

Chapter 12

Sustainable Rural Tourism and Its Implications for Poverty Alleviation in Tibet Autonomous Region, P.R. China

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INTRODUCTION

Depressed areas have limited options for development because of various factors such as disadvantageous location vis-à-vis central consumer areas; limited natural resources; lower levels of economic development; undeveloped infrastructure; a shortage of investment in education, scientific, and technological research; and so on. In such situations, developing tourism becomes a high priority choice in poor areas. Although tourism is not a panacea to solve all development problems of remote and underdeveloped areas, it offers some useful opportunities.

Poor areas often have many tourist attractions because of unspoiled, special landscape and lifestyles, and persistent old cultures. At the same time promotion of tourism is constrained by poor infrastructure, limited development investment, insufficient accommodation and other services, lack of skilled human resources, and so on. Therefore both poverty alleviation and promotion of tourist facilities have to be addressed simultaneously.

This paper examines ways of reducing poverty in rural Tibet through the sustainable development of tourism. The notion of rural family tourism as a priority aspect of tourism development has been recommended to the regional government, and it is being adapted and carried out carefully.

SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS AND TOURISM RESOURCES IN TIBET

Social and economic features

Tibet is a historically important area of over 1,200,000 sq.km. It is the second largest area in terms of provinces and has the status of an autonomous region in China; and is thus counted separately. It includes one city and six prefectures, with 74 counties and 6,422 villages. By the end of 2001, the total population of the region was 2,629,00; 93% of whom were of Tibetan nationality. The other 6.9% are Han, Menba, Luoba, Hui, Naxi, and Nu. The low population density (2 /km²) is a significant factor influencing regional economical development. About 86% of the population depend on farming and herding. The GDP of the region is relatively low at 13,870 million yuan RMB in 2001 (5,307 yuan RMB per capita). GDP growth of 12.8% during the last year was the highest among all the provinces of China (Figure 1). Investment, as a major driver of growth, accounted for 61% of the GDP in 2001 with 8,577 million yuan RMB. This figure does not include the investment in the Qinghai-Xizang railway project of 2,000 million yuan RMB, or 386 million yuan RMB coming as aid and assistance from partner provinces and specific departments of the central government. The government revenue at local levels is rather limited—only 61,108 million yuan RMB in 2001. The average revenue per person is 234 yuan RMB because of lower tax policies. Government expenditure of 10,457 million yuan RMB in 2001 exceeds revenue because of the vast areas of land and consequent high administrative costs.

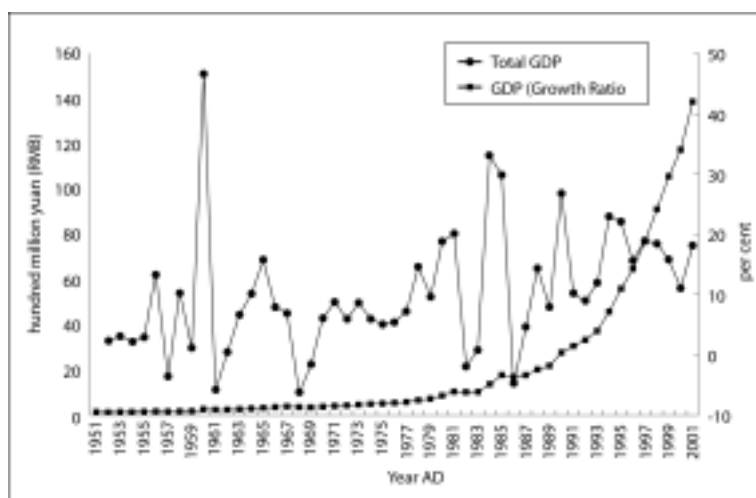


Figure1: The change of total GDP in Tibet in the past 50 yrs

Though the economy of Tibet has made some progress since the economic reforms undertaken by China, the regional economy still suffers from several gaps. (i) The growth and efficiency of the regional economy remain at low levels. The GDP per unit of land in Tibet is 116 million yuan RMB/km², which is the lowest in China. (ii) The financial revenue of all local governments is low, and the deficit is huge. The average proportion of government revenue to GDP is less than 4.4%; the huge financial deficit of 9,840 million yuan RMB binds the hands and feet of local governments, and limits their capabilities for development. (iii) The difference between urban and rural residents is growing. About 69% of the poor population (4% suffering from absolute poverty) are concentrated in rural areas. Their annual income equals 59% of the national average. Thus the general poverty of the rural economy is an obvious problem in Tibet.

