

Research on the Impacts of Homestay Program on Rural Areas in Case of Homestay Program in Jingxian County, Anhui Province, China

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Abstract: This paper examines the development and impact of homestay programs in Jing County, Xuancheng City, Anhui Province, China, with a particular focus on the rural Cai Cun Village. Homestay programs have gained popularity among urban Chinese tourists seeking respite from city life, offering them immersive experiences in rural environments. The study underscores the importance of homestays as a rural development strategy, highlighting their role in enhancing local infrastructure, boosting economic growth, and fostering community cooperation. By analyzing demographic, social, economic, political, cultural, and geographic factors, as well as interviewing local homestay operators, the research identifies both the benefits and challenges associated with homestay operations. Key issues such as management inefficiencies, audience limitations, seasonal unemployment, and non-committing participants are discussed. The paper proposes solutions, including the integration of agricultural activities, targeted advertising, and increased government intervention to address these challenges. The findings offer valuable insights for potential homestay operators and contribute to the broader discourse on rural revitalization, emphasizing the potential for homestays to drive sustainable development in less-developed regions.

Keywords: Impacts, Homestay Program, Rural Areas, Homestay Program, China.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, homestay programs have become a more attractive and popular choice among tourists from the Chinese mainland. To people living in cities, getting in touch with the natural world and having several days off to experience different lifestyles are really attractive. Homestay programs, especially those homestay programs in rural areas, have been inundated by citizens from urban areas who are tired of heavy traffic and noise.

Different countries and regions have generally developed a similar pattern of homestay programs, though they have unique characteristics. In the UK, the homestay program is similar to the local B&B program, which provides consumers with breakfast and bed. In Malaysia, the homestay program has been developed to be more diversified. People can live with the local households and participate in daily production and work [1]. In some other regions, a homestay is called a guesthouse. In China, a

homestay is described as a small accommodation set up by operators using local dwellings or spare resources to provide consumers with an experience of local nature, culture, and lifestyle [2]. This type of tourist program has brought huge benefits from all perspectives to areas, especially rural regions.

1.2. Literature Review

Many geographers and economists from all over the world have started to study the operation of the homestay program systematically from all kinds of perspectives. They found that the homestay program is not simply just a tourism program but also a rural development strategy [1].

For instance, in 2011, Abdul Rasid proposed that before participating in the Homestay Program, a majority of operators received monthly income in the range of RM500 to RM1000. After joining the Homestay program, their income range rose from RM1000 to RM1500. This could attract more and more villagers who were not in the program at first to participate in the work about homestay [3]. For another example, Ruth K. Kimaiga asked several Kenyan homestay operators to assess several statements about the socio-economic benefits brought by running homestay programs to study the attitude of local host families about homestay accommodation. Most people said the homestay program in Kenya was helpful in increasing business opportunities and employment rates in the local region, inspiring a sense of cultural identity and promoting cultural communication through the operation of the homestay program [4]. Some other scholars found that the homestay agglomeration in the Mogan mountain region of Zhejiang Province, China, greatly burdened the local government revenue. The local homestay industry has become the main source of local taxation. This represents the homestay industry in Mogan Mountain entering the mature development stage [5].

However, most scholars focused on countries and areas where the homestay occurred in a relatively earlier period, such as the UK, Germany, Japan, and Taiwan, or they chose places with many agglomerations of homestay accommodations. There are not so many case studies on some specific independent homestay accommodation. There is also rare research on homestay accommodations in less developed regions, such as some remote mountainous regions in mainland China and the remote islands of the United States. These less developed regions have beautiful landscapes and landforms without too much development. Because of the lack of planning and specific analysis, the homestay accommodations are located in the mountains, and they are hard for people to reach there. To these less developed regions, a homestay program is an excellent opportunity to inspire strong potential, realize industrial upgrading, and promote rural development.

