

Research on Rural Revitalization Pathways in Underdeveloped Areas: A Case Study of Wuli Village, Nujiang Prefecture, Yunnan Province

Hanning Lai

Chengdu Foreign Languages School, Chengdu, China
Email: 13910921634@139.com

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Abstract

This study takes Wuli Village, a settlement along the Ancient Tea-Horse Road, as a case study, focusing on pathways to balance cultural preservation and economic development within the context of rural revitalization. Constrained by its transportation conditions, Wuli Village's economic development is relatively lagging; however, this has also contributed to the relatively intact preservation of its original village landscape and cultural characteristics. Using field research methods, the study conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with residents from 15 out of the village's 42 households and examined the role of surrounding enterprises in stimulating the local economy. The research finds that the core challenge facing Wuli Village is the lack of distinctive products with market potential and a foundational industrial base. Based on this, the study proposes that establishing cooperative mechanisms with surrounding enterprises and developing tourism formats centered around cultural experiences could be effective pathways for achieving the dual objectives of cultural preservation and economic enhancement.

Keywords

Rural Revitalization, Cultural Characteristics, Enterprise Cooperation

1. Introduction

Research Background: The current state of rural development in China's remote areas, the difficulties and challenges faced, and the urgent need for rural revitalization research.

Over the decade since the implementation of China's Rural Revitalization Strategy, eastern plain regions have achieved significant development through indus-

trial clustering and urban-rural integration. However, deeply impoverished areas in the west still face a triple contradiction of geographical isolation, industrial hollowing-out, and cultural preservation. Represented by remote villages like Wuli Village in Nujiang Prefecture, Yunnan Province, these areas, while preserving the original features of the Tea-Horse Road and characteristics of multi-ethnic cultural coexistence due to poor transportation access (Yuan & Wang, 2012), are trapped in a dual predicament of being an “ecological island” and an “economic depression”: the annual income per household among the 42 families is less than 10,000 RMB, traditional agriculture and animal husbandry barely suffice for self-sufficiency, and the seasonal outmigration of young people leads to continuous village hollowing (Hu et al., 2022).

This phenomenon of “protective poverty” is common in the Three Parallel Rivers region of northwestern Yunnan. According to data from the China Rural Development Report (Zhou et al., 2021), ecologically sensitive villages similar to Wuli Village account for 18% of the total villages in western China, and their development is constrained by the policy tension between the “ecological protection red line” and “economic development needs”. Existing research often focuses on agricultural modernization or e-commerce poverty alleviation models. However, for culturally dense remote villages, how to balance “authenticity preservation” and “economic sustainability” remains an unresolved challenge. The particularity of Wuli Village lies in its triple scarcity as the “only well-preserved original village segment along the Yunnan-Tibet Ancient Tea-Horse Road”, possessing natural landscape (Nu River Gorge cloud and mist topography), cultural heritage (multi-religious coexistence, Nu blanket weaving), and historical value (ancient trade route sites) (Dai et al., 2023). This makes it a typical sample for exploring “culture-enabled revitalization pathways”.

In current practice, government-led infrastructure improvements (such as the hardening of the village access road in 2020) have alleviated transportation constraints but failed to activate endogenous development momentum. Spontaneously formed low-end tourism (e.g., two agritainment) falls into a vicious cycle of “low consumption—low revenue” due to a lack of standardized services and distinctive products. In contrast, the Jishang hotel, through its “modular local design” and “cultural experience operation” enterprise cooperation model, demonstrates the potential to transform cultural capital into economic capital: its Phase I project, by employing local artisans in construction and developing Nu blanket derivative artworks, increased the monthly income of participating villagers to 3,000 - 5,000 RMB, validating the feasibility of the “enterprise-community collaboration” model (Qian et al., 2024).

This case echoes the “Community-Benefiting Tourism” concept proposed by the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which involves activating dormant rural cultural and ecological resources through enterprise resource integration capabilities (design, branding, channels). As demonstrated by the experiences of Japan’s Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and France’s Provence rural transformation,

the key to revitalizing culturally dense villages lies in constructing a closed loop of “local value—professional transformation—market realization”. Wuli Village’s exploration offers important insights for such areas: under the premise of strictly adhering to ecological and cultural bottom lines, enterprises, acting as “value converters (Wang et al., 2024b)”, can integrate scattered resource elements (such as traditional crafts, folk activities, natural landscapes) into high-value-added experiential products, thereby resolving the “preservation vs. development” dichotomy.

