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### Sustainability of Chinese Tourism-Assisting the Poor Policies: The Perspective of Policy Values

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**Abstract:**

As tourism sustainability is not clearly defined, tourism policies in many countries are criticized for overemphasizing economic growth. Chinese tourism has contributed significantly to poverty reduction and sustainable development in impoverished areas under the guidance of the tourism-assisting the poor policies (TAPPs). But little literature has investigated whether and how Chinese TAPPs promote sustainable development in impoverished areas. As policy values are the basis of policy formulation and implementation, this study identifies the sustainability values reflected in typical Chinese TAPP documents to fill this gap. This study conducts the content analysis of the TAPP documents issued by the Chinese Central Government during 1984–2020 under the modified framework of sustainability value dimensions. It's found that the overall sustainability value structure of TAPPs is dominated by economic and social-cultural values, contributing to the success of Chinese absolute poverty eradication. The steady increase in environmental values implies the Chinese government's growing attention to environmental problems caused by tourism-assisting the poor initiative though still far from enough. The evolution of TAPP sustainability values is consistent with Chinese economic and social development strategies. The research is expected to help international scholars better understand TAPPs' role in achieving SDG and offer implications for the Chinese government in improving sustainability in the rural revitalization strategy.

**Keywords:** poverty alleviation, tourism sustainability, policy values, rural tourism, rural revitalization.

### 中国旅游扶贫政策的可持续发展：政策价值视角

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## 摘要:

由于旅游可持续性没有明确界定,许多国家的旅游政策被批评为过分强调经济增长。在旅游扶贫政策的引导下,中国旅游业为贫困地区的减贫和可持续发展做出了重要贡献。但很少有文献研究中国的旅游扶贫政策是否以及如何促进贫困地区的可持续发展。由于政策价值是政策制定和实施的基础,本研究确定了典型的中国旅游扶贫政策文件中反映的可持续性价值,以填补这一空白。本研究在可持续价值维度修正框架下,对1984-

2020年中央政府出台的旅游扶贫政策文件进行内容分析。研究发现,旅游扶贫政策的整体可持续性价值结构以经济和社会文化价值为主导,有助于中国消除绝对贫困的成功。环境价值的稳步提升意味着中国政府对旅游扶贫倡议引起的环境问题越来越重视,尽管还远远不够。旅游扶贫政策可持续性价值观的演变与中国经济和社会发展战略是一致的。该研究有望帮助国际学者更好地了解旅游扶贫政策在实现可持续发展目标中的作用,并为中国政府提高乡村振兴战略的可持续性提供启示。

**关键词:** 扶贫、旅游可持续性、政策价值、乡村旅游、乡村振兴。

## 1. Introduction

Sustainability has been widely discussed in the literature of scientific, social and economic disciplines and even emerged as an independent academic discipline in the new century (Mauri, 2020). The United Nations has promoted the application of sustainability globally by proposing sustainable development in the 1980s and initiating Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030). Tourism is an industry closely associated with sustainability (Mauri, 2020). Sustainable tourism, which directly associates tourism and sustainable development, has become a prominent research focus and has attracted attention from different stakeholders in developed and developing countries (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Pan et al., 2018). To recover from the devastating disaster caused by the COVID-19, the tourism industry should be transformed into a more sustainable sector (Chirisa et al., 2020; Prideaux, 2020; Haywood, 2020).

Poverty alleviation on the top agenda of 2030 SDGs is also an important issue in conceptualizing sustainable tourism (Mowforth and Munt 2015). At the beginning of this new century, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) initiated the Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty program (ST-EP) on a mission to reduce poverty through socially, economically and ecologically sustainable tourism development. ST-EP and “pro-poor tourism” (PPT), which stresses tourism’s net profits for the poor (DFID, 1999), are the most influential concepts in China’s initiative to reduce tourism through tourism development. Zeng and Ryan (2012) translated the Chinese term “fu pin lv you” for pro-poor tourism into ‘Tourism-Assisting the Poor’ (TAP) to highlight the introduction and adaptation of the concepts and principles of PPT and ST-EP in China. TAP in China generally has generally been generally defined as a tourism-induced poverty reduction strategy led by the government and oriented by the market to lift the poor out of poverty by transforming the unique and abundant tourism resources in poverty-stricken rural areas into marketable tourist products and services. It targets the creation of benefits for local communities, particularly the local poor and contributes to local poverty reduction

while sustaining regional economic development and environmental conservation (Zeng & Ryan, 2012).

Tourism has played a significant role in the Chinese national poverty alleviation program since the 1980s under the guidance of Tourism-assisting the Poor Policies issued by the Chinese government. In 2020, China resolved its millennial-old issue of extreme poverty after delisting the remaining 832 impoverished counties, ten years ahead of the UN 2030 SDG schedule (Xinhua, 2020). Tourism, as one of the major poverty alleviations means in China, has contributed 20%-30% to fulfilling the country’s 2020 extreme poverty eradication goal. However, as is often the case, rural underdevelopment hinders the modern development in many developing countries (Orukpe, 2020). The Chinese government realized that rural areas would remain the key targets of relative poverty governance (Li et al., 2020). Therefore, China has advanced rural revitalization to prevent those who have shaken off poverty from falling back into a poverty quagmire. Tourism remains an effective driver for implementing the rural revitalization strategy, which has put sustainable rural development on the top of the agenda.

Governments are the main stakeholders in sustainable and pro-poor tourism (Bramwel, 2011; Hall, 2011; Chok et al., 2007). Government plays a pivotal role in controlling, planning and directing sustainable tourism growth (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). The role of governments in tourism is an outcome of their tourism policy formulation and implementation (Beny et al., 2021). The Chinese government’s leading role in TAP relies on the formulation and implementation of tourism-assisting the poor policies (TAPPs). Yu et al. (2021) found that tourism growth in some Chinese regions causes environmental degradation, especially CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The poverty line mainly measures China’s extreme poverty eradication. Does this indicate that Chinese TAPPs focus on tourism’s contribution to the local economy boom instead of sustainability in TAP destinations? If not, what sustainability values are reflected in TAPPs throughout the different TAP stages? How do they evolve to alleviate the conflicts of tourism’s role in poverty reduction social and, cultural and environmental development in poverty-stricken

areas?