1.3. Research Framework

As a result, this paper will focus on a specific case of Jingxian County in Anhui Province, China. It will first summarize the conditions of the homestay program development in Jingxian County. Then, by using the demographic, social, economic, political, cultural, and geographic aspects of the local region and interviewing local homestay operators, it will study the impacts of the homestay program on the local development of Jingxian County. Several problems in the development process will be revealed, and suggestions to solve the problems will be provided.

2. Case Description

Jingxian is a county under the jurisdiction of Xuancheng in Anhui Province. It is located in the southeast of Anhui Province, at the junction of the south bank of the Yangtze River and the mountainous areas of southern Anhui Province. The total area of Jingxian County is 2054.5 square kilometers, accounting for 1.47% of the total area of Anhui Province. Jingxian County changed its name and field through various dynasties in China. Today, there are 9 towns and 2 villages under the region of the county. After the COVID-19 epidemic, its service industry has recovered rapidly, with

the annual value added of the service industry in 2023 reaching 7.45 billion yuan and the tourism revenue reaching 6.77 billion yuan, accounting for 90.8% of its total revenue [6]. This is because facilities and scenic areas are becoming more developed. For example, the government turned the highway into a tourism line called Sichuan-Tibet Highway in Southern Anhui. It attracted many tourists to drive there for a visit. Consequently, the economy of guest houses in Jing County has also developed rapidly. In 2020, the Corner No.79 Homestay started its own business. It is located at No. 79, Fang Cun Village, CAI Cun Town, Jing County, Xuancheng City, Anhui Province. The Moon Bay Beauty Spot is just next to it. The operator of the homestay program is Huanghui, a native woman in Jing County. She once worked in Shanghai. Then she went back to her hometown and set up the Corner No.79 Homestay.

3. Analysis on the Impact of the Homestay Program

3.1. Impact Analysis

3.1.1. Impact on Individual Case

The homestay program generally changed the living pattern of the operator. Mrs.Huang was an employee in a private enterprise. She thought that the pastoral life was more suitable for her. However, as an operator, she does not have much time for leisure now. Most of her time is used for keeping the houses in order. She said she still needs some time to find a balance between work and personal life.

The corresponding impact of her insidious hard work is that the total income of Mrs.Huang's family has increased. The family's annual income was about one million before in Shanghai. Now, the income is much higher than that. Mrs.Huang said that many villagers are working in the homestay system. The operation of homestay changed their life, too.

3.1.2. Impact on Villagers

According to the interview, there are 15 guesthouses in the Fang Cun Village. About over 50 villagers participated in the operation of the homestay program. Several factors, such as exploring new experiences, source of good income, participating in SME business, interest, developing individual skills, and occupying time, can be the reasons why people would like to participate in the homestay program [7]. Undoubtedly, the homestay programs have brought them huge benefits. Mrs.Huang said most of the villagers were farmers before. Meanwhile, Jing County is a mountainous area. The total income is not considerable. After 2010, houses were gradually rebuilt, and some audacious forerunners started to set up homestay programs in order to attract tourists. Now, most of the framers devoted themselves to the operation of the homestay program. Their annual income was doubled. The concept of three categories of potential participants is propitious to explain this process [1].

Also, community members learned a lot about cooperation and communication. This is because it is really essential to have a 'team spirit' to run a guesthouse. The workers in the homestay program are appointed to participate in making meals, cleaning the houses, driving the guests to their destinations nearby, and so on. They have to cooperate closely and smoothly in order to provide the best service for tourists. For example, animal farms will provide special discounts for those visitors who are accommodated in local homestays. During this process, they also gain more experience and skills. It also helps maintain traditional values of teamwork and brings them a feeling of togetherness.

The most important impact on these villagers is that operating or participating in the operation of the homestay program gave them a sense of satisfaction and pride. Mrs.Huang is extremely proud of what she did. As both an entrepreneur and a worker, she gained a strong sense of accomplishment when she saw everything went well. Women's social status is increased, as operating the homestay does not require too much physical activity. The findings revealed that the homestay program greatly

changed the position of women in the community. Their living condition and social status improved [8].