Tourism resources

Because of its special altiplano landform, cold climate, difficult access, sparse population, isolation from population centres, and underdeveloped economy, there is little influence of damaging human activities on tourism resources. At present the ideal aboriginal scene of snow altiplano, historical cultural relics of the Tibetan people, and simple and unsophisticated folk customs are fully preserved in Tibet. The tourism resources of Tibet consist of natural unspoiled environments, historical and cultural monuments, and sustained folk customs and festivals.

Nature-based tourism resources

Tibet is located in the main part of the Qinghai-Xizang altiplano, bearing the name of 'the third pole of the world'. Its natural environment is famous for snow mountains, meadows, glaciers, and lakes. Tibet's natural wonders include the world's highest mountain (Chomolungma and its surrounding mountains); deepest canyon (Yaluzangbu); highest lakes; and most concentrated mountain glaciers. In Tibet there are 39 nationally protected wild plant species and 125 nationally protected animal species. There are 18 nature conservation areas with a total area of 401,000 sq.km, or 33% of the total area of Tibet. Among them, there are four national-level nature reserves with a total area of 352,000 sq.km. Also there is one national level resort, one national geological park, and two national forest parks.

Culture-based tourism resources

There are 161 cultural monuments designated in Tibet: 27 national-level monuments, 55 autonomous region-level monuments, and 79 county-level monuments. The Potala Palace, Jokhang Temple, and Norbulingka have

already been listed in the world cultural heritage lists. The Zhashilunbu Temple, Sajia Temple, Zongshan Relics, Guge Relics, etc. have been regarded as potential units in the world cultural monuments' list; there are three national-level historical cultural cities (Lhasa, Shigatze, and Jiangze).

Non-physical tourism resources

There are many non-physical tourism resources in Tibet, including rituals and practices relating to production and livelihood, local folk-custom festivities, festivals, and so on. Practices relating to production can be seen in the areas of agriculture, forestry, and pastoralism, as well as in habitations, settlements, and towns. Based on regional folk customs and religious cultures, Tibet can be divided into frontal Tibet, interior Tibet, An Tibet, and Kang Tibet. The clothing, architecture, religions, rituals, weddings, funerals, festivals, and methods of production differ significantly from region to region. In addition to the purely religious and local festivals, there are seven fixed grand tourism festivals: Xuedun festival, Azalea festival, Yalong cultural festival, Zhu Peak cultural festival, Xiangxiong cultural festival, Horse Race festival, and Tea-Horse-Ancient Road festival. These festivals promote the protection and restoration of local cultures and traditions of Tibet.

TOURISM IN TIBET

Organisation

The Tibet Tourism Bureau (TTB) was established in 1979 and symbolised the desire of the regional government to develop the tourism industry. In 1986, TTB was formally set up as a department of the government of the Tibet Autonomous Region in charge of the tourism industry. Later on TTB branches were set up in six prefectures and one city to facilitate the development and protection of local tourism resources. A similar organisation also exists at county levels where abundant tourism attractions and potential exist. Development Committees have been formed in the hotspots of tourism. In 1995, two non-governmental organisations were set up: 'Tibet Travel Agency Association' and 'Tibet Tourism Hotel Association'. The tourism organisations of both government and non-government agencies have played important roles in promoting sustainable tourism development in Tibet.