How can long-term mechanisms for enterprise participation be established? Where is the balance point between cultural authenticity and commercial development? The answers to these questions are not only crucial for improving the livelihoods of the 42 households in Wuli Village but can also provide a replicable methodology for the revitalization of 280,000 similar villages across China (Li et al., 2024; Tao & Wall, 2009).

2. The Current Situation of Wuli Village

2.1. Basic Overview and Regional Representativeness of Wuli Village

Wuli Village is located at the Yunnan-Tibet border, deep within the Nu River Gorge, a 7-hour drive from the nearest airport (Figure 1: The geographical location of Wuling Village).

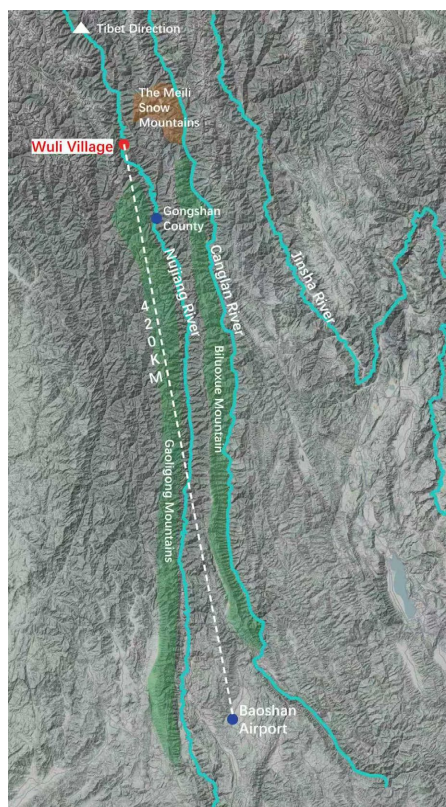


Figure 1. The geographical location of Wuling Village.

Transportation is essentially blocking, but the original landscape remains preserved. The journey from Baoshan Airport to Wuli Village is arduous, involving at least 8 hours of travel. Some sections traverse gorge terrain, making the ride not only bumpy but also precarious due to narrow roads, complicating vehicle passage. The region of the Three Parallel Rivers endows the area with rich natural resources, including sufficient water for farmlands. The surrounding mountains also host a variety of herbs that can be gathered for income. Perennially nourished by moisture, the gorge is often shrouded in clouds and mist, with the village faintly visible within, hence the name “Wuli” (Within the Mist). It is a classic small village, with only 42 households (a number that continues to decline), low income, and a population that is almost entirely self-sufficient. Some families earn only a few hundred RMB per month, as survival depends on raising pigs and cattle and growing their own food. With little opportunity to spend more money, the local people have limited demand for cash. The village also possesses significant religious characteristics (**Figure 2**: Buddhist cultural buildings), with locals practicing different faiths, including Buddhism, Catholicism, Christianity, etc.



Figure 2. Buddhist cultural buildings.

2.1.1. Geographical Features and Livelihood

Wuli Village is located deep in northwestern Yunnan, at the Yunnan-Tibet border, in the northern section of the Nu River. It lies with the Biluo Snow Mountain behind, the Nu River and Gaoligong Mountain in front, and the Dulong River to the west, situated within the area where the Nu, Lancang, and Jinsha Rivers flow in parallel. Furthermore, Wuli Village is the only preserved original village segment on the Yunnan-Tibet Ancient Tea-Horse Road (from Yunnan to Tibet). This unique geographical environment has shaped a livelihood based on coexistence with nature. Due to the high altitude and unsuitable conditions for many crops, villagers cultivate terraced fields on steep slopes, growing cold-resistant crops like corn, potatoes, and buckwheat. Relying on a profound understanding of the surrounding forest resources, villagers gather various wild mushrooms such as matsutake and morels, as well as wild vegetables and medicinal herbs. These mountain delicacies are partly consumed and partly sold for cash. Simultaneously, they raise livestock such as pigs, chickens, and cattle to meet household food needs. The younger gen-

eration tends to engage in seasonal migrant work, bringing cash income back to the village, which is also a crucial current livelihood strategy. Most daily necessities are sourced directly from the natural environment. The vertical mountain ranges create diverse environments on a single mountain, rich in animal and plant resources. Their way of life represents a high degree of coexistence with nature, primarily utilizing natural products and minimal external resources. While this lifestyle is natural and environmentally friendly in terms of daily living, and allows for self-sufficiency, long-term self-sufficiency fails to stimulate local consumption desires. Ultimately, this leads to an inability to develop the village economy.