This study, through the content analysis of TAPP documents issued by the Chinese central government during 1984–2020, identifies the evolution of values of Chinese TAPPs to explore what TAPPs do to promote sustainable poverty alleviation in different TAP stages. This paper establishes the TAPP sustainability value model as the theoretical framework to mine the sustainability values reflected in Chinese TAPP documents. Based on the analysis of the coding results of these documents, the evolutionary logic of TAPP values is explored. Recommendations on improving sustainability TAPPs are made to offer implications for the Chinese government to enhance sustainability in the rural revitalization strategy. The research is also expected to help international scholars better understand TAPPs' role in achieving SDGs.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Poverty Alleviation through Sustainable Tourism

The role of tourism in reducing poverty has been widely recognized, especially in developing countries (Guo, 2020). However, this poverty alleviation tool is criticized for its negative impacts on the natural environment and social and cultural development of destinations (Gascón, 2015; Yu et al., 2021). In line with “sustainable development” proposed by the World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainable tourism was proposed in the 1990s as an alternative approach to addressing the negative effects of tourism. 2017 was designated as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development on a mission to tap tourism's potential to lead to economic growth, social inclusion and cultural and environmental preservation (Niccolo & Fernanda, 2019). The conceptualization of sustainable tourism has broadened from environmental to economic, social, cultural and political issues, including poverty alleviation, the top goal of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015–2030 (Mowforth & Munt, 2015).

But too few tourism scholars have been engaged in the challenges identified by the SDGs, the Paris agreement and other global initiatives (Lane et al., 2017). Academic debate continuously focuses on whether sustainable tourism outcomes turn out sustainable (Janne et al., 2020) as tourism nowadays is too addicted to growth without considering the sustainability goals (Freya, 2017). Sustainable tourism contributes to GDP and employment opportunities in developing and developed countries (Wang & Ma, 2015). However, the economic sustainability of the tourism market does not naturally back up poverty reduction (Chok et al., 2007; Wattanakuljarus & Coxhead, 2008). Scheyvens (2018) suggested that the sustainable tourism research focus should shift beyond tourism's contribution to economic growth and increase job opportunities and income to consider the sociopolitical aspects of poverty and structural inequalities that hinder people's development due to the

multi-dimensional nature of poverty.

### 2.2. Sustainable Tourism Policy

Sustainable tourism policy is an established part of tourism policy research (Hall, 2011). Since tourism sustainability is not clearly defined, many countries' tourism policies are criticized for overemphasizing economic growth (Mai & Smiths, 2015; Anderson et al., 2018). Multiple stakeholders interpret tourism sustainability based on their demands and interests (Truong, 2014; Beny, 2021), which causes conflicts and obstacles to sustainable tourism policy implementation.

To scientifically develop sustainable tourism policies, it is necessary to develop indicators for guiding sustainable tourism planning (Blancas & Gonzalaz, 2010). However, no consensus has been reached on whether the indicator system is more effective for tourism sustainability, who should be responsible for reducing tourism's negative impact on the environment or the equality of sustainable tourism policies (Miller, 2001; Asmelash & Kumar, 2019). Sustainable tourism policies encourage the balanced development of the environment, economy and society of destinations. Scholars even argue that sustainable tourism policies should face the tourism challenges posed by climate change (Gossling et al., 2012; Moyle et al., 2014). Most of these policies only respond to part of sustainable development principles and goals with employment, labor (Baum, 2018) or poverty alleviation rarely considered. Academic research center on policies' impact on tourism sustainability has little attention to developing policies and governance behavior in tourism sustainable development (Guo et al., 2019).

### 2.3. Policy Value

Public policy is what governments choose to do or not to do (Dye, 2005), indicating that the process of policy formulation and implementation is “the authoritative allocation of value” (Easton, 1965). Policy values are “the valued ends embodied in and implemented through, the collective choices we make through policy processes” (Stewart, 2009). Identifying policy values is necessary as the public policy process is a rational and principled activity (Lasswell, 1948). Values are usually identified to frame policy problems in policy discussion and making (Schon & Rein, 1994). Administrative systems unconsciously adopt policy devices to avoid value conflicts (Thacher & Rein, 2004). Exploring the dominant social values of a nation might be a complicated task. But it's easier to identify the values of public policies in specific sectors, such as environmental policy (Abbsi, 2018).

Stewart (2009) first drew the dichotomous nature of some general policy values. It's believed that a value is only identifiable through its opposite, for example, growth or greenness? Reconciling the conflict between employment, output, and environmental issues manifested by this value pair is the challenge to which sustainable development policies should respond

(Stewart, 2009). However, the literature on poverty alleviation through sustainable tourism reveals that ST-EP has the greatest impact on China's TAP focuses on the social, economic and ecological tourism development to avoid the tourism's negative impacts on poverty reduction. Sustainability value dimensions of Chinese TAPPs are not limited to growth and greenness but involve the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental sustainability (Purvis et al., 2018). Therefore, the dimensions of sustainability values can be modified into the economic, social, cultural, and environmental values in the Chinese TAP context, as shown in Figure 1. As the studies on the formation process of sustainable tourism policies are far from enough (Guo et al., 2019), it's worthwhile for this study to investigate the evolution of sustainability values of Chinese TAPPs from the modified sustainability value dimensions to determine how the Chinese government has mitigated the conflicts of economic, social and environmental values in the TAPP formulation.