Growth

During the period from 1996 to 2000, the numbers of foreign and domestic tourists increased rapidly at an average rate of 17% per year (18.8% per year for foreign tourists and 16.3% per year for domestic tourists). The growth rate in tourism revenue has been 30.5% per year (15.3% from

international receipts and 10% from the local tax on tourism enterprises). In 2001, tourist numbers reached 686,000–559,000 domestic and 127,000 foreign tourists (including the tourists from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan), as shown in Figure 2. Total tourism income was 750 million yuan RMB, of which 385 million yuan RMB was from foreign tourists (Figure 3). The total tourism income was equal to 5.4% of GDP in the year 2001–1.2 times higher than gross regional export earnings. The tourism industry has thus played an important role in the economic development of Tibet.

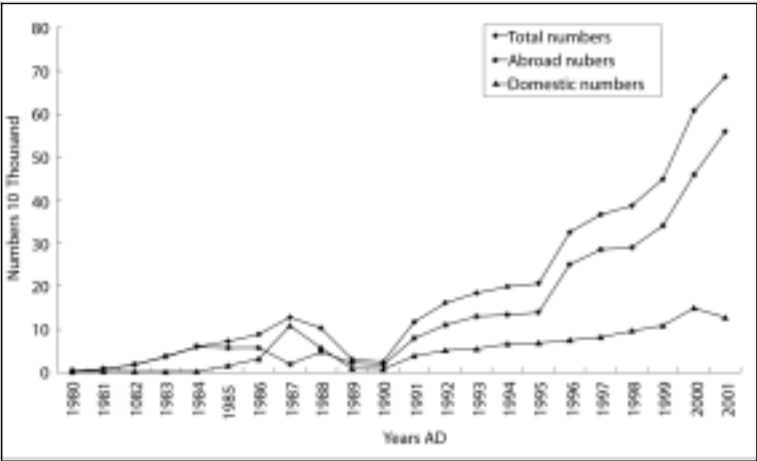


Figure 2: Change in the number of visitors to Tibet in the past 20 years

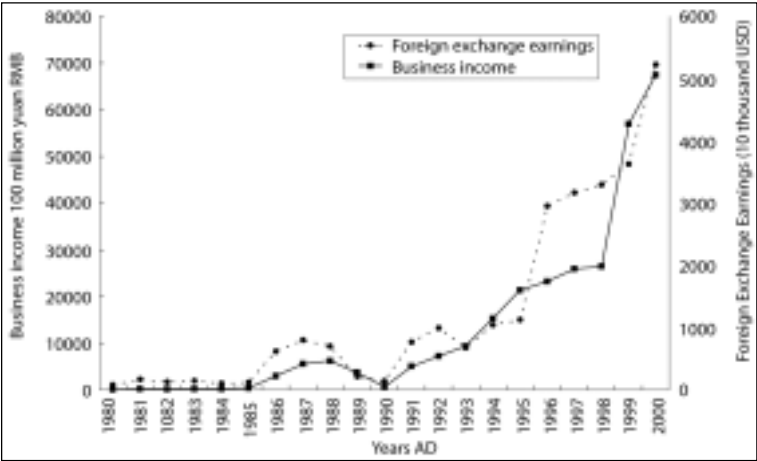


Figure 3: Change of business income from tourism in Tibet in the past 20 years

By the end of 2001, there were 167 tourism enterprises in total, including 35 travel agencies (19 international travel agencies and 16 national ones) and 97 tourism hotels (1 four-star, 14 three-star, 7 two-star, and 8 one-star) in this region. There are 5,713 guest rooms in total (about 12,600 beds); 29 fixed tourism restaurants; 3 tourism trade companies; 3 tourism vehicle companies with over 900 fixed tourism vehicles with over 8,000 seats. All tourism enterprises are state-owned with the exception of over 300 tourist vehicles belonging to individuals. They directly create 6,000 jobs, 62% of which are carried out by Tibetan people (in the year 2000), and 38% by other minority people. Nearly 30,000 persons are estimated to benefit indirectly from tourism-related earnings.