3.1.3. Impact on the Facilities and Natural Environment

The product of the homestay program refers to supplementary attractions such as nature, habitat and vernacular architecture, agriculture projects or activities, and so on [1]. It is one of the three basic components of the homestay program. In addition, the homestay relies on the product to attract tourists. As the homestay wants to attract more people to visit, many other products are developed. People designed various activities, such as walking through the footpath in the forests on the mountain or feeding animals in the family farms. The most famous activity in Jing County is the Kayaking drifting. On a hot sunny day, it is attractive for nonlocal visitors to drift along the brook. To protect the unique products and develop more valuable products, the local people tried their best to protect the environment. For example, the water quality of the brook is protected and supervised by the regulators so that the tourists can play safely. The local residents responded that the water quality was better and better in recent years.

The government also supports the homestay program by building more roads and subsidizing the establishment of facilities like the water dam and grocery stores. The infrastructure in this mountaineer's area has been more and more thorough in recent years. This gives both local and nonlocal people more opportunities to proceed with short-term or long-term migration, and the population flow rate rises.

3.1.4. Impact on Rural Housing Vacancy

Because of the quick urbanization and industrialization, the housing vacancy rate in China's rural areas has risen quite a bit. For example, there are many vacant houses in rural areas in the surrounding areas of Nanjing [9]. Some of the vacant houses with advantageous locations are excellent places for turning into a homestay. Mrs. Huang quickly realized the advantages of her ancestral home, and she turned the house into a guesthouse. Corner No.79 Homestay was the ancestral home of Huang's family. In 2020, Mrs. Huang returned to her hometown and turned the ancestral home into a homestay. Then, she used social media to advertise Corner No.79. Fortunately, the Sichuan-Tibet Highway in Southern Anhui was popular on the internet. Corner No.79 soon became profitable. She said many young people came back to Jing County to establish their own businesses, including setting up the homestay program. The development of rural areas drives more and more young people to return to their hometowns. Consequently, the rural housing vacancy in the Fang Cun village quickly decreased.

3.2. Problems Existing

3.2.1. Seasonal Unemployment

Though the homestay program can actually increase employment, in some parts of the years, the income will not be so substantial because tourism enters the low season. Some workers who work in a homestay thus may be unemployed. In some more serious cases, the homestay programs are forced to shut down. For instance, the southern Anhui area will often experience flooding in summer. In 2016, Anhui Province experienced serious flooding events and post-flooding disease [10]. This is fatal to homestays, which depend heavily on tourism.

3.2.2. Lackage of Systematic Planning

In the region of Jing County, there are also some other small-scale villages like Cai Cun Village, which has an agglomeration of guesthouses. Unlike the Mogan Mountain agglomeration, the

homestay agglomeration in Jing County is not systematic or big [5]. One reason is the development of homestays in Anhui Province is later than that in Zhejiang Province. Another reason is that there is not a huge institution that can help organize the resources appropriately.

3.2.3. Lackage of Knowledge of Management

Some operators of the homestay program don't know how to manage a homestay program to let it be profitable. Some of the operators think their houses are just a simple place for tourists to live. Some other operators can't even calculate their costs and expenses clearly due to the limitation of their literacy. Some young people may go back to the rural areas to change the situation. A large number of homestays in rural areas are still of relatively low quality and do not have elaborate design and management.

3.2.4. Audience Restriction

According to the interview, over 99% of the tourists visit Corner NO.79 Homestay by selfdriving. These tourists are usually old, with their children following them. The Corner NO.79 Homestay even specifically designed a family suite for those huge families with several children. However, only young people come to visit the homestay program.

3.2.5. Non-Committing Participants

Not all the people in the village participated in the operation of the homestay program. Some of the villagers are still farmers or working in the handicraft industry. They are not interested in the homestay program, and they are intolerant. These people are called 'non-committing participants' [1]. They can be alienated for many reasons.