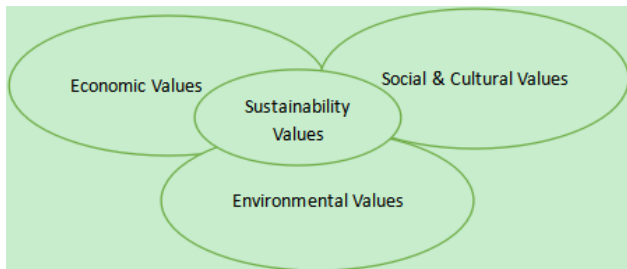


Figure 1. Sustainability value dimensions, adapted from typical sustainability intersecting circles model (Purvis et al., 2018)

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Methods

TAPP documents are the typical carriers of policy values. To identify the sustainability values reflected in TAPP documents in an objective, systematic and profound way, the content analysis is adopted the text mining software Rost 6.0 and Nvivo 11. First proposed by Berelson (Berelson, 1952), the content analysis can objectively, quantitatively, or qualitatively analyze information through various media such as policy documents (Zhang et al., 2019). This method can be conducted through six steps: research issues, sampling, analysis units defining, data classifying and encoding, reliability verification, data analysis and conclusions (Liu, 2014).

Content analysis is widely used in the analysis of policy texts. It can help researchers perceive historical changes in various policy research issues, such as policy values, essential facts and development trends of policies (Krippendorff, 2012; He, 2018). Rost 6.0 is effective text mining software for establishing TAPP documents semantic network to testify for the reliability of selected samples and facilitate the construction of policy values. Nvivo is typical qualitative analysis software that can encode structured and semi-structured policy texts. These are the two most commonly used coding methods. The first is to establish the coding

layers and nodes based on an analysis framework and then detail the coding through line-by-line reading. The second is the encoding procedures that the grounded theory researchers follow: opening, spindle, and selective encoding (Holton, 2007).

This study uses the first coding method with the specific steps as follows: (1) analyzing the semantic network of selected samples with Rost 6.0 to obtain an overall understanding of the TAPP content and verify the reliability of samples selected; (2) establishing a sustainability values framework based on the text mining results and the modified TAPP sustainability value dimensions; (3) coding the samples based on the nodes established under the analysis framework with Nvivo 11; (4) quantifying and analyzing the coding results in conclusions.

#### 3.2. Data

Chinese tourism has been contributing to poverty alleviation since the 1980s, when the Chinese central government intensified the reform and development of the tourism industry in 1984. China's TAP has mainly experienced four stages: the early exploration period (1984–1996), the initial development period (1997–2004), the rapid improvement period (2005–2012) and the targeted and efficient period (since 2013) (WTD, 2018). To ensure the reliability, typicality and authority of sampling, this study selects the TAPP documents issued by the Chinese Central Government authorities as samples. Documents included are mainly TAPPs enacted by the State Council, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development and other relevant ministries and commissions. Policy documents are searched on the official websites of the above national authorities with the keywords of “poverty alleviation,” “tourism-assisting poverty alleviation,” “rural tourism,” “leisure agriculture,” and “targeted poverty alleviation.” After removing policies that are not directly related to TAP, 64 policy documents were selected as the samples. The distribution of these samples in different TAP development stages is shown in Figure 2. Among the 64 samples, 55 policies were enacted during the TAP targeted and efficient period, achieving 86% of the total samples.

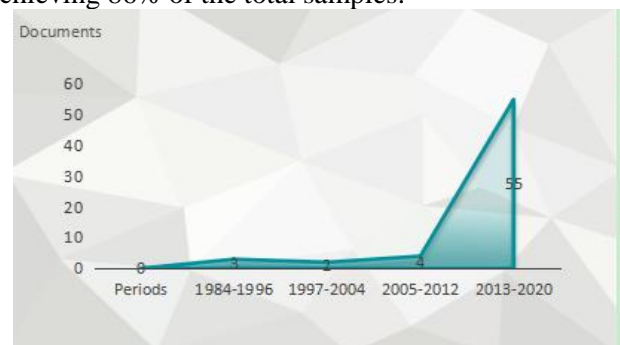


Figure 2. Distribution of TAPP documents (1984–2020)

#### 3.3. TAPP Sustainability Value Dimensions

Concerning the most popular three pillars of

sustainability dimensions among tourism scholars, this study sets up the TAPP sustainability value model (Figure 1) based on the sustainability policy value pair proposed by Stewart (2009), Chinese TAP connotation and the three typical sustainability intersecting circles model (Purvis et al. 2018). To testify the applicability of this value dimension model in the Chinese TAPP analysis, the TAPP documents semantic network is shown in figure 3 through the Chinese text mining tool ROST 6.0. As the high-frequency words of policy texts can reveal the core values of policies (Zhang et al., 2019), the social and semantic network generation functions of ROST are used to extract high-frequency words, filter meaningless words, extract line features, construct a network of co-occurring words, and finally generate semantic network TAPP documents. It can be seen from Figure 3 that “tourism” and “poverty alleviation” are at the center of the semantic network, indicating that the selected policy samples are highly related to the TAP. The high-frequency words at the center of the network also include “construction” and “development.” These two core words are a bridge for identifying TAPP values through their intense links with other high-frequency words.

According to Figure 3, the network-centric words have a close relationship with high-frequency words such as “countryside,” “rural,” “poverty,” “region,” “enterprise,” “resource,” “market,” and “agriculture.” It reveals that TAPP chooses to guide market entities such as enterprises to explore tourism resources and boom up their tourism market in rural and impoverished areas. In this way, employment and entrepreneurship are stimulated to increase the income of farmers and poor households and promote economic development in impoverished areas. The revitalization of rural and rural industries manifests the economic value orientation of TAPPs. The co-occurrence of network-centric and high-frequency words such as “public,” “service,” “management,” “infrastructure,” “facility,” “social,” and “culture” reflects that TAPPs pay attention to improving infrastructure facilities, social culture management and public services in rural and

impoverished areas, indicating the social and cultural value orientation of TAPPs. The connection between the core words of the network and the high-frequency word “environment” fully shows that the TAPPs attach importance to the protection of the ecological environment in rural and impoverished areas because the ecological environment underpins the sustainable development of the TAP program. Improving the rural habitat is the key to the national initiative of constructing beautiful villages. These focuses reflect the environmental value orientation of the TAPPs.