Tourist features

Arrival gateways

Because of the limitation caused by the Qinghai-Xizang plateau landform, tourism traffic has so far networked mainly with China's economic centres and commercial hubs. Figure 4 (drawn based upon the data on foreign tourists in 2001) shows that air transport is the main means for tourists to travel to Tibet. For example, Geermu, the only road gateway, was used by 5% of all foreign tourists in 2001. Air over-transfer through neighbouring provinces (Chengdu in Sichuan accounts for 43%) and a neighbouring country (Nepal accounts for 34%) was the main choice of tourists coming to Tibet. Besides Hong Kong and Nepal, there are no other international airline centres serving regional tourism. Accessibility is the bottleneck of sustainable tourism development. This situation will be greatly changed after finishing the Qinghai-Xizang railway in 2006.

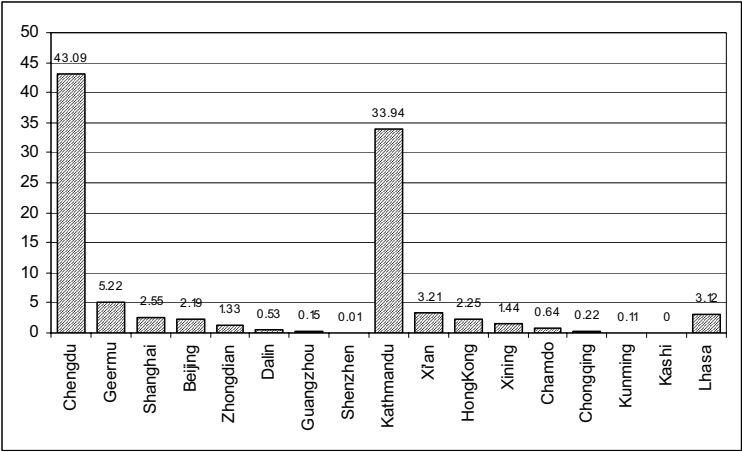


Figure 4: Gateways distribution of foreign arrivals to Tibet in 2001

The places of origin of tourists

Figure 5 shows that domestic tourists to Tibet are largely from the areas near to Tibet such as Sichuan, which accounts for 14% of all domestic tourists, or areas having higher development and higher incomes such as Beijing (22%), Guangdong Province (15%), and Shanghai (14%). This pattern is expected to change after opening the Qinghai-Xizang railway in 2006.

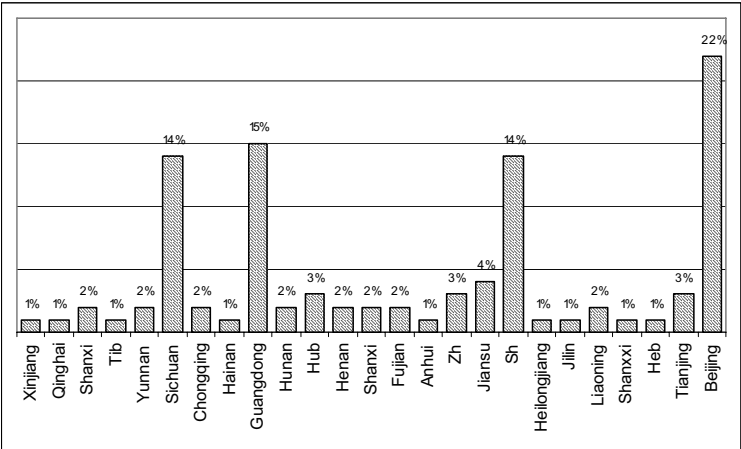


Figure 5: Break down of domestic tourists in Tibet by province of origin

Regarding foreign tourists, 23% were from the USA, followed by Japan (11%), Germany (8%), Holland (6%), Britain (5%), France (4%), as shown in Figure 6, which also includes Hong Kong and Macao (5%) and Taiwan of China (4%).