2.1.2. Main Modes of Production

The primary modes of production in Wuli Village are traditional agriculture and animal husbandry, along with some other activities. Agricultural cultivation relies on natural rainfall and water retention on slopes, lacking irrigation facilities. Crops have one harvest per year, with limited yields. This production mode is small-scale, relies on human and animal labor, has very low mechanization, and constitutes a relatively primitive form of ecological agriculture. Family raising of livestock is mostly free-range. Livestock provides both a source of meat and essential aid for farming. This mode of production supplies animal protein (meat, eggs, milk), accumulates manure for farmland use, and employs large animals like cattle and mules for transporting goods and plowing. Handicraft production (mostly Nu blankets) is demand-driven. However, the main handicraft product, the Nu blanket (**Figure 3**), suffers from overly simplistic designs without professional input. Nevertheless, weaving Nu blankets can also serve as a tourism experience activity, generating income for the locality. Some villagers have converted their homes to run agritainment or family inns, providing accommodation and meals for tourists, but currently, there are only two such establishments, and one has already closed. Young people in the village are more inclined to engage in seasonal migrant work outside the tourist season, traveling to Gongshan County, Dali, Kunming, or even coastal areas, bringing labor income back to the village to improve their lives and build houses.



Figure 3. Nu blanket.

2.1.3. Income Levels

Villagers' incomes are generally low, with most households having an annual income of less than 10,000 RMB, consistently below that of rural areas in China's eastern plains and also below the average level for Yunnan Province. With the comprehensive advancement of China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation and Rural Revitalization strategies, along with improvements in infrastructure (such as roads and communications), villagers' incomes have substantially increased over the past decade. However, a gap with the average level remains. Household income in Wuli Village is no longer solely derived from agriculture but consists of multiple components, including traditional agricultural income, operational income, wage income, and policy-based transfer income (policy-based transfer income). Traditional agricultural income, wage income, and policy-based transfer income are difficult to significantly increase within a few years, as their levels fundamentally depend on how much people want to earn, or are fixed in the case of transfers. Due to the extreme scarcity of shops or activities for transactions within the village, the local people have very low demand for income. The grain they grow themselves can meet basic survival needs. Even for building a house, which modern perspectives see as requiring substantial funds, villagers only need government approval to fell a dozen or so trees for materials, and labor is solved through mutual help within the community. The money needed to build a house is much less than one might imagine. The lack of demand fails to stimulate consumption and grow the village economy, which is a crucial reason for the low income levels in the village. Fieldwork evidence substantiates these economic challenges. One villager expressed, "We grow enough to eat, but there's no money for other things. If someone gets sick or children need school fees, it's very difficult". Another stated, "Why would I need more money? There's nothing to buy here, and we build our own houses". These quotes highlight the low cash-based demand and the self-sufficient nature of the local economy.

2.2. Commodity Exchange in Wuli Village

The scale of trade is small and infrequent, often involving barter or small cash transactions. A stable grain market has not formed.

2.2.1. Grain Trade from Farming

Villagers occasionally trade surplus grain beyond their own needs at periodic markets or with mobile vendors, exchanging it for daily necessities like salt, oil, and cloth. Very few households use their own grain to operate agritainment; the entire village has only one such family, as most households' daily needs are already met.

2.2.2. Livestock Trade from Animal Husbandry

Livestock trade is a relatively important source of cash income for Wuli Village. Villagers sell surplus pigs, chickens, cattle, and other domestic animals when they need money. Transactions mostly occur in local small markets or are conducted

by buyers coming to the village. Although profits are limited, this still constitutes a primary means of supplementing household cash.

2.2.3. Item Trade from Cultural Characteristics

The locality has many cultural characteristics passed down for centuries, but very few are marketable. The corrugated metal roofs have poor practicality for urban architecture and their appearance does not align with mainstream modern aesthetics. Only the Nu blanket, being not too large and having practical use, can be sold. The problem lies in the fact that Nu blankets with overly traditional aesthetics are not favored by most urbanites. Some tourists buy them merely for novelty. The labor-intensive production also means that Nu blankets cannot be sold in large quantities.

