past 40 years, China has made significant progress toward its poverty alleviation goals. The rural population under the current poverty line has decreased by 739.9 million. Statistics show that the number of people living on <\$1.90 a day worldwide has dropped from 1.8 billion in 1990 to 0.776 billion in 2013 (World Bank 2017), among which China has contributed more than 70 percent to world poverty reduction (Wang and Zeng 2018). The poor rural population is primarily located in southwest China. Provinces with a poverty headcount ratio of >5 percent in 2017 include Xinjiang (9.9 percent), Gansu (9.7 percent), Guizhou (8.5 percent), Tibet (7.9 percent), and Yunnan (7.5 percent). These statistics show that western China, including Xinjiang, Gansu, Tibet, Guizhou, and Yunnan, is still profoundly poverty-stricken (M. Liu *et al.*, 2019). China poverty alleviation became the hallmark of a new campaign: mobilizing several hundred thousand of China government staff to visit poor rural areas,

registering all poor households, and designating official poverty villages and counties. The local government and society, as part of China's poverty alleviation program, has implemented a strategy to transform poor villages into tourist destinations. This approach involves upgrading infrastructure, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable tourism practices. Therefore, China's Government has carried out a series of large-scale poverty alleviation policies especially since the opening and reform policies of the late 1970s. The success of China's poverty alleviation benefited from a series of policies and institutional reforms (M. Liu *et al.*, 2019).

Past studies have highlighted that China's success in poverty reduction is the result of sustaining rapid economic growth and the implementation of large-scale, long-lasting, Government-led poverty alleviation strategies over the past 40 years (M. Liu *et al.*, 2019). The role of China's economic growth in poverty reduction has mainly manifested in two ways. First, the introduction of the Household Contract Responsibility System in the late 1970s promoted developments in agriculture that increased the farm incomes of the rural poor. Later, this was encouraged mainly by science and technology developments in the agricultural sector. Second, the economic growth caused by market reforms and infrastructure investments increased the fiscal revenue of the Government and made the Government more capable of implementing poverty reduction policies to help the rural poor population, which is called an indirect effect of economic growth in poverty alleviation (Wang, 2008).

Reviewing China's anti-poverty strategies over four decades, we find that poverty alleviation strategies went through four stages according to the differences in anti-poverty strategies and measures: relief-type poverty alleviation (1978-1985); development-oriented poverty alleviation (1986-2006); development-oriented poverty alleviation and social security system (2007-2012); and targeted poverty alleviation (since 2013).

In the period of targeted poverty alleviation that started in 2013, a series of anti-poverty measures for the poor population was implemented in combination with integrated strategies of development-oriented poverty alleviation and a social security system. A targeted poverty alleviation strategy requires local Governments to identify poor areas and households to ensure adequate support for the poor (Zhou *et al.*, 2018).

The targeted anti-poverty policies mainly include: (1) lifting the poor households who have the ability to manage poverty through involvement in industry development; (2) relocating the poor who live in mountainous areas with limited resources to more hospitable areas, such as nearby plain areas or towns; (3) implementing ecological compensation policies to help those poor people living in ecological preservation areas; (4) preventing intergenerational poverty transmission by strengthening educational aid; and (5) helping physically disabled people with social security measures (Wang and Zeng 2018; Zhou *et al.* 2018).

In recent years, resettlement has also been increasingly adopted as an effective way for poverty alleviation or ecological/environmental restoration. Poverty can be connected closely to environmental and geographic conditions, particularly the "spatial poverty traps" of remote mountainous or arid and semi-

arid areas. A significant reason for the slow socio-economic development of poverty-stricken and underdeveloped regions is the vicious cycle of poverty and ecological environment degradation (Cavendish, 2000)

Owing to harsh ecological conditions, the development of production factors and infrastructure construction is slow in these areas, so implementing in-situ poverty in poverty-stricken areas can be extremely difficult. According to China's current poverty standard, many recorded rural poverty-stricken people live in relatively remote areas with relatively underdeveloped infrastructure, a severe contradiction of land and water resources, extremely fragile environments, and frequent natural disasters. These are exemplified by the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau region, the northwest plateau region.