Categories of tourist

There are three categories of tourist in Tibet, as shown by Figure 7. The first is those that have much time or long vacations, such as retirees, students, and housewives. The second is those that have high earnings, such as staffers and businessmen. The third is those that have good education, such as teachers, engineers, lawyers, and so on.

CONSTRAINTS ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN TIBET

Weak tourism infrastructure

Modern and very comfortable facilities are an important step towards promoting tourism. This does not mean there are no tourists who live with

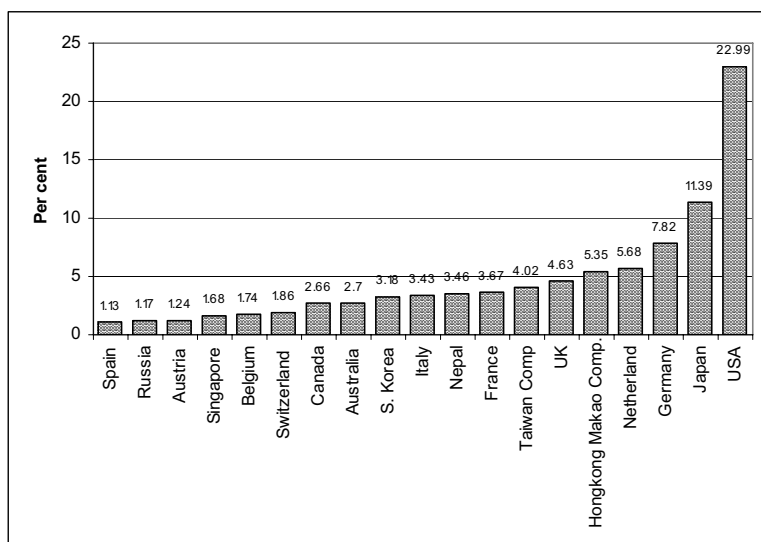


Figure 6: Break down of foreign tourists to Tibet by nationality

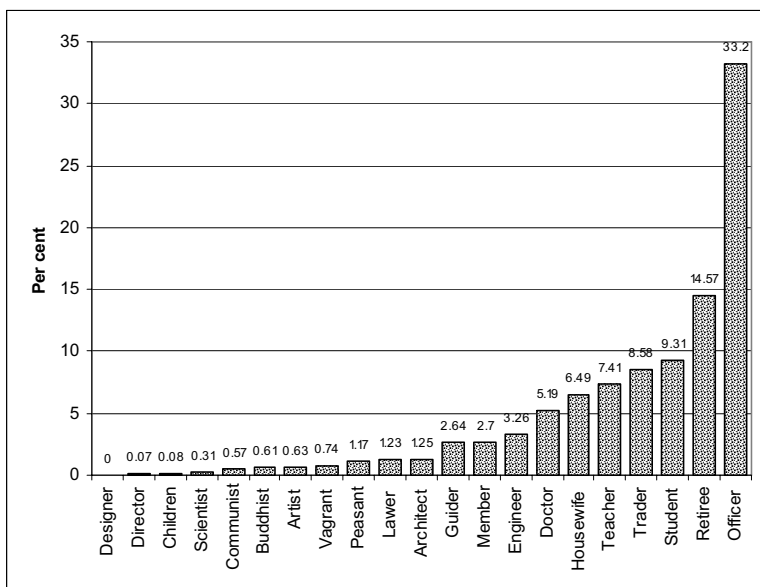


Figure 7: Break down of foreign tourists to Tibet by profession

simple facilities. However, in Tibet’s case, the level and quality of infrastructure for attracting tourists are quite low. Due to lack of resources the government is unable to build the facilities required.

Furthermore, the lack of skilled professionals, ranging from tourist guides to senior managers, is another problem. However, things are slowly moving, and facilities for cultural tourism, ecotourism, and so on are being established.

