

LEADERSHIP ROLE IN RURAL REVITALIZATION AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing discussion about sustainable development goals for people and the planet is nothing new. However, there are still many gaps and uncertainties in our knowledge of how to enable societies to become resource-efficient, sustainable, and wealthy (Griggs *et al.*, 2013). Rural tourism is a form of tourism development that reflects the principles of sustainable development (Sharpley, 2000). There are only a handful of studies on rural tourism development thus far, and studies that examine rural revitalization from a managerial perspective are still lacking. This study proposes a conceptual model of contributing factors to the success of rural revitalization, such as leadership involvement, stakeholder management, and community participation. Particularly, the leadership role will be closely examined. A successful revitalization project of a traditional village in Erkan Settlement in Penghu Taiwan is chosen as the case study.

Rural revitalization is a relatively new concept in achieving sustainable tourism development. It is a key approach to rural development as well as to poverty alleviation (Gao & Wu, 2017). The key issue is how to utilize the land for tourism purposes while providing local residents with sustainable income and livelihood from participating in tourism, and at the same time, preserving the local traditional cultures and ethnic spaces and villages (Shang *et al.*, 2021). Rural livelihoods are critical to rural development, tourism development, and sustainable development (Shen *et al.*, 2008). There are several potential benefits to be gained from rural tourism development, namely, direct economic benefits, experiential benefits, conservation benefits, development benefits, and synergistic benefits

(Saxena *et al.*, 2007). In addition, Li *et al.* (2020) suggested that there is still much room for improving and achieving rural revitalization.

Penghu county is composed of 90 isles (Penghu County Government, 2023) and 84 settlements (Kuan, 1987), located in the west of the main island of Taiwan. Erkan, one of these 84 settlements, is located in Xiyu Island in Penghu County, and having more than 300 years of history of the Chen family and the descendants. Erkan was enlisted and selected as the most suitable village to become a folklore village since 1991 (Wu, 1998; Erkan Ancient Residences, 1999). With the collaboration of various governmental bodies, the architectures in Erkan were renovated and helped to open up the cultural and traditional resources (Mi, 1995; Mi 1999; Yu, 2014). Former villagers from Erkan who moved out to the cities returned and helped in the revitalization planning and discussions (Wu, 1998). Today, Erkan Settlement has been positioned as one of the major accessible cultural attractions in Penghu with its well-preserved residential complex with unique architectural style. Besides coffee shops, seafood stalls, and local eateries, the village has a number of mom-and-pop stores, each operated by one descendant from the Chen family, selling unique and exclusive traditional products such as incense, almond drink, herbal packs, and local traditional snacks. The village also has accessible paths to the alleys, accessible restrooms, and plenty of parking spaces for tour buses and cars (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2023). The settlement demonstrates a successful rural revitalization project.

Rural tourism is challenging by nature due to it is decentralized, multi-player, and multi-stakeholder (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). An integrated approach is needed for rural tourism (Cawley & Gillmor,

2008), the integration of tourists, businesses, and host communities are the key to using and managing the resources sustainably (Saxena *et al.*, 2007). MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003) suggested that community-based partnerships such as cooperatives could be effective in rural tourism development. In particular, the local communities are the central stakeholders (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Leadership, thus, may play an important part in successful rural tourism to unite all stakeholders (McGehee *et al.*, 2015). Capable leaders can connect all the stakeholders, not to mention the leader's crucial role to inspire and communicate with the local community when launching a project (Burns *et al.*, 2015). The study examines the relationships among the leaders, stakeholders and the local community, especially the involvement of the place leaders and their contributions to successful rural tourism.

Place leadership concept has been widely discussed in the fields of policy, governance, and regional studies (Beer *et al.*, 2019; Collinge & Gibney, 2010; Nicholds *et al.*, 2017), however, the concept is still relatively new in the tourism perspective. Place leadership can be used in various spatial levels (such as regions, sub-regions, cities, districts, etc.) that cover a specific place as well as

the sentimental attachment of a place (Collinge & Gibney, 2010). Unlike the usual top-down leadership approach, place leaders emerge from and within the community (Collinge *et al.*, 2010). Place leaders have the essential elements of emotional attachments and a sense of place (Collinge & Gibney, 2010). These leaders usually spend considerable time and effort focusing on that specific place to gain community support for initiatives and possess strong relationships with various external and internal stakeholders (Sotarauta & Beer, 2017). This study thus intends to investigate the involvement of the place leaders and their contributions to successful rural tourism. Questions such as: What are these leaders actually doing? How do they contribute to the project? What leadership styles are adopted? How do they mobilize support (Collinge *et al.*, 2010)? How do they coordinate among these stakeholders and the community? These questions will be answered in the study.

This research proposes a conceptual model for contributing to the success of rural revitalization, namely, leadership involvement, stakeholder management, and local community participation. These three perspectives and their relationships will be studied and analyzed in the research (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Research Conceptual Model

METHOD

The research is in ongoing study progress status. Mixed research will be adopted to test the conceptual model. Elite one-on-one in-depth qualitative interviews with rural tourism leaders and

in-depth qualitative focus groups with various stakeholders will be done. Quantitative surveys with the local community and tourists in Penghu will be conducted and analyzed.

Elite interviewing is conducted with personnel in a position of authority who can provide insights

and have a comprehensive grasp of the issue under exploration (Gillham, 2000). The goal of elite interviews is to generate knowledge for scientific purposes (Littig, 2009). Leaders who were involved in the planning and execution of Erkan Settlement Revitalization Project will be interviewed for expert insights by purposive sampling and elite interviews. The study targets include the high-ranking officials from the government such as the chairperson of the Cultural Bureau in Penghu, the chairperson of the Tourism Planning Department in Penghu, the chief, and the decision makers of Erkan Settlements. There are six interviews scheduled and may have further additional interviews to reach data saturation. Each interview is planned to be one to two hours in duration, with audio recording conducted in Chinese or Taiwanese. In-depth qualitative focus groups with the related stakeholders such as shop owners in Erkan, local government officials, tour operators, and the local community in Erkan Settlements will be conducted by purposive sampling method. It is planned to have three or four focus groups, each focus group with six to eight participants, and each will last for less than one-hour duration in Chinese with audio recording. Both elite interviews and focus group conversations will be transcribed into Chinese and then translated into English, and NVivo software will be used in the analysis.

Face-to-face quantitative surveys with Penghu local communities and tourists will be conducted. The questionnaire content will be based on the literature review as well as the initial findings from the elite interviews and focus groups. A pilot test will be run to ensure the questionnaire content and design are all in place before the data collection. A systematic random sampling method will be used for the quantitative survey to ask the local community and the tourists in Penghu. Data analysis will be accomplished by making use of SPSS software to run relevant statistical tests.

IMPLICATIONS

The research findings will contribute to filling the research gap of lack of rural tourism managerial perspectives studies. Also, the research approach of the elite interview is not prevalent, and there are not many current publications in tourism studies using this technique; thus, this study can contribute to the

usage of elite interviews from a social science research point of view. Moreover, this study will contribute to the tourism industry by case-sharing possible successful rural revitalization stories and their contributing factors. The study will be able to suggest strategic action to practitioners in planning and implementing rural tourism projects. Also, the case can be considered as a reference in benchmarking in order to foster worldwide rural tourism as well as sustainable tourism development.

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