The poverty-stricken people to be resettled on record can be classified according to environmental conditions as follows: (1) live in remote mountains, rocky mountains, remote alpine regions, desertification regions, regions with severe soil erosion, a region without primary development conditions and region whose water and soil condition cannot meet the demands of agricultural production; (2) live in regions lacking transportation, water conservancy, electricity, communication or other infrastructure, or regions with a severe shortage of essential public service capacities (education, health care, hygiene, etc.); (3) live in water source reserves, biodiversity reserves, wetland reserves; (4) live in regions with severe endemic diseases or frequent geological disaster.

Resettlement has revitalized rural land, housing plots, and other resources accelerated rural land circulation, catalyzed modern agriculture parks, family farms, large producer-households, and other business patterns, and promoted the stable development of regional characteristics economies.

Severely impoverished areas including the Tibet Autonomous Region are the top priority in China's battle against poverty. Known as the "Roof of the World," Tibet is famous for its picturesque plateau landscape and rich ethnic culture. Tibet is also an ethnic region inhabited mainly by Tibetans, who account for more than 92% of its present 3,175,500 population. Since 2016, 39.89 billion yuan has been invested in over 2,900 poverty alleviation projects, which helped lift more than 238,000 impoverished people out of poverty and benefited more than 840,000 people. The average annual net income of poor people in Tibet had risen from 1,499 yuan (about 220.44 U.S. dollars) in 2015 to 9,328 yuan in 2019.

Rapid development in seven industries in the region, including clean energy, the high-tech and digital industry, and culture and tourism. Per capita, the disposable income of local farmers and herders has nearly doubled over the past decade. The regions also promote ethnic unity protecting its excellent ecological environment and improving conditions in its border villages. From many policies and implementations of poverty alleviation carried out in Tibet, the development of high-quality tourism industry is an inspiration and attraction for many people. The quality of the tourism industry is measured by preserving the environment and the local community's culture. This paper provides some descriptions, stories, and examples from several areas in Tibet that have developed a tourism industry that not only improves the economy but also makes the tourism industry high

quality. Hopefully, these stories will inspire the world community, especially developing countries, to work hard to eradicate poverty in the last few decades.

2. China Sustainable Tourism for Poverty Alleviation

In numerous developing countries, tourism is considered an effective, responsive, and cost-efficient method to reduce poverty (Hummel and Duim, 2012). This mindset is primarily driven by the tourism-led growth (TLG) model's economic development model (Balaguer and Catavella-Jorda, 2002). Tourism development has not only been viewed as an engine for economic growth but also as a tool for alleviating poverty and advancing food security, especially in developing countries (Vanegas Sr et al., 2014). According to Asongu and Odhiambo (2019), sustainable tourism ensures a constant income stream for economic development, especially for economies that depend substantially on the tourism industry for economic prosperity. The role of sustainable tourism in reducing poverty has also been widely supported by institutions such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and International Labour Organization (ILO).

The WTO defines sustainable tourism as development that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems.

Achieving sustainable tourism requires several objectives: the natural, historical, cultural, and other resources for tourism are conserved for continuous use in the future while still bringing benefits to the present society. Tourism development is planned and managed so that it does not generate severe environmental or socio-cultural problems in the tourism area. The overall ecological quality of tourism areas is maintained and improved where needed. A high level of tourist satisfaction is maintained so that tourist destinations will retain their marketability and popularity. The benefits of tourism are widely spread throughout society.

Tourism is not very different from other productive sectors, but it has four potential advantages for pro-poor growth. First, it has a higher potential for linkage with other local enterprises because customers come to the destination. Second, it is relatively labor intensive and employs many women. Third, it has potential in developing countries and areas with few other competitive exports. Fourth, tourism products can be built on natural resources and culture, which some of the poor have assets.