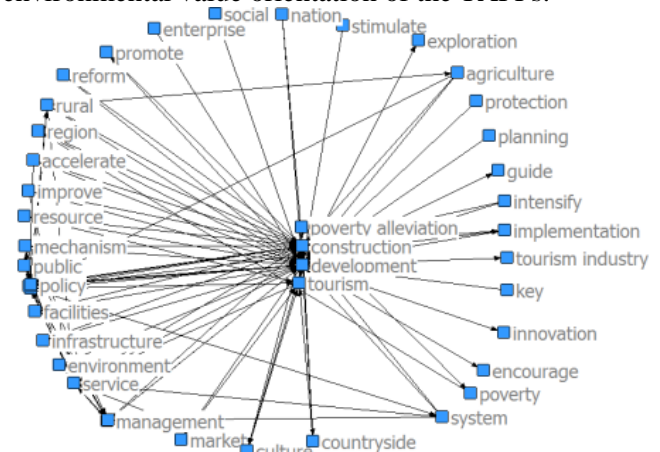


Figure 3. The semantic network of TAPP documents (1984–2020)

### 3.4. Establishment of TAPP Values Framework

Based on the applicability of the TAPP sustainability values dimension model, it's necessary to establish further the framework to identify the TAPP sustainability values. Before the generation of the TAPP documents semantic network, 172 words are obtained after filtering meaningless words and extracting high-frequency words. These 172 high-frequency words are then classified into three categories: economic values, social and cultural and environmental values. Following the classification, keywords are refined through merging and adjustment to form the sub-categories of value dimensions. The formation process of the TAPP values framework is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The TAPP sustainability values framework formation process

Categories (Value dimensions)	Sub-categories	Examples of high-frequency words
Economic values	Economic stimulation	Rural areas, countryside, poor region, economic, development, investment, stimulate...
	Eliminating poverty and getting rich	Tourism, income, increase, poverty alleviation, farm products, projects, resources...
	Industry revitalization	Structure, quality, upgrading, strategy, industry, revitalization, economy, integration
	Consumption promotion	Consumption, leisure, tourists, family, demand, tourism industry, promoting....
Social and cultural values	Employment and entrepreneurship	Employment, entrepreneurship, professional, guide, enterprise, market...
	Public service	Public, service, infrastructure, facilities, medical service, transport, safety...
	Participation and cooperation	Farmers, poverty population, market, enterprise, participation, cooperation...
	Governance under regulation and law	Regulation, mechanism, policy, improvement, supervision, problems, governance...
	Professional training	Professional, staff, talents, farmers, vocational, training, education...
	Reform and innovation	Policy, system, regulation, market, mechanism, reform, innovation...

Environmental values	Cultural inheritance	Countryside, tourism, culture, heritage, project, protection, propagandize...
	Human habitat improvement	Rural village, habitat, environment, project, engineering, construction, infrastructure, facility, improvement...
	Upgrading the scenic areas	Scenic area, tourist facility, project, development, quality, improvement...
	Environmental protection	Ecological environment, protection, intensify, planning, management, guarantee...
	Washroom renovation	Rural tourism, scenic area, toilet, washroom, project, improvement, renovation...

3.5. TAPP Documents Encode

Establishing the TAPP sustainability values framework through semantic network analysis lays a foundation for identifying the value orientations of TAPPs. However, to understand the evolution characteristics and distribution of TAPP values in different TAP stages, the TAPP documents should be encoded through Nvivo to explore the content of policy values further. The 64 policy texts are classified and merged based on stages and imported into Nvivo software for independent coding. Stages refer to the four TAP stages, including the early exploration period, the initial development period, the rapid improvement period and the targeted and efficient period. Economic, social, cultural, and environmental values are taken as

parent nodes, and sub-categories of three value dimensions in the sustainability values framework are labeled as child nodes. Finally, the imported policy texts were coded line by line semantically. The words, sentences, or paragraphs reflecting the specific values of value dimensions are classified as references of child nodes. Thus, the coding hierarchy of “stage-parent node - child node - reference point” is formed, as demonstrated by the example of the coding process in Table 2. Two coders complete the whole coding process independently, and 951 codes are obtained. The coding reliability was tested through the Nvivo coding comparison function. It was found that the consistent percentage of two coders was 99.4%, indicating high coding reliability.

Table 2. Coding process example

Code No.	Samples in the TAP stages	Parent node	Child node	Reference point
1-2-3-2	TAPP texts in the early exploration period	Social and cultural values	Governance under regulation and law	Strengthen the supervision and administration of the tourism market in business, public security, taxation, and pricing; resolutely prohibit fraud, forced sale and other illegal phenomena harmful to tourists.
2-2-5-2	TAPP texts in the initial development period	Social and cultural values	Reform and innovation	Encourage various economic forces to participate in TAP development and actively cultivate diversified stakeholders in the TAP market.
3-3-3-10	TAPP texts in the rapid improvement period	Environmental values	Environmental protection	Support the TAP participants in actively using new energy and materials. Promote the use of energy conservation, water conservation and emission reduction technologies.
4-1-2-19	TAPP texts in a targeted and efficient period	Economic values	Eliminating poverty and getting rich	Help farmers avoid poverty and become rich by exploring characteristic tourism resources in poverty-stricken areas, building beautiful villages and giving play to the role of scenic areas in increasing poor households' income.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Structure Characteristics of TAPP Sustainability Values

The distribution of codes under value dimensions and categories reveals the structural characteristics of the sustainability values of TAPPs. In Nvivo, 951 codes of TAPPs in the four stages are classified under the sustainability values framework. The sustainability value proportion chart (Figure 4) shows obvious differences in the distribution of the three value dimensions in the TAP stages. The frequency and proportion of codes under the value dimensions and categories in different stages and their overall distribution are calculated in Table 3.