Inaccessibility, high cost, and limited numbers of tourists

Limited accessibility and long distances constitute major constraints to tourism development in Tibet. For instance, the aeroplane is the main vehicle for tourists visiting Tibet, but the monopoly of one air company on the route has created many problems. Poor service and high ticket charges are some of the problems. Tourism in Tibet requires much more time because of the huge distances between destinations. According to the statistics of some travel groups, foreign groups stay an average of 7.13 days in Tibet, which is 0.87 longer than the national average, much higher than in other provinces and cities, and even longer than the permitted length of vacation for most tourists (Figure 8). The expenditure is also a little bit higher for Tibet tours. The average expenditure per day per foreign tourist was 153 USD in 2001, which was \$45 higher than the average cost in the whole of mainland China. These constraints of inaccessibility, high cost, and longer tour duration limit the numbers of tourists visiting Tibet.

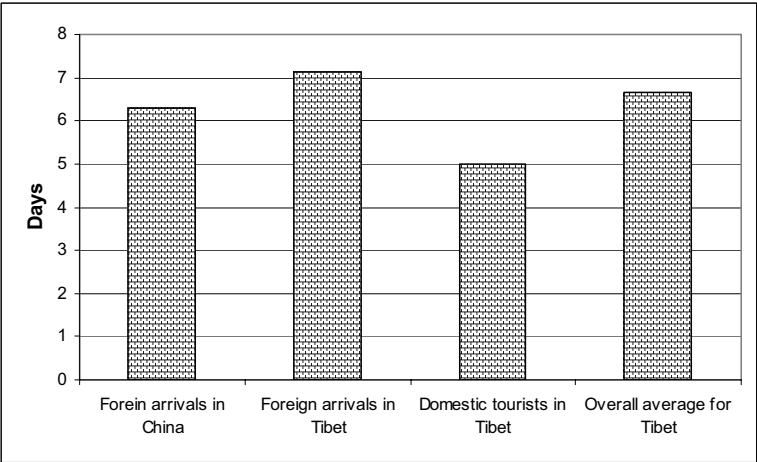


Figure 8: Average period of stay of visitors in Tibet

Seasonality and related imbalance

There is a long off-season of more than 6 months for tourism in Tibet because of the plateau climate with great temperature differences between the day and the night and relatively lower oxygen content in the air. The sharp seasonal fluctuation in the flow of tourists is a serious problem for the tourism business (Figure 9). In the off-season the occupancy rate in most hotels is less than 10%, even with price reductions of 40%. Some of them have to stop business. Therefore surprisingly high prices are charged in the busy season. The intensive competition and great risk within tourism enterprises can be especially harmful to small enterprises.

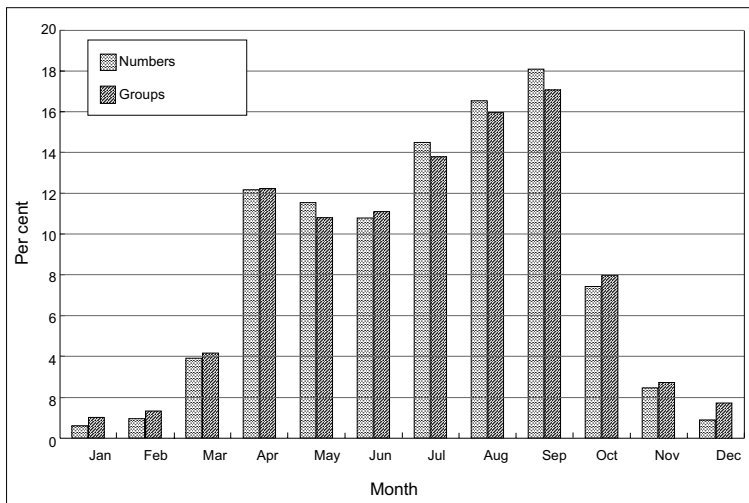


Figure 9: Seasonal flow of tourists in Tibet

The shortage of skilled workers

There is a strong demand for high quality workers who have skills to develop and manage tourism resources and provide facilities. But an investigation of tourism employees at the end of 2000 showed discouraging results, including the small number employed directly in tourism and their lack of requisite experience and qualifications.