Those four potentials in tourism are well exemplified in the practice of High-Quality Development in tourism in Tibet for poverty alleviation. First, the tourism sector in Tibet fosters strong linkages with local enterprises, benefiting surrounding communities as visitors engage with various businesses. Second, the labor-intensive nature of tourism, with a significant employment focus on women, aligns with the inclusive growth goals. Third, Tibet, as a region with limited competitive exports, finds a promising economic avenue in tourism development. Fourth, the utilization of natural resources and cultural assets in tourism products aligns with the theory, as these assets, often owned by local communities, contribute to poverty reduction by providing income-generating opportunities and preserving cultural heritage.

3. High-Quality Development in Tibet Tourism Industry

In order to realize the poverty alleviation program, many counties in Tibet are treated and guided in tourism ways. For poor counties rich in tourism resources like in Tibet plateau, the government supports the construction of infrastructure and service facilities, improves the tourism environment, encourages the rational development of tourism resources and the protection of the ecological environment, and actively guides local residents to participate in the development of tourism programs and engage in tourism services. The development of tourism will expand employment and drive the development of related industries, thereby promoting higher tax revenues and resident incomes.

The Chinese government employs various strategies to educate Tibetan rural peoples and enhance their skills in the tourism sector. These strategies include vocational training programs designed to equip individuals with practical skills such as hospitality management, language proficiency, and tour guiding. Training centers and workshops are established in rural areas. Additionally, the government promotes collaboration with educational institutions, such as university and industry partners to develop specialized courses to the needs of the tourism sector. Financial incentives, subsidies, and support for entrepreneurship further encourage rural residents to engage in tourism-related activities. Through a multifaceted approach, China aims to empower Tibetan rural communities with the skills necessary to actively participate in and benefit from the expanding tourism industry, contributing to poverty alleviation efforts.

For poor counties that can only rely on traditional agricultural development, the government should increase investment in agricultural infrastructure and technology, vigorously improve the efficiency of funds invested in agricultural support, and encourage the development of special agriculture. These agricultural spots and products also could be tourist destinations because of the beautiful scenery and attraction (Yan, 2016).

Tibet's rural tourism industry has enabled more Tibet farmers and herdsmen to escape poverty. Can we imagine that those peoples live in thousands of miles of snow, thousands of miles of the frontier? They walk in the mountains and grasslands of Tibet, waving colorful prayer flags that move with the wind and the never-ending prayer wheel singing about the thousand-year-old civilization. With this unique regional and cultural environment, Tibet's tourism industry is also flourishing. The distinctiveness of Tibetan culture lies in many deeply rooted Tibetan and Buddhism traditions such as monks and local people spiritual practices, pilgrimages, vibrant festivals like Lantern Festival, Tibetan New Year Festival, Buddha Painting Unfolding Festival making it a compelling destination for travelers seeking an immersive and authentic experience.

One of the key elements contributing to the uniqueness of Tibetan culture is its strong connection to Tibetan Buddhism. The region is home to numerous monasteries, such as Jokhang Temple, Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, Samye Monastery, etc. The Potala Palace in Lhasa, the former residence of the Dalai Lama, stands as an iconic symbol of Tibetan Buddhism. The intricate murals in each temple, prayer halls, and sacred relics within these monastic structures offer visitors a glimpse into the profound spiritual heritage of Tibet.

Tibet's arts and crafts are a testament to the creativity and skill of its people. Thangka painting, depicting Buddhist deities and scenes, represents a unique form of Tibetan artistic expression. The art of woodblock printing, the production of prayer flags and scriptures, is another distinctive craft. Tourists are often fascinated by the

opportunity to witness these crafts being created and, in some cases, even try their hand at learning these traditional skills. The breathtaking landscapes of Tibet, from the majestic Himalayas to serene Namtso lakes and vast grasslands, contribute significantly to the region's allure. Pilgrimages to sacred sites, such as Mount Kailash, hold deep spiritual significance, attracting not only religious pilgrims but also adventure seekers, mountain climbers, and nature enthusiasts. The unique combination of spiritual and natural wonders makes Tibet a destination that transcends the conventional tourist experience.