As we can see from Figure 4, TAPP sustainability value orientations in different TAP stages are dominated by the economic and social and cultural values through the proportion of the latter declines

gradually except for the initial development period. The proportion of economic value fluctuates throughout the four stages. Overall, environmental values occupy the lowest percentage, showing a linear growth trend. From the early exploration to the initial development period, the percentage of economic values drops significantly despite the remarkable rise in social and cultural values. The reference points of environmental values emerged during the initial development period. As tourism started to play a role in promoting the economic development of poor areas, its negative effects on the environment, especially in scenic areas, started to attract the government’s attention. Therefore, in the initial development period, TAPPs manage to alleviate the conflict between economic development and environmental problems by greatly increasing the proportion of social and cultural values. From the period of rapid improvement to the targeted and efficient period, the proportion of economic values



gradually exceeds the proportion of social and cultural values. The environmental values experience a steady increase through their proportion is still less than the other two value dimensions. The distribution change of the three value dimensions implies that tourism has become one of the important ways to eliminate absolute poverty in the government's poverty alleviation strategy in a more environmentally friendly way.

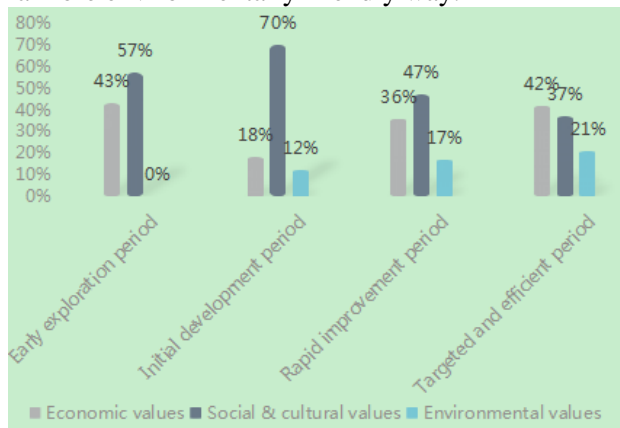


Figure 4. Distribution of sustainability values in Chinese TAPPs (1884–2020)

Based on the distribution of TAPP sustainability values in different stages, the overall structural characteristics of TAPP were further analyzed according to the frequency of reference points in Table 3. The main features are as follows:

#### 4.1.1. Social Cultural Values and Economic Values Balance

The overall value structure of TAPPs highlights the social and cultural and economic values. According to the frequency of reference points aggregated by value dimensions in Nvivo, the frequency of social and cultural values and economic value accounts for 80.9%. Table 3 shows that the number of reference points of the six specific values under the social and cultural value dimension totals 41%, only 1.1% higher than that of the five specific values in the economic dimension. This slight difference implies a balanced proportion of social, cultural, and economic values in TAPPs. The balance owes to China's strategy of "constructing material civilization and spiritual civilization and attaching equal importance to both," which was implemented over four decades of the country's reform and opening-up in 1978. The Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee proposed the coordinated development of material and spiritual civilization in 2015. The strategy constitutes the basic tasks of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and is further elaborated in the 19th CPC National Congress report in 2017.

Chinese TAPPs actively respond to the strategy of balancing the spiritual civilization and material civilization by focusing on the tourism's impacts on the economic, social and cultural development in poverty-stricken areas. In TAPPs, the advantages of abundant tourism resources are explored to drive tourist consumption, help poor households shake off poverty

and get rich through an increase in employment and income. In this way, tourism status in China's poverty alleviation program has been largely promoted. Besides the importance of economic values, the TAPPs realize social and cultural values through more investment in infrastructure, education, culture, health and other public services in poor areas. Various measures are taken to stimulate the enthusiasm of local governments, social forces and impoverished people's participation in TAP. The mechanism that hinders the TAP is reformed. Laws and regulations have been improved to guarantee tourist and operators' benefits and to preserve and inherit culture. Professional training is intensified to enhance the skills of tourism practitioners in poverty-stricken areas and improve the service quality of TAP.

#### 4.1.2. Economic Values Center for Eliminating Poverty and Economic Stimulation

The economic driving force of tourism makes it one of the most important ways to reduce poverty in China. To help the poor population tackle poverty and boost the local economy of poverty-stricken areas represent the core-specific values under the economic value dimension in TAPPs. As shown in Table 3, the frequency of eliminating poverty and getting rich and economic stimulation both break 100, about twice that of other economic value categories. They rank first and third in the ranking of 15 value categories, respectively, dominating the value orientations of TAPPs. To realize these values, TAPPs initiate projects in poor areas, especially in the central and western region, ethnic minority areas, old revolutionary bases, and poor rural areas, to develop characteristic cultural tourism, leisure agriculture and rural tourism. These TAP projects play tourism's role in promoting industrial convergence and creating more employment opportunities so that the poverty population can avoid economic poverty and gradually realize their moderately prosperous life.

These economic values are consistent with the socialist essential requirements of "eliminating poverty and achieving common prosperity" proposed by the Chinese CPC Central Committee. The Chinese government has started to combat absolute poverty since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The national absolute poverty alleviation campaign has mainly experienced five stages: small-scale relief (1949–1978), reform-led poverty alleviation (1978–1985), development-oriented poverty alleviation (1986–2000), comprehensive poverty alleviation (2001–2011) and targeted poverty alleviation (2012–2020). China's tourism industry didn't begin until the reform and the opening-up policy was implemented in 1978. TAP mainly falls in the last three stages of the absolute poverty reduction campaign. The common feature of the national poverty alleviation policies in these three stages is their focus on the endogenous development of poor areas and populations. Poverty alleviation through industry development is important in promoting "blood-forming" poverty alleviation. Assisting the poor in increasing their income, the main

indicator to measure absolute poverty, is the primary value goal of poverty alleviation through industrial development. As the main means of poverty alleviation through industrial development, TAPP economic values have echoed the mission of the country's absolute poverty alleviation program.