Protection of fragile environments and cultural diversity

Tibet's environmental fragility and unique culture are well known. Tourism, despite its gains, also carries risks to both environment and culture due to its side effects. Concern for these factors has led to a cautious approach to tourism, which constrains tourism enterprises.

Similarly, the direct contribution of tourism to the poor population is rather limited, despite its important role in Tibet's economy. The participation of poor populations in the tourism industry is very limited, and a few groups with higher incomes take away most of the tourism income. This is despite the fact that the poor areas and the poor people protect most tourism resources. And yet they may suffer from the most negative impacts of tourism activities. This is a hidden constraint for sustainable tourism development.

RURAL TOURISM: AN OPTION OF SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

The implications of rural tourism development in Tibet

Most of the constraints to tourism in Tibet are linked to poverty. General poverty is responsible for lack of investment, enterprise, and skilled manpower needed for promoting tourism development. The general poverty in Tibet is due to both the economy and the society being primarily rural. Hence, eradication of rural poverty could serve as an effective step in promoting sustainable tourism development in the region. In this context, promotion of rural tourism should be strongly focused. There could be several links between rural tourism development and rural poverty eradication. (i) The tourism industry can promote the gains of market-driven processes in rural areas and transform the latter. (ii) Creation of infrastructure and improved livelihood options through tourism can help to reduce rural poverty. (iii) The risks and problems created by seasonality of tourism can be partly minimised in rural tourism because of availability of non-tourism related activities in rural areas as adjustment options. (iv) Promotion of rural tourism will also mean imparting modern skills and capabilities to rural workers. (v) Since several nature, culture, and ritual-based tourism attractions are located in rural areas, the growth of rural tourism will help rural people to promote and protect these resources.

Two cases of rural tourism in Tibet

Rural tourism in Tibet started in 2002 and is guided by local government. We present here the experiences of two successful cases. One relates to Gongzhong village in Linzhi Prefecture; and another relates to Samu village in the vicinity of Lhasa City. Limited companies of rural tourism have been formed in both villages. The way of life of villagers, unspoiled environment, and historical culture and customs of villages are the key tourist attractions. The farm products and handicrafts constitute merchandise for the tourists. Roads, public toilets, and so on are built by government aid. The investment in service facilities is provided by the company. Villagers as workforce

participate in tourism activities under the guidance of the company. The Tibet Tourism Board (TTB) and its branches are in charge of training villagers. Villagers benefit from tourism by earning wages, development of village infrastructure constructed by the company using a part of the tourism income and aid to the poor population not involved in tourism activities.

Samu village began its tourism business on May 1st, 2002. Since then 3,000 domestic and foreign tourists have visited this village. They are attracted by the beautiful environment, folk customs, authentic folk food, well-regulated management, and folk culture especially a stage-show consisting of over 30 programmes of songs and dances which are composed, directed, and played by inhabitants. This village has 68 families with 303 persons depending historically on farming. In 2002, 29 families, and 33 people participated in the rural tourism business. Average income of each family was 1,145 yuan RMB each month, which was equal to the total annual income during the last year. The total direct tourism income in this village was nearly 70,000 yuan RMB, excluding the income from sale of merchandise to tourists. In the past there were only 10 persons working outside the village, earning cash income of less than 10,000 yuan RMB in total. Now tourism has become the main source of cash income in the village. Most importantly, a rural development foundation has been set up in the village to help extremely poor families. Rural tourism is welcomed and supported widely by villagers.

CONCLUSION

- i) Tourism resources and constraints to exploiting them are much greater in poor areas than in developed and richer areas. Besides, the approach to tourism development has to be different in poor areas. Rural tourism is one potential step for addressing the problem of poverty.
- ii) Not every kind of tourism has obvious effects on alleviating poverty. Hence, alleviating poverty while promoting rural tourism needs systematic integration of components promoting tourism and enhancing poor people's income.
- iii) Based on gains identified, rural tourism should be one of the strategic measures for sustainable regional development in Tibet.