To the west of Lhasa, there is Pangong Lake, the most beautiful lake in Tibet. Walking on the bank of Pangong Lake, the blue waves are rippling, the birds are surrounded, the snow-capped mountains are dotted in the distance, and the beautiful scenery is dizzying. Relying on the long-standing cultural heritage, local customs, and unique tourism resources, Ritu County has built an eco-tourism boutique in line with Pangong Lake Scenic Spot as the core and Pangong Lake Bird Island as the soul. Since 2011, Ritu County has invested more than 12.2 million yuan in improving the infrastructure construction of the Pangong Lake tourist attraction.

Every June, the number of tourists in the Ritu county area reaches more than 60,000. The income from tourism in the county area has reached 97.39 million yuan, and the number of people employed in the tourism industry in the county has reached 652, including 18 children from local families working in the Pangong Lake Scenic Spot and 11 children from low-income families. The income of the masses has increased by 1.92 million yuan, giving full play to the leading role of tourist attractions in poverty alleviation. In recent years, Ritu County has adhered to the priority of ecological protection, doing more work to lay the foundation and benefit the long-term. A total of 49.61 million yuan has been invested in carrying out 1,186 hectares of swamp enclosure and 140 hectares of vegetation restoration in Pangong Lake and its surrounding areas, 64.2 hectares of forest belts have been planted, ten mu of grass have been planted, 1,000 cubic meters of wetland garbage have been cleaned, and water canals and lakes have been built for 1,000 hectares. Three kilometers of side remediation, at the same time equipped with auxiliary facilities such as water supply and drainage, electrical appliances, and supporting equipment for publicity and education, scientific research, patrol, fire prevention, and monitoring, further intensified the ecological protection of Pangong Lake.

Pangong Lake is getting more and more beautiful, with green water and green mountains, as well as golden and silver mountains. With the continuous increase in the protection of Pangong Lake wetlands, the public's awareness of the importance and urgency of protecting wetlands and the ecological environment is gradually improving, and the whole society is conscious of participating in the protection of biodiversity. And increased initiative. The environmental benefits, educational and scientific research value and economic benefits of Pangong Lake have improved further.

The second example is Lebugou scenic spot which relies on advantages to develop characteristic industries. Lebu in Tibetan means "good place." Lebugou is a famous scenic spot in Cuona county, Shannan city, where the climate is pleasant. Every spring and summer, beautiful rhododendrons, jasmines, roses, and all kinds of unnamed wildflowers bloom all over the mountains and plains. In the beautiful Lebu Valley, there is Lemenba Ethnic Township. The villagers set up farmhouses, restaurants, tea houses, and sales points for ethnic specialty products and also developed a tea industry suitable for the local climate. Tourism and the tea industry have become the "two drivers" driving the regional economic development carriage.

In 2015, the village was listed as the first batch of 20 new characteristic towns by the autonomous region. They raised 300,000 yuan by themselves to build the current four-story building. The building has a total area of 217 square meters, and the third and fourth floors have been converted into hotels. Relying on tea picking, hotels, odd jobs, and various policy subsidies, local people's annual income has reached more than 100,000 yuan.

According to reports in 2019, the total output of dry tea in Lexiang township reached 16,910 kilograms, and the income of the tea cooperative reached 2.54 million yuan. Among them, 550,000 yuan was cashed out as a subsidy fund for migrant workers, 1,041,500 yuan was implemented in the rent of tea fields and dividends, and encouragement funds for college students. The total value of condolences and welfare to the needy is more than 98,000 yuan. Today, the people of Lexiang take the express train of the development of the "tea + travel" industry, and every household has eaten "tourism meals," embarked on the "road of prosperity," and lived a "new life." As of the first half of the year, Lexiang has received more than 30,000 tourists and achieved an average annual tourism income of more than 600,000 yuan.