#### 4.1.3. Social and Cultural Values Highlight Public Service and Participation

Participation, cooperation, and public service are the top two value categories of social and cultural value dimensions in TAPPs. Since the implementation of development-oriented poverty alleviation in the 1980s, the government has been devoted to optimizing conditions for TAP, mainly by guiding social participation, increasing policy and institutional supply and improving infrastructure and other public service systems. Table 3 shows that the total frequency of reference points for participation and cooperation and public service are 106 and 91, respectively, ranking second and fourth among the 15 value categories.

Participation and cooperation value is exhibited in TAPPs by urging local governments to pay due attention to tourism planning for poor areas, calling for the young officials, experts, university students, returning migrant workers, enterprises, research institutes, colleges and universities to participate in TAP development actively. The TAP model is innovated through targeted poverty alleviation measures such as collaboration between the central and western regions, regional tourism integration, designated assistance, and counterpart aid to construct a TAP multi-participation and coordination pattern. The public service value in TAPPs focuses on improving infrastructure construction of transportation, communication, water and power, culture and education, medical and health care, disaster prevention and mitigation in poor areas. Tourism's public service capacity in public health, information services, public culture, public safety and emergency rescue is enhanced to provide a good environment for tourism development in poor areas.

#### 4.1.4. Environmental Values Stressing Environmental Protection and Improvement of Human Habitat

The poor population in most of the poverty-stricken areas in China suffers from a fragile ecological environment and poor living conditions. It is an

inevitable choice for TAPPs to emphasize ecological and environmental protection and improvement of human habitats to achieve TAP sustainable development. Table 3 shows that in the early exploration period, there were no reference points for environmental values in TAPPs. The environmental value reference points emerged during the initial development period in the late 1990s. The value shift is closely related to the positioning of the national poverty alleviation strategy for constructing an ecological civilization. The "National Eighth Seven Year Plan for Poverty Alleviation (1994–2000)" links poverty alleviation with ecological and environmental protection for the first time. In the 21st century, the "China Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Program (2001–2010)" and the "China Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Program (2011–2020)" both regard the improvement of the ecological environment as the focus of poverty alleviation. The "China Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Outline (2011–2020)" even proposed that China's poverty alleviation should put the ecological environment improvement on the top agenda.

The reference points of environmental values witness a leap-forward increase in TAPPs. Table 3 shows that environmental value reference points rise from 6 in the initial development period to 160 in the target and efficient period, an increase of 257%, accounting for 88% of the total environmental value reference points in the four periods. The total number of reference points for environmental protection leaps to 80, making it the fifth-ranked value category among the 15 value categories. The content of this value category extends from the ecological construction, energy conservation, pollution prevention and control to the construction of laws and regulations for conserving tourism resources and protecting the natural and cultural heritage. Improving the rural human habitat has become an important part of the construction of the rural tourism service system in the target and efficient period. This value emphasizes improving poor villages' production and living conditions, helping rural tourism operators upgrade tourism facilities and the surrounding environment, restoring villages and towns with characteristic tourism resources, famous historical and cultural villages and towns, and continuously optimizing the environment of leisure agriculture and rural tourism.

Table 3. Frequencies of TAPP sustainability values in the TAP stages

Value dimensions	Value categories	Early exploration period	Initial development period	Rapid improvement period	Targeted efficient period	Total by category	Proportion by dimensions
Economic Values	Economic stimulation	4	4	2	91	101	39.9%
	Eliminating poverty and getting rich	0	2	16	92	110	
	Industry revitalization	3	2	6	38	49	
	Consumption promotion	1	2	7	63	73	



	Employment and entrepreneurship	1	0	4	41	46	
Total by Period		9	10	35	325	375	
Social And Cultural Values	Public service	3	16	18	54	91	41%
	Participation and cooperation	1	4	11	90	106	
	Governance under regulation and law	4	6	6	36	52	
	Professional training	0	2	4	34	40	
	Reform and innovation	4	5	5	34	48	
	Cultural inheritance	0	5	2	46	53	
Total by Period		12	38	46	294	390	
Environmental Values	Human habitat improvement	0	0	3	52	55	19.1%
	Upgrading the scenic areas	0	4	1	18	23	
	Environmental protection	0	2	11	67	80	
	Washroom renovation	0	0	1	23	24	
Total by period		0	6	16	160	182	
In total		21	54	97	779	951	

## 4.2. TAPP Sustainability Values Evolution Logic

### 4.2.1. TAPP Values Based on Tourism Development and Poverty Alleviation Targets

The leading values of TAPPs at different stages echo the problems and targets of tourism development and poverty alleviation at different times. The TAP early exploration period and the initial development period are in the initial tourism development stage. In this stage, the tourism industry eliminated the shackles of the planned economic system and merged with the market economic system. Tourism's role in increasing the income of the poor emerged naturally. Therefore, TAPPs focus on solving the problems of a self-enclosed service system in the tourism industry, the regulation of the tourism market, and the shortage of public services. The TAPP values were led by reform and innovation, governance under regulation and law, public service and other social and cultural values.

The TAP's late initial and rapid development periods fall in the comprehensive poverty alleviation stage. China implemented a western development strategy in this stage, which initiated participatory poverty alleviation in rural villages. In response to "helping rural villagers shaking off poverty and building a socialist new countryside," TAPPs proposed equalizing public services in rural and urban areas through the TAP and began mobilizing all sectors of society to participate in TAP. Tourism's status in poverty alleviation career and its positive role in removing the poor from poverty was increasingly recognized in TAPP values. The gap between the proportion of economic values and the proportion of social and cultural values was significantly reduced. In the targeted, precise TAP period stage, the tourism industry has matured with an established and consolidated industry system through more than 30

years of reform and opening. Tourism's capacity to drive the economic development of poverty-stricken areas was enhanced, making it a major tool in the targeted poverty alleviation stage since 2012. The implementation of precise policy measures such as the Rural Tourism Project and the Rural Tourism Maker Plan, TAP provides the poor with more opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship, speeding up the pace of poverty alleviation in poverty-stricken villages. Gradually, economic values become the leading value of TAPPs.