4. Suggestions

To further enhance the homestay program in rural mountainous regions, several strategies can be implemented to address existing challenges and improve the overall experience for both tourists and local operators. These strategies include developing agriculture in conjunction with the homestay program, increasing government involvement, and enhancing advertising efforts. Together, these measures can help create a more sustainable and attractive homestay industry, boosting the local economy and providing additional income streams for residents.

4.1. Developing Agriculture Alongside the Homestay Program

In 2023, agriculture contributed a larger share of Jing County's total income compared to the service industry, indicating the significant potential for further agricultural development in the region. This potential can be harnessed to complement the homestay program, creating a synergistic relationship between agriculture and tourism. One practical approach is to encourage local farmers to utilize greenhouses for growing vegetables and fruits, which not only extends the growing season but also provides a unique attraction for tourists.

By offering activities such as fruit or vegetable picking in the greenhouses, tourists can engage in interactive experiences that add value to their visit. This hands-on approach not only enhances the tourist experience but also provides homestay operators with an additional source of income, particularly during the tourism off-season. Moreover, the ability to stockpile food produced in these greenhouses can be crucial in preparing for extreme weather conditions, ensuring food security, and reducing dependency on external supplies. This dual focus on agriculture and tourism not only

strengthens the local economy but also promotes sustainable practices that benefit the entire community.

4.2. Government Involvement and Support

The role of government in supporting and organizing the homestay program is crucial for its long-term success. Government intervention can take various forms, including financial investments, infrastructure development, and strategic planning. By allocating more funds to the homestay program, the government can attract top-tier designers and managers who can redesign and optimize the homestay offerings. This could involve creating aesthetically pleasing accommodations that blend seamlessly with the natural surroundings, thereby enhancing the overall appeal to tourists.

In addition to improving the design and management of homestays, the government can also invest in infrastructure projects such as road construction and landscape beautification. In Jing County, for instance, the local government has already initiated efforts to enhance the natural landscape, build dams, and promote the homestay program on social media platforms. These actions have had a positive impact on the community, with residents expressing gratitude for the government's support. Mrs. Huang, a local villager, noted that these initiatives have significantly contributed to the success of the homestay program, demonstrating the vital role of government involvement in fostering a thriving tourism industry in rural areas.

4.3. Enhancing Advertising and Public Awareness

Effective advertising is essential for increasing public awareness and attracting more visitors to rural homestay programs. In today's digital age, where social media plays a significant role in influencing travel decisions, it is crucial to create compelling marketing strategies that resonate with potential tourists. One approach is to design and promote "punch points," or scenic spots within the homestay areas that are ideal for taking photographs.

These visually appealing locations can serve as powerful marketing tools, as many young travelers are willing to journey long distances to capture the perfect picture for their social media profiles. By capitalizing on this trend, homestay operators can draw a younger demographic to their properties, increasing occupancy rates and boosting local tourism. Additionally, providing comprehensive information about the homestay program to potential visitors, especially those who may be unfamiliar with or hesitant about rural travel, can help dispel any reservations and encourage more people to explore these unique destinations.

In conclusion, by developing agriculture alongside the homestay program, increasing government support, and enhancing advertising efforts, the homestay industry in rural mountainous regions can be significantly improved. These strategies not only benefit the local economy but also create a more sustainable and attractive destination for tourists, ensuring the long-term success of the homestay program.

5. Conclusion

This paper studies the current situation of homestay programs in Jing County, Xuancheng City, Anhui Province, China. It reveals the real experiences of the operator in the Cai Cun Village. In rural areas, a homestay program is a strong tool to bring people with higher incomes and better living conditions. Developing homestays is one of the fastest and most powerful ways to quickly enhance the construction of infrastructure, social and economic development, and community cooperation in rural areas. It is also useful in reducing rural housing vacancy rates and protecting the environment. Tourists in the homestay in Anhui can deeply experience the local people's lifestyle and enjoy leisurely time. However, several problems, such as a lack of management knowledge and systematic

organization, audience restriction, 'non-committing participants', and seasonal unemployment, still exist. We can use methods like developing agriculture, enhancing advertising, