

# Community-based Tourism Stakeholder Conflicts and the Co-creation Approach: A Case Study of Longji Terrace Fields, PRC<sup>1</sup>

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*Received: February 12, 2019*

*Revised: April 4, 2019*

*Accepted: June 7, 2019*

## Abstract

The conflicts and power relations between tourism stakeholders have recently attracted the interest of scholars studying community-based tourism. This article examines stakeholders' interests, conflicts, and conflict solving through the co-creation approach in the context of tourism development in the Longji Terrace Fields in Guilin, China. Based on qualitative research using in-depth semi-structured interviews, the article examines the existing tensions among different stakeholders as well as conflict-solving solutions. The article illustrates how stakeholders' interactions could be based on common interests and mutual benefits through a co-creation approach rather than through economic competition. Balancing the benefits of the diverse tourism stakeholders is necessary to achieve inclusive growth and sustainable tourism development in the long run. The article suggests that solving conflicts among tourism stakeholders and the co-creation of

<sup>1</sup> This research article is part of a Ph.D. dissertation in Social Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, entitled "Chinese Outbound Tourism and Alternative Modernity - A Reflexive Study of Chinese Transnational Tourists in Thailand." The authors wish to acknowledge the sources of funding support for the research on which this article has been developed. They include the National Social Science Fund of China (17BJY150), the Guangxi Human Resources Highland for Young Lectures Capacity Escalation Projects from the Department of Education of Guangxi and Guilin Tourism University under grant number KY2016YB536, and Guangxi Science and Technology Base and Talent Project: China-ASEAN Tourism Cooperative Research and Innovation Center (2017AD19030). It is also part of the projects conducted by the Asian Development Bank under the following capacity-building projects: the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) and the Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS)- B-I-G Capacity Building Program for Connectivity (B-I-G Program).

relationships in contemporary tourism projects and development can be of great importance in improving our understanding of stakeholder power relations and empowerment for common goals.

**Keywords:** community-based tourism, stakeholder, conflict, interest negotiation, co-creation

## Introduction

The underlying premise of this article is that conflicts between competing tourism stakeholders can be resolved through the discussion of solutions. Recent decades have witnessed the convergence of tourism and social science research. In the current tourism development context, power relations related to the tourism stakeholder theory have gradually become a popular topic of discussion. The successful development of a community-based tourism project is largely determined by the proper power geometry structure among all related parties, in other words, the stakeholders (Coles and Timothy, 2004). Each party is interested in its own concerns. These situations could inevitably lead to inner and outer social, economic and cultural disputes, and conflicts. How to solve these conflicts is of critical importance to the successful development of community-based tourism sites. Thus, the logic of this paper starts from the application of the stakeholder theory in social conflicts in a case study of community-based tourism, while introducing the principle of co-creation as one of the problem-solving suggestions.

## Literature Review

The stakeholder theory,<sup>2</sup> according to Grimble and Wellard (1997:175), offers "a holistic approach or procedure for gaining an understanding

<sup>2</sup> The definition of stakeholders originated in the stock market connotation of stockholder: an individual, or group of organizations, that holds one or more shares in a company, and in whose name the share certificate is issued. Another name, 'shareholder,' is equivalent to this definition. The concepts are related to players who present their subsistence in an organization's or a social group's benefits and development scenarios. When "stock" is replaced with "stake" in the concept of the tourism industry, it means interests and claims, related to certain benefits or shares about a legal right or status in certain social contexts.

Source: <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/stakeholder.html>

of a system, and assessing the impact of changes to that system, by identifying the main actors or stakeholders and assessing their respective interests in the system.” A widely-accepted definition of a stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the development and/or the achievement of an organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 2010). Twelve categories of stakeholders in the tourism sector were identified by Robson and Robson (1996); they include tourism employees, tourists, shareholders, pressure groups, hotels, tour agents, national administrations, local marketers, media, travel transportation, local attractions, and central governments. Tan, Sitikarn and Anomasiri (2018: 38) suggested that stakeholders’ participation is one of the most important social resources that play a significant predictive role in moving community-based tourism towards community strengthening and sustainable success; while Robson and Robson (1996) put forward that tourism organizational entities need a tacit consideration of the related stakeholders to minimize potential conflicts and achieve proper and better-coordinated development. To calculate the stakeholders’ potential functions in terms of finding the key stakeholders, Higman (2013) proposed five categories of main stakeholders in the tourism sector: organizational management, tour operators, local community habitats, government entities, and tourists. Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) pointed out the narrower definitions of stakeholders. They defined stakeholders as those agencies or persons who have direct relations to the core economic interest of a social enterprise.