### 4.2.2. Economic Values Following Common Prosperity and Well-Off Society Ideology

The TAPP values always adhere to the idea of common prosperity, closely following the pace of the national poverty alleviation strategy and striving to accurately drive the construction of a well-off society all-around. Mao Zedong first put forward the idea of common prosperity. This idea lays the basis for the reform and opening strategies, the theory of poverty alleviation and development, the scientific concept of development and the idea of targeted poverty alleviation proposed by the following generations of leaders. "A well-off society" was first proposed by Comrade Deng Xiaoping. To construct a well-off society all-around was formally proposed in the report of the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012. Building a moderately prosperous society all-around is the phased goal of the idea of common prosperity.

Under the guidance of the strategic concepts of common prosperity and a "well-off society," TAPPs gradually established the "government + market" TAP model in its early exploration and initial development period. The "TAP pilot zone" was established to promote socio-economic development in the old revolutionary and border areas. In the TAP rapid

development period, TAPPs began emphasizing the expansion of tourism in the central and western regions and the rural areas. The tourism industry became a connection between the eastern region and the central and western regions. TAPPs were devoted to promoting the fair distribution of social resources, civilization achievements and wealth between urban and rural areas through tourism. This conforms to regional and urban-rural coordinated development proposed by the western development strategy and the scientific development concept. In This way, TAP was expected to help under-developed central and western regions and rural areas achieve economic, social and environmentally sustainable development. The inclusion of TAP in the “China Rural Poverty Alleviation and Development Outline (2011–2020)” shows that TAP has been promoted as a major part of the national poverty alleviation strategy. Therefore, in the TAP targeted efficient period, TAPPs tend to fulfill the absolute poverty elimination task by implementing rural tourism projects, backing up key scenic areas in their role in stimulating the social-economic development of poor areas in the neighborhood. These efforts ensure that poor areas and poor rural people do not fall behind in removing poverty and becoming rich.

#### *4.2.3. Social and Cultural Values Optimized to Improve the Capabilities of the Poor*

Since the late 1980s, China has continuously optimized its poverty alleviation pattern. A large-scale poverty alleviation pattern has been formed, led by the government, participated by the market and coordinated by the social forces. Therefore, TAPPs strive to establish a multi-participatory TAP model by optimizing social and cultural values to improve the poor population’s ability to shake off poverty. In the early exploration and initial development periods, TAPPs mainly provide public services in tourism traffic safety, market information, medical and health, and emergency rescue through cooperation between various government departments and regions. The training of TAP practitioners’ professional and ethical qualities was emphasized to ensure the smooth operation of the tourism market and the quality of tourism services. During the rapid improvement period, TAPPs further expanded the TAP model to participate by more stakeholders varying from government departments, market entities, universities, and social organizations to individuals from all walks of life. To give full play to the advantages of labor resources in poverty-stricken areas, TAPPs organize officials, experts, and skilled workers to help impoverished people improve their skills and qualifications for participating in the TAP.

In the targeted, efficient period, in response to President Xi’s new guidelines on poverty alleviation, especially his stress on helping the poor increase their ambitions and intelligence to tackle poverty, TAPPs require local governments to innovate TAP implementation strategies and improve interest linkage mechanisms, especially in rural tourism. A series of key

TAP projects are carried out in rural areas to improve TAP infrastructure facilities in impoverished villages. To stimulate the initiative and enthusiasm of the poor to participate in TAP and consolidate their lasting endogenous motivations, TAPPs introduce a series of preciser “enabling” measures. For example, tourism graduates, professional volunteers and cultural workers are sent to villages to help poverty-stricken villagers enhance rural tourism skills, provide consulting services for their entrepreneurship and enhance rural residents’ interests and capabilities in rural TAP participation.

#### *4.2.4. Environmental Values Practicing “Green Poverty Alleviation”*

Since TAP’s initial development period, TAPPs have been guided by the concept of sustainable development and green poverty reduction to coordinate the conflicts between tourism development and social-economic development and environmental protection in poverty-stricken areas. The World Commission on Environment and Development proposed the concept of sustainable development in the 1980s and was widely recognized by the international community, including the Chinese government. In 1997, the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China positioned the sustainable development strategy as one of the national economic development strategies. This strategy was further developed by the scientific development concept put forward by the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2002. A good ecological environment was one of the most important goals of building a well-off society in the report of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007. The concept of “green development” proposed by the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee in 2015 further upgraded the concept of sustainable development, integrating “green development” into the entire process of targeted poverty alleviation, thus forming the concept of “green poverty alleviation.”

TAP unveiled its initial development period when China began its sustainable development strategy. Tapp’s environmental values focus on constructing infrastructure and ecological protection facilities for scenic areas in central and western regions. In the comprehensive poverty alleviation stage, ecological environment construction was listed as the focus of China’s national poverty alleviation strategy. Therefore, TAPPs in the rapid development period provide specific guidelines for resource protection, energy conservation and emission reduction of TAP. During the targeted, efficient period, “green poverty reduction” has become an important model for targeted poverty alleviation. The main goal of green poverty reduction is to achieve ecological civilization and a win-win situation for poverty elimination and prosperity. Under the “green poverty reduction” model, the environmental values of TAPPs focus on comprehensive improvement of rural habitat, washroom renovation and treatment of garbage and sewage in key TAP villages. Special rectification is

taken to step up the restoration of traditional villages, dwellings, and historical villages and preserve their local and rural features to make them more ecological and livable.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Sustainable tourism can be an alternative approach to avoiding the negative impacts of tourism's widely-recognized role in reducing poverty in developing countries. But whether sustainable tourism outcomes turn out sustainable remains a debate in the international academic community as tourism policies are criticized for overemphasizing economic growth. Poverty is a multi-dimensional issue not just limited to economic deprivation. Sustainability and poverty alleviation through tourism should involve economic development, social, cultural and environmental sectors. Since tourism's contribution to the success of absolute poverty elimination in China under the guidance of Chinese TAPPs is mainly evaluated through the income poverty line, whether and how Chinese TAPPs promote sustainable development in impoverished areas has been investigated. Policy values are the basis of policy formulation and improvement. Sustainability has always been an important theme in tourism practice and research, attracting more attention from practitioners and researchers in the post-pandemic era. Eliminating poverty tops the list of SDGs (2015–2030). However, few tourism scholars endeavor to respond to the challenges identified by SDGs.