3. Tourism in Wuli Village

3.1. The Potential for Hotels to Rapidly Develop Wuli Village's Economy

In May 2022, the Jishang hotel began construction in Wuli Village, opening new possibilities for the village's revitalization.

3.1.1. Current Basic Situation

The “Jishang · Wuli Village” project (**Figure 4**: “Jishang · Wuli Village” project,



Figure 4. “Jishang · Wuli Village” project 1.

Figure 5: “Jishang · Wuli Village” project 2, **Figure 6:** “Jishang · Wuli Village” project 3) is located in Wuli Village, Bingzhongluo Town, Gongshan County, Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, deep within the Nu River Gorge. Access is extremely difficult, requiring a 7-hour drive from the nearest airport, making it a true “hidden gem”. The hotel aims to retain the original characteristics, emphasizing deep integration and respect for local natural and cultural resources.



Figure 5. “Jishang · Wuli Camp” project 2.



Figure 6. “Jishang · Wuli Camp” project 3.

The project is developed in two phases:

Phase I “Jishang · Wuli Camp”: Based on restoring classical Chinese rural aesthetics, integrated with contemporary high-quality lifestyles, targeting high-end clientele such as scholars, artists, and designers, providing deep cultural experiences and services.

Phase II “Jishang · Wuli Camp”: Positioned as a “wild luxury camp on the Bingzhongluo-Chayu-Chawalong route”, serving both as a tourism hub and cultural dissemination point, equipped with facilities like a restaurant, cafe, guest rooms, and gear sales, catering to self-driving tourists and backpackers.

The hotel adopts “modular local design” as its construction philosophy, using local natural materials to minimize damage to the original village landscape, striving to become a “destination cultural post”.

3.1.2. How the Hotel Drives Wuli Village's Economy

“Jishang · Wuli Village” stimulates local economic development through the following means:

Job Creation: During hotel construction and operation, local villagers are hired for roles in construction, hotel services, etc., providing stable employment. During the construction phase, the project can prioritize hiring locals for foundational work, earthwork transport, etc., bringing immediate income. More importantly, during the operational phase, the hotel will systematically train local talent for positions covering front desk reception, room service, food and beverage management, logistics, gardening maintenance, and cultural guiding.

Procurement of Local Materials and Crafts: During the construction phase, the enterprise can systematically use local timber, stone, bamboo, etc., not only reducing transport costs but also making the building itself a showcase of local style. Simultaneously, carpenters, stonemasons, weavers, and other artisans from the village are invited to participate in creating the hotel's style (e.g., carved decorations, stone wall laying, bamboo lamp making), enabling their traditional skills to produce products and architectural elements that blend ancient and modern based on modern designers' plans. This process is not merely procurement but a practice of modern application for traditional crafts, injecting new vitality into ancient skills and laying the groundwork for subsequent commercialization.

Monetizing Cultural Content: The hotel should transcend its accommodation function to become a channel for disseminating Wuli Village's culture. Through systematic and regular planning, it can host micro-exhibitions themed on Lisu culture and Tea-Horse Road history, and establish an “Artist Residency Program” to attract domestic and international painters, writers, and musicians to create works, which can become part of the hotel's art collection or be derive as cultural products. Building on this, the hotel can collaborate with the village collective to create an annual “Wuli Culture Festival”, gathering global cultural leaders and depth travelers. Through high-end, niche activities (such as ancient road hiking forums, ethnic music nights, handicraft workshops), Wuli Village can be elevated from a mere sightseeing spot to a deep cultural experience destination, significantly enhancing brand recognition and directing high-spending clientele to surrounding industries like homestays, catering, and handicraft sales. The arrival of high-spending groups means village income will rise substantially and implies an influx of external projects into the village, bringing consumption opportunities. This allows villagers to have places to spend the money they earn, stimulating their desire for both consumption and income generation.

Promotion of Agricultural Products and Specialties: The hotel's food and beverage department is a key link in promoting “agritourism integration”. It should

strive to create a “Wuli Flavor” catering brand, with the restaurant menu prioritizing the purchase of local organic vegetables, free-range poultry, Nu River wild mushrooms, and specialty mountain honey. This not only ensures the freshness and uniqueness of ingredients but also directly incorporates villagers’ agricultural products into the hotel’s high-value supply chain. Furthermore, the hotel can promote these high-quality specialties through online sales channels, telling the ecological and cultural stories behind them, helping villagers establish a unified, standardized, traceable brand image, thereby get through the upgrade path from “raw material supplier” to “branded product”, significantly increasing the profit margin of agricultural products and helping villagers broaden sales channels (Guo et al., 2025).