Broader views are based on the premise that a development project or a business can be affected by, or can affect, almost any party or anyone (Magness, 2008; Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997). The concept hinges on the notion of fairness: “stakeholder management requires, as its key attribute, simultaneous attention to the legitimate interests of all appropriate stakeholders, both in the establishment of organizational structures and general policy and case-by-case decision making” (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). In other words, no one stakeholder should predominate. But in real life, of course, the ability

to exercise power and to draw upon superior resources vis-à-vis other stakeholders means that, in fact, there will be major or primary stakeholders, minor or secondary stakeholders, active and passive stakeholders, and those that affect other stakeholders versus those that are affected by other stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995; Sofield, 2003). Identifying the categorical sections of stakeholders is the first step in problem solving.

However, the interests of the different stakeholders all have intrinsic value, which means that different groups of stakeholders “merit consideration for its own sake” (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). In summarizing the conflicts in touristic areas in rural China with a variety of case studies, the following issues are identified: land expropriation, ticket revenue distribution, vending rights, tourism management rights, house demolition, house building, entry restrictions, village elections, and others (Wang and Yotsumoto, 2019). Resolving the conflicts becomes of great significance to all related parties. Consequently, it is important to introduce the co-creation theory for the purpose of solving these conflicts. The concept of co-creation is an initiative at the corporate managerial level, a strategy that brings together parties with diverse interests to jointly create collectively beneficial results (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2018).

One of the benefits of utilizing the stakeholder co-creation approach is that it enhances the prospects of a sustainable outcome. It facilitates the identification of differences of opinions, interests, and personal needs; and people-to-people interaction allows convergent and divergent opinions to be managed. It improves the assessment of the social and political impacts of policies and projects (Sofield, 2003). It is relevant for identifying multiple objectives and concerns and is therefore particularly useful when there are multiple users of a limited resource. And, according to Grimble and Wellard (1997), it provides an efficacious way “in which the needs and interests of people who are under-represented politically and economically can be highlighted.”

Environmental degradation, issues of equality, and social impacts caused by the tourism industry have attracted widespread social

concern; hence the stakeholder approach surrounding sustainable development has come into the range of tourism practitioners and researchers (Legrand, Simons-Kaufmann and Sloan, 2012; Page and Ateljevic, 2009). Page and Ateljevic (2009) initiated a multi-stakeholder approach to tourism development in proving its role in providing an avenue for overall economic development and a boost for local entrepreneurship activities. According to Botchway (2004) and Dobbs and Moores (2002), excluding the potential majority of beneficiaries leads to a development deficiency and organizational project failure.

Coming back to the locus of this article, its objective is to analyze the related stakeholders' power geometry within the community-based tourism industry development and cooperation situation. The literature review concentrates on previous research focusing on how tourism stakeholders are defined and identified, and the existing tensions among the related stakeholders. It also mentions a solution to the potential conflicts among different parties. However, the existing theories do not cover a variety of interactions within the unique features of the stakeholder equilibrium.

Therefore, we used our research as a case study, with the objective to identify stakeholders' interests, conflicts and conflict solving through a co-creation approach in the context of an existing successful tourism development project in Guilin, China.

### **Research Methods**

This article endeavors to relate the power relations theory to tourism development in modern Chinese community-based tourism. It selected one of the most successful cases – the Longji Terrace Fields in Longsheng, Guilin, China – as an example to investigate the implementation and practice of interest-oriented stakeholder power relationships through an empirical study of some incidents involving interest conflicts and negotiations.

The research adopted a qualitative case study approach. In addition, documentary resources of empirical evidence, such as

government annual reports, county documents of operation and non-official archives were utilized. Face-to-face interviews with stakeholders, including local authorities, government officials, company leaders, and villagers were conducted during the field visits from February to March and May to August 2017. A total of 17 face-to-face discussions were conducted, eight documentary reports were collected, and a series of voice recordings were transcribed and closely analyzed. Among the 17 participants interviewed, five were officers from local governments on the county and village levels; another six included tourism company leaders and officers representing project investment parties; and the remaining six interviewees were villagers from the villages of Pingan, Dazhai, and Xiaozhai. The empirical data and theoretical findings involved stakeholders' conflicts and restructuring the co-creation relationships among the interviewees in the fieldwork site. The diverse research methods and interviewees improved the reliability and credibility of the research results, which are described below.

### **Research Findings**

#### **The Research Site – Longji Terrace Fields**

The research site is Longji Terrace Fields, located in Longsheng County, Guilin City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. The county has a total area of 2538 square kilometers, inhabited by Miao, Yao, Dong, Zhuang, and Han people, as well as some other ethnic groups, who together comprise 75 percent of the population. Longsheng County is abundant in tourism resources. Since the 1980s, the number of overseas tourists has been increasing year by year, and the number of domestic tourists has also been increasing since the late 1990s. Tourism has gradually become a mainstay industry in Longsheng County since then. Other industries, such as the health industry, organic food production, herbal medicine, e-commerce, trade and logistics, and cultural industries, as well as entrepreneurship enhancement measures have become the new forces driving economic

growth through the momentum of tourism industry growth. In 2015, the number of tourists exceeded 5.5 million and the total tourism revenue reached 4.7 billion RMB (People's Committee of Longsheng County, 2016). During the expansion and thriving development of Longji Terrace Fields since the 1990s, the villages of Jinzhu Zhuang, Huangluo Yao, Pingan, Dazhai, and ancient Longji began participating in diverse tourism activities, such as homestays, dining, souvenir sales, backpack porter service, local guiding, sedan chair service, and the singing of folksongs. In the process of tourism development, the villagers, community leaders, tourism investment companies, and tourism administrators have usually shared economic benefits. However, at some critical moments, intense conflicts have broken out between some of these different stakeholders. Stakeholder analysis confirms the existing complex problems of the local community and the existing negotiation process. This method is also applicable to integrate the interests and perspectives of marginalized and disadvantaged social groups (Chambers, 1997). In the section that follows some key conflicts between different interest groups and their diverse perspectives will be presented.

### **Conflicts among Stakeholders in Longji Terrace Fields**

An initial field trip to the venue of the community-based tourism case study field revealed a very complex situation that defied easy analysis. Because of the differences in interest demands, the relationships between the various stakeholders was subjected to different interpretations. In an earlier study, Grimble and Chan (1995) conducted a stakeholder audit. The aim of this audit was to develop an understanding of the system and decision makers in the system; identify principal stakeholders; investigate stakeholder interests, characteristics, and circumstances; and formulate new strategies to improve stakeholder relations and therefore a sustainable form of development by meeting as many different needs as possible. This research applied this method to study the conflicts among stakeholders in Longji Terrace Fields.

Among all the disputes, the conflicts and contradictions that were most obvious are described below.

#### **Conflicts between Residents and the Tourism Investment Company**

One of the conflicts was a dispute between community residents and the investment company over tourism infrastructure, environmental protection issues, ticket revenue distribution, and other issues. The residents believed that they, as the indigenous owners of the community's tourism resources who had played a key role in tourism development, should be receiving a larger portion of the income from tourists. At the same time, the investment company viewed itself as responsible for scenic management and marketing promotion, and thus, argued that the tourist ticket revenue should be collected as the company's main source of income. The tourism company manager argued their case as follows.

Currently the company is bearing the burden of paying the villagers a large sum of money as the site's maintenance fee, as well as road construction and maintenance fees. The company also needs to pay all government taxes. The villagers are never satisfied with what they have already gained. In addition, for each ticket that we sell we need to pay ten percent to the villages as a resource management fee (LQ [Pseudonym], 2017).

In recent years, according to the government's annual reports, a series of road-blocking parades and many public and implicit protests have taken place because of revenue distribution conflicts. Some of the major conflicts over the interest distribution between community residents and travel companies were mentioned by the some of the interviewees, as in the example below.

Pingan villagers encircled the gate area to protest in March 2005. They boycotted the tourism company in April 2004 to voice their opposition to the policies proposed by the investors. The main request from the villagers concerned the land tenure contract between the investing tourism company and the village,

which had expired. When the company wanted to negotiate a renewal contract, the residents in the village were not satisfied with the small portion of ticket revenue they would receive. Another incident happened in 2009. Villagers from Jinzhu Zhuang village blocked the main road to a scenic spot in response to the moving of the ticket sales office from the village to a new office at the outer entrance to the area, which would bring about revenue loss for the local villagers. (CZ [Pseudonym], 2017)

### **Conflicts of Interest between Villagers and the Local Tourism Administration**

Local governments tend to increase tax revenue by forming rules and systems conducive to development or by attracting external investment. In many cases, the local people are excluded from such opportunities and become marginalized, sometimes completely, from the revenues gained from the development of the projects. Therefore, there is an urgent need for appropriate institutional arrangements to recognize the residents as one of the key stakeholders in the project. Conflicts between villagers and the government could also be triggered by the wrongdoings of individual government officials, such as using their power misleadingly to gain improper personal profit. One villager who was interviewed explained:

Some government officials at times improperly utilized their positions for personal gain, by inappropriately participating in certain tourism business activities. (CM [Pseudonym], 2017)

In this case, the stakeholder groups are heterogeneous, and the government and local residents would inevitably be negotiating on behalf of their own interests. Government officials are closer to the decision-making process and they need to recognize and understand the interests, characteristics, and circumstances of the local communities and the populace.

### **Conflicts between County Governments and Tourism Companies**

The conflicts between Longsheng county government and the investment company involved issues of authority and responsibility to govern the operations of the area for more sustainable development. Longji Tourism Co., Ltd. exclusively runs the operation of all the attractions of Longji Terrace Fields, while the local government, which exerts its power in establishing a subordinate scenic management bureau, is the main body governing the area. These two entities' responsibilities and roles were sometimes intertwined, and sometimes both sides felt dissatisfied with the work of the other. The tourism company contended that the main responsibilities of the scenic area management department should be focused on its responsibility to sketch out a master plan for construction of the scenic area. Moreover, they should exert their function as coordinator for managing the tourism industry in the villages and coordinate the relationship between the company and the villagers, especially when obvious conflicts emerge. One company staff member expressed his viewpoint as follows:

The work of the Longji Administrative Bureau seems dysfunctional, because as we can see, environmental protection is facing a severe challenge, and illegal hotel construction has become out of control in recent years. We believe that these phenomena should be immediately stopped and tackled by the government. (MG [Pseudonym], 2017)

The perspective of the Longji Administrative Bureau, on the other hand, can be seen in the view of an official who expressed the following view:

The implementation of corporate management in the Longji Terrace area has done more harm than good. The company's desire for shortsighted business revenues is not conducive to the development of local residents or the protection of resources in the long run. Companies have their innate quest for profits, but as the local administrative government entity, we need to consider resource management and environmental protection.

Otherwise, the scenic area cannot be maintained properly. (OF [Pseudonym], 2017)

The problems faced by the government and the company lie in these contradictions and disputes, and neither of the parties would be willing to take account of administrative responsibilities, especially when faced with contradictory development and under-development issues.

### **Conflicts and Disputes among Villagers**

Some conflicts also exist between individual villagers, one of which lies in disagreements over the utilization of public space. Many of the villagers became involved in the tourism business by establishing family homestays and vendor businesses, but some did not act as quickly as others, and were left behind in terms of economic benefits. Criticizing those who utilized more public goods for the purpose of individual businesses, marginalized groups of people are still suffering from sheer poverty and other predicaments. Their own poverty now prevents them from utilizing public facilities to change their lives. The dilemma they face is that they could not join in economic integration and benefit from the tourism development in the community, and consequently the only thing they could do was to express their jealousy and criticism over those whose incomes have improved. Consequently, some people were criticized for using excessive public goods to engage in tourism that resulted in environmental pollution and resource degradation.

A second conflict was among those villagers who cooperated with outside investors to build homestay hotels on their land, and those who did not. Since outside investors have greater marketing experience and could attract more tourists, some of the people who operate their own family houses as homestays have become dissatisfied because their businesses became less competitive and lost market share. Most community residents believe that the Longji Terrace site is the common property of community residents, and that those outside the community are not entitled to engage in the homestay business.

However, those residents who rent their family hotels to outside investors did profit from it, causing other family hotels lose out in the competition, ultimately resulting in conflicts and constant disputes.

Armed with an empirical understanding of individual stakeholder needs, interests and concerns, it might be possible to formulate an integrated proposal that could meet the needs of multiple stakeholders and thus achieve a sustainable outcome (Hardy, 2001).

After analyzing the existing conflicts among stakeholders, this article endeavors to find a simple resolution to the existing conflicts among the stakeholders, and then propose the concepts of the co-creation approach.

### **Co-creation among Tourism Stakeholders**

Herein we can elucidate power relations analysis of tourism stakeholder power relationships in the theory of practice framework. Power relations presuppose a dialectical feature, the coexistence of ruling hegemony and ruled resistance. Viewed from the perspectives of diverse groups of people, relations between individuals, between social groups, and a different social classes, power relations could be characterized by suppression and repression, dominance and resistance, harmony and conflict, unification and separation, sense of belonging and sense of frustration, as well as stability and changing reforms. A dialectic view of power reveals that a two-sided, co-existing discrepancy is a permanent feature in the dynamic mobilization of people. Tourism, in its essence, is an economic phenomenon. Government planning and legislation has power over the tourism bilateral relationships. Private investors' distribution of capital exerts force over the potential success of the hospitality sector, by undertaking their corporation responsibilities, which is so-called 'power to.' In contrast, community citizens are relatively less powerful. They are a marginalized, yet very important group in desperate need of empowerment. Key actors in tourism relationships would be involved in negotiation for the sake of receiving their deserved rights. Otherwise,

it will lead to another form of hegemony or economic exploitation. The power of united marginalized groups to negotiate with the more powerful investors and governments can be seen in the case of the Pingan village dispute.

The story illustrated by the former village chief (FVC, [Pseudonym], 2017) was like this:

A. The elite village chief committee organized a local tourism association, consisting of the village committee members and some representatives (opinion leaders) from villagers. Authorized with the consensus of all of the villagers, this association has the power to initiate negotiating discussions with the tourism company on important issues, especially the ticket revenue distribution mechanism, which ensured the interest of each villager in terms of headcounts.

B. The exact percentage for ticket revenue distribution was not a permanent resolution. In 2012, a renewal contract of 10 years was signed between the village tourism association and the tourism company; however, this distribution mechanism was a fluctuating one, which is also a proper way to protect the interests of both sides.

C. The revenue was not distributed to each villager directly, but to the Longsheng County Tourism Administration, which served as a supervisory body to ensure mutual guarantee authority. The money would be transferred to the village committee and eventually distributed to each headcount in the village.

D. The distribution of ticket revenue would go to the head of each family according to the number of headcounts at the moment of the signing of the contract in 2012. That means that within this 10-year contract, the family would receive a fixed number of headcounts of family members, even though it is possible that a family member would pass away. The passed-away family member would still receive a share of the revenue until the signing of a new contract.

E. The ticket-selling officers consist of both villagers and the tourism company, which serves as a perfect mechanism for mutual supervision. No fraud or statistical deception can be made under this scheme, which guarantees the transparency of revenue distribution and the local communities' supervisory power over the company.