Therefore, this study must fill this gap by identifying what sustainability values contained in Chinese TAPPs under the modified framework of sustainability value dimensions. Further analysis is conducted on how they evolve to mitigate the conflicts of economic, social and cultural and environmental development in impoverished areas in different TAP stages. As policy documents are the carriers of policy values, this study analyzed TAPP documents issued by the Chinese central government from 1984–2020 with content analysis.

It was found that the overall structure of TAPP sustainability values is featured by the balance of economic values and social and cultural values, with environmental values being the least proportion of 19.1%. Chinese TAPPs are dominated by economic, social, and cultural values to actively play tourism's role in fulfilling the Chinese government's poverty alleviation strategies and building a well-off society. As income is the main indicator to evaluate the elimination of poverty alleviation and well-off society, economic values are the leading values pursued by the TAPPs to increase the poor population's income through tourism development. Social and cultural values try to sustain the achievement of economic values mainly by removing the impediments of the TAP system and mechanism, inviting the wide participation of social

forces in TAP, increasing public service supply and enhancing the poor population's capabilities. Though environment values appeared in the TAP initial development period and increased steadily in later periods, the total proportion still lags behind largely compared with the other value dimensions. This indicates that the Chinese government is increasingly aware of the environmental problems caused by TAP, especially in the targeted, efficient period. Still, the attention to smooth the conflicts between the environment and social-economic development in poor areas is far from enough.

The evolution of TAPP sustainability values into four stages is inconsistent with China's national social-economic strategies. Social and cultural values primarily dominate TAPPs during the first three stages, in line with the strategy of reform and opening up to construct and improve the TAP model, system and mechanism. During more than 30 years of reform and development, the proportion gap between economic and social and cultural values gradually narrowed with the implementation of the western development strategy and optimization of the poverty alleviation strategy. Economic values occupied the leading position in TAPP sustainability values for building a well-off society and achieving common prosperity through absolute poverty elimination. Though environmental values are in the position of the least importance, they have attracted more and more attention from the Chinese government, especially after the implementation of the scientific development strategy in the new century. Environmental values witnessed a giant rise when the "green development" strategy was proposed in 2015 and incorporated into the TAP process in the targeted and efficient period.

With the victory of the fight against absolute poverty in 2020, China's poverty alleviation strategy has shifted from eradicating absolute poverty to alleviating relative poverty. China has launched a rural revitalization strategy to enhance absolute poverty elimination and curb the relative poverty. TAP has been listed as one of the major means to revitalize the industries of rural areas owing to TAP's success in improving economic and social, and cultural development in rural areas. However, besides poverty elimination as SDG1, the United Nations has listed combating climate change as SDG13. Most rural areas and key relatively poor regions in China are environmentally fragile. Tourist arrivals can cause energy consumption, carbon emission, pollution and other environmental costs of destination. Therefore, in response to SDGs and environmental challenges in rural tourism development, environmental values need more attention from the government to promote the rural ecological revitalization and further carry green TAP model established in a targeted, efficient period.

To make the TAP more sustainable in rural revitalization, Chinese TAPPs should increase in

proportion or even balance the environmental value dimension with the other two value dimensions in the sustainability value structure. The specific values of the environmental dimension should not be limited to improving human habitat or infrastructure facilities. Facing the increased tourist arrivals at rural tourist destinations after the pandemic, how to curb the pollutant emission, climate change and improve the energy consumption efficiency must be considered in the TAPP value transformation. Furthermore, social and cultural and economic values should be modified to facilitate the realization of environmental values. For example, the value of governance under regulation and law should urge environmental and tourism departments to jointly develop the green TAP management and assessment measures, such as providing a pollutant and carbon emission monitoring information services in key rural TAP villages. TAP operators, villagers and tourists should follow these environmentally friendly measures and adjust their behavior accordingly. In the industry revitalization value under the economic dimension, rural TAP project implementation should consider energy efficiency to protect the environment and create economic benefits. In the post-poverty era, Chinese TAPPs can further pursue fairness and justice and curb relative poverty economically, socially and environmentally by setting up an interactive and balanced mechanism of three sustainability value dimensions.

## 6. Limitations and Further Study

Investigating whether and how Chinese TAPPs promote sustainable development in impoverished areas should be a systematic task. It's only the first step for this study to identify the sustainability values reflected in TAPP documents, as policy values are the basis of policy formulation and implementation. To ensure the typicality, reliability and authority of the data in different TAP stages, this study selects TAPP documents issued by the Chinese central government as samples with TAPPs developed and implemented by the local governments excluded. If local samples are excluded, the consistency of sustainability values between local TAPPs and TAPPs issued by the central government cannot be evaluated, which might affect the data triangulation.

Thus, further research is needed to improve the systematic investigation and evaluation of the Chinese government's endeavor to improve sustainable development in impoverished areas through tourism, especially in terms of the following questions: what policy instruments are used to realize TAPPs' sustainability values and goals? How do local governments respond to the sustainability values and goals in the central government's TAPPs, especially in periods of

target poverty alleviation and rural revitalization.

What are the impacts of Chinese TAPPs on sustainable development in impoverished areas? Besides the documentary analysis, other qualitative and

quantitative research methods, such as case studies, interviews and surveys with different stakeholders, can be combined to address these research questions.

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## The Authors' Contributions

The authors participated in conducting the research, collecting, and analyzing data. Guo Yan revised the original draft and wrote the final version.

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