Tour Route Development: As a travel service institution, the hotel can design unique, in-depth experience routes for guests. Beyond the classic Tea-Horse Road trek (Figure 7: The Ancient Tea Horse Road), it can develop other potential niche routes, offering travelers more choices and hiring more guides familiar with local trails. By training and certifying a group of local guides who lead guests deep into the village and wilderness, the hotel not only extends visitors’ stay but also spreads consumption opportunities from within the hotel to the entire community.



Figure 7. The ancient tea horse road.

Unlike other methods, the model of hotels integrating with villages represents an external push for the economy. It can introduce external consumption items, generate greater consumption desire among villagers, and provide job opportuni-

ties offering more income. Moreover, after consumption desires are enhanced, people become more motivated to earn money. Even without the hotel, this can make villagers more proactive in seeking work outside or cultivating more land.

During the interview, some of the villagers who had already started working said, “The enterprise has indeed improved the quality of life for my family and I have also obtained a stable job”. However, some families that did not benefit from these enterprises would say, “These enterprises really didn’t offer us any special assistance, did they?”

3.1.3. Why Partnership with Enterprises is a Potential Path for Wuli Village’s Development—Wuli Village’s Transformation Path

The integration of enterprises with Wuli Village, especially cooperation with cultural enterprises like “Jishang” that possess strong content output capabilities and brand influence, offers numerous possibilities for the village’s development, such as resource integration and brand empowerment (Wang et al., 2024a). Enterprises can integrate resources from design, media, art, commerce, and other sectors, transforming Wuli Village’s cultural and natural value into brand content with communicative power and consumer appeal, enhancing its popularity nationally and internationally. Currently, some luxury clothing brands are already hiring local Nu blanket weavers to create new blanket designs based on contemporary aesthetics for sale as luxury garments. Enterprises also provide a sustainable development model: through an “anthropological research + design practice + content production” model, they ensure the development process respects local culture, ecology, and economic logic, avoiding the homogenization and damage caused by over-commercialization. Furthermore, local enterprises adhere to a model that balances cultural protection and innovation. They not only protect traditional culture but also promote its creative transformation and innovative development through contemporary design, artist residencies, publishing projects, etc., giving it greater contemporary value and vitality. In terms of long-term operation and influence consolidation, enterprises possess long-term operational capabilities and media matrices, enabling them to continuously channel high-quality clientele and content resources to Wuli Village, forming a virtuous cycle of “culture—popularity—economy (Xiao et al., 2025)”. However, currently, there is no complete enterprise operating long-term within the village; these remain hypotheses (Figure 8: Enterprise Assistance Mechanism for Rural Areas Chart). It is important to clarify the evidence base for the Jishang hotel’s impact. The mentioned income increase for participating villagers to 3,000 - 5,000 RMB monthly was observed during the Phase I construction and initial artisan collaboration phase, as reported by the project managers and confirmed in interviews with participating villagers. Many of the activities described in Section 3.1.2, however, such as the “Wuli Culture Festival” and systematic online sales channels, are prospective plans outlined by the enterprise, representing the potential future trajectory rather than fully realized outcomes.

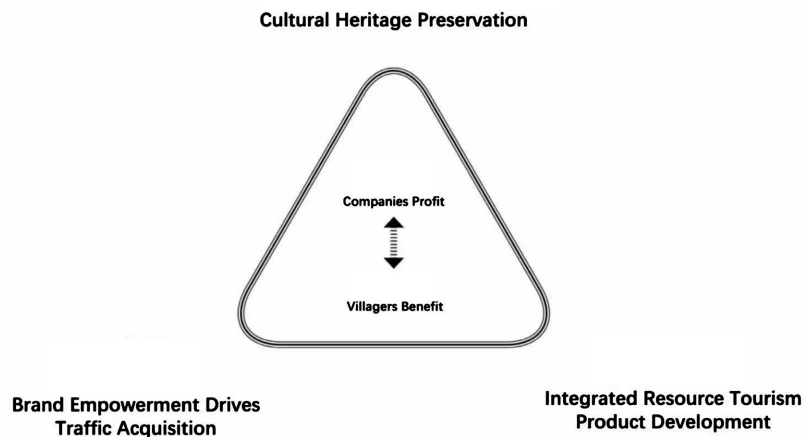


Figure 8. Enterprise assistance mechanism for rural areas chart.