F. Regarding the above-mentioned resolutions, there still exists a certain portion of unfairness in the revenue distribution. But realistically, the local residents could enjoy at least a certain portion of the benefits from the ticket revenue. Villagers once again became more willing to simultaneously preserve their terrace farmland and continue rice planting for the tourists who are seeking a landscape of colorful rice fields during four seasons, and most of them participate in the homestay, vender, and sedan-carrying businesses.

The above-mentioned revenue distribution negotiation process as a problem-solving resolution was not a simple revenue negotiation. It was one of the manifestations of co-creating a mutually beneficial co-working mechanism and equal revenue sharing framework. In the Chinese context, the government has strong structural power over the community-based tourism project as the administrative board. Investors, in this case the investing company, were the project developers who have the power to propose cooperative development master plans, while the community leaders who joined the negotiation gained the power to negotiate for a better revenue distribution for each villager. The outcome of the negotiation for proper ticket revenue distribution ensured the right of each villager, who bears the responsibility of providing proper services to visitors, as well as taking responsibility to maintain the rice terraces and their traditional farming lifestyle, which eventually creates the touristic landscapes and tourism products. In this regard, the co-creation approach nexus all stakeholders could also be one of the resolutions to the formation of contradicting stakeholder relationships. Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2014) elaborated the co-creation paradigm as "customer experience was becoming central to enterprise value creation, innovation, strategy, and executive leadership." Customer experience would require all related stakeholders to work and collaborate together to secure and create an amiable atmosphere so that this new frame of references could create interactive and transacting value to the customers, the tourists. This could not be done one-sidedly, but in the words of Akhilesh (2017), through "a complex, value-based, context-driven and collaborative effort to develop new paradigms,

products, and services to satisfy human wants.” Thus, co-creation is a two-sided learning process with different stages in tourism development projects.

### Conclusion and Discussion

The above-mentioned conflicts of interest could be fierce and brutal, but bearing a co-creation methodology in mind, the related stakeholders would finally reach a consensus of respect and cooperation, which will surely build up tourists’ experiential satisfaction index, and finally become a process that is mutually beneficial to the stakeholders. These benefits in the end accrue to related stakeholders, since the government, community, private sector and investors’ benefits or wellbeing are intertwined with a representational interest. Sustainable tourism is a form of planning and management whereby tourism is viewed in a holistic manner and different interests such as environmental, financial, community, and tourist satisfaction are addressed (Sofield and Mei Sarah Li, 1998). Conflicts, discussions, and negotiations among stakeholders would shape and reshape the existing power relationship and form new forms of power relations among each party. In the case of the Longji Terrace Fields communities, there are major interest groups such as state power, elite community, ordinary community residents and outside investors, as well as county government, that show the diversity of power geometry within the community context. As the case study witnessed, community participation gradually increased, and the way of participation also showed a variety of development trends. Longsheng county government, tourism companies, community residents, outside investors, and tourists are the main stakeholders in this tourist destination. Interests among the various power entities are complicated. Because of their different interests and needs and driven by the maximization of their own economic benefits, conflicts of interest and contradictions among the power stakeholders were constantly arising. Longsheng county government, as an agent of the official power of the state within the community, holds the authority of

governing the area and directly possesses the tourism resources through its powerful position to comprehensively represent the development of community tourism resources. The tourism company, as a scenic area management enterprise, has the right and responsibility to manage and maintain scenic spots. The community, lacking professional knowledge and marketing insight, would need more capability facilitating and marketing empowerment. At present, the community residents are powerless, and this situation sometimes results in explicit conflicts of interest among the various power entities. Only by forming a new co-creation mechanism of interests and changing the existing unequal power structure can an effective way for sustainable development go forward. Tourism embodiment and performance have witnessed exciting signs of progress by which a smaller part of the stakeholders benefitted. What needs more attention are justice and equality in such issues as stakeholder power distribution, property and resource conservation, and power-relations governance, by which the ‘community of common destiny of mankind’ shares in its advocacy and embodiment of China’s understanding of power, stressing equality and fairness. In order to fulfill the aspirations and expectations of both tourists and local communities, there is a need to construct integrated stakeholder power relations. No stakeholder should be left behind, and by working together, the community will grow together to become a more prosperous community, and a community of co-creatively shared interests.

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