The third example is Nyingchi, a city in Tibet perched at an average altitude of about 3,000 meters. This city prepares for the annual influx of visitors that flock to this city high above the clouds. The attractiveness of this area of the autonomous region in Southwest China is in no small part thanks to improved infrastructure, such as trains. Today, it takes just three and half hours on a bullet train to travel the 435 km from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, to Nyingchi. This area transformed from a backward place into a beautiful tourist place. By 2020, the average annual income per capita had increased to more than 34,000 yuan (\$5,334). Nyingchi has one of the most well-protected virgin forests in China, with a forest coverage rate of 53.6 percent.

With its beautiful lakes, snowcapped mountains, forests, and a wide variety of cultural activities, Nyingchi city is a major attraction. According to its tourism development bureau, Nyingchi invested more than 110 million yuan on infrastructure in its major tourism spots last year. Official data from the bureau shows that it is home to some 700 guesthouses owned by rural residents that received 4 million visits last year. Last year, 27,000 rural residents found job opportunities in tourism, an increase of 4 percent year on year. Around 1.38 million tourist visits were made to operators in rural Nyingchi.

The Tibet autonomous region received more than 41 million tourists last year, and tourism revenues exceeded 44 billion yuan (\$7 billion), according to an announcement at an annual meeting of the regional people's congress recently. Tibet has been a popular destination for domestic and overseas tourists for decades due to its rich heritage, natural appeal, and unique traditional cultures. In recent years, the region has been making a significant effort to upgrade the quality of services for tourists. Cultural products and incentives have been introduced to benefit visitors and business operators. Tourism sectors focus on Tibet's unique folk culture and natural resources, particularly in rural areas, and allow more rural residents to benefit from tourism.

To attract China domestic tourists and international tourists, Tibetan government has a comprehensive and strategic approach that highlights the diverse aspects of those unique heritage. Firstly, invest in promoting the province's religious heritage. Showcase the grandeur of significant religious sites, such as Tibetan Buddhist temples, monasteries, or sacred landscapes, through visually appealing marketing materials and online platforms, such as WeChat blog or videos, bilibili.com as largest video platform, Tiktok, as well as outside China social media such as Youtube, Instagram, Facebook, and websites. In addition, each travel package to Tibet mostly offered guided tours that

provide insights into the spiritual significance and history of these places. Furthermore, establish cultural centers or workshops where tourists can witness artisans creating traditional crafts like intricate tapestries, woodblock prints, or indigenous artworks. Organize hands-on experiences, allowing visitors to participate in these crafts, fostering a deeper connection with the local culture.

Festivals, annually, can be powerful magnets for tourists. Therefore, strategically schedule promotional events around major festivals, offering immersive experiences like traditional Tibetan dance performances, music, and drama. The implementation is a robust digital marketing strategy, including an engaging website, social media campaigns, and virtual tours. Utilize high-quality visuals and storytelling to evoke the essence of your province's culture, making potential tourists eager to experience it firsthand. In addition, local government collaborate with travel agencies and influencers to increase visibility and create partnerships with local businesses to ensure visitors have a seamless and enjoyable experience.

By developing the tourism industry and enriching the content of the tourism industry, rural tourism has become an emerging pillar industry for prospering rural areas, revitalizing agriculture, and improving farmers, allowing more farmers and herders to develop the tourism industry and embark on the road of poverty alleviation and prosperity, and become a significant force to improve the happiness index of the people.

4. Conclusion

The leap in Tibet's development over the past 60 years fully demonstrates that its democratic reform conformed to the historical trend of the times and the fundamental aspirations of all ethnic groups in Tibet and met the people's actual demand for social progress. Tibet has transformed from a society under feudal serfdom to socialism, from poverty and backwardness to civility and progress. The central government has introduced many favorable regional policies, covering tax and finance, infrastructure, industrial development, education, health, cultural preservation, and environmental protection.

From the three places given above, Pangong Lake, Lebugou, and Nyingchi, the Tibet tourism industry has a significant and positive effect on poverty reduction, reflecting the great value of executing the pro-poor tourism programs. Structural optimization, community empowerment, a high-quality tourism industry, and a sustainable tourism strategy should ensure coordination between scale development and appropriate quality. Under this condition, the underdeveloped or backward regions are actively advocated to regard tourism as an effective tool for development and poverty alleviation.

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