4. Lessons Learned: The Universality of Enterprise-Led Rural Development

4.1. Lessons and Universal Insights

The rural revitalization practice in Wuli Village, catalyzed by a high-quality hotel, offers successful experiences that extend far beyond the economic improvement of a single village. It provides a highly valuable development paradigm, whose core lies in the paradigm shift from “external transfusion” to “endogenous hematopoiesis”. This approach is highly versatile and replicable, but it still requires ensuring that external enterprises respect local traditional cultural characteristics and do not transform a village with its own culture into a cluster of concrete buildings (Wang & Li, 2025).

While the enterprise-led model presents significant opportunities, it is crucial to acknowledge its potential risks. These include over-commercialization that could dilute cultural authenticity, the risk of cultural appropriation where external entities profit disproportionately from local heritage, and the creation of community dependency on a single external entity, making the village vulnerable to the enterprise’s financial health or strategic shifts. A balanced approach requires clear agreements on benefit-sharing, community involvement in decision-making, and strategies for building local capacity to ensure long-term resilience beyond the initial enterprise partnership.

4.2. Feasible Conditions

4.2.1. Cultural Empowerment, Not Mere Commercialization

This case abandons the superficial approach of simply packaging culture as a commodity, turning instead to “cultural empowerment”. Through artist residencies, craft procurement, and the design of deep experience routes, the hotel positions local culture as a high-value “core means of production” and a unique life experience. This motivates villagers’ cultural confidence and motivation for preservation, forming a virtuous cycle where “culture is preserved because it is appreciated, and continues to generate value because it is preserved”.

4.2.2. Community Participation, Not Passive Acceptance

The sustainability of development stems from the initiative of the main actors. This case, through mechanisms such as establishing villager shareholding, local employment, and skills training, ensures that villagers are not merely “beneficiaries” of development but active “participants” and “decision-makers”. This establishment of agency is the social foundation for gaining local support and ensuring the project’s long-term stable operation.

4.3. Universal Value and Reference Significance

Wuli Village’s experience offers the following actionable reference paths for villages facing similar dilemmas:

4.3.1. Identifying Viable Enterprises

Underdeveloped villages should not passively wait for rescue but should proactively seek or cultivate “converters” that can efficiently connect their unique resources (cultural, ecological, product) with external market demand. As shown by a 2023 survey (Liu et al., 2023), in villages similar to Wuli Village in northwestern Yunnan, enterprise-involved projects increased villagers’ income by an average of 2.3 times, directly validating the effectiveness of the Jishang hotel’s “agricultural product procurement—branding promotion” model. This “converter” could be a boutique hotel, a social enterprise, a renowned designer studio, or a strong cooperative. Its core function is to understand the urban consumer market and empower the rural production system. Beyond tourism, enterprise cooperation is also crucial for developing the “distinctive products” identified as a core challenge. For instance, partnerships with design enterprises can help modernize Nu blanket patterns and product lines to enhance their market appeal while preserving traditional weaving techniques. Collaborations with agribusinesses can help brand and market local agricultural goods like wild mushrooms and mountain honey, establishing premium product lines that capture greater value for the community. This broader view of enterprise cooperation addresses the foundational industrial base needed for sustainable development.

4.3.2. Designing Win-Win Models, Becoming a Community of Interest

Any external investment project must be designed from the outset to ensure that the local community shares in the long-term development dividends. While ensuring the enterprise can profit from the village’s unique anchor points, it is also crucial to guarantee that villagers benefit from the enterprise’s development, contributing to long-term sustainability.

4.3.3. Investing in “People”, Activating Endogenous Motivation

Investment is ultimately an investment in people. The modernization of villagers’ skills and mindsets is the ultimate guarantee for sustainable rural development. Development projects must be accompanied by systematic capacity-building plans for local residents, covering technical services, financial management, marketing, etc., empowering villagers to become qualified participants in the modern economy.

4.3.4. Adhering to the Bottom Line of “Protective Development”

Ecological and cultural heritage are the most core, non-renewable capital of underdeveloped areas. Development must be premised on protection. Clear red lines for environmental and cultural carrying capacity must be established. All development activities, from architectural design to tourist capacity, must serve the ultimate goal of protecting core resources, achieving “development within protection, and better protection through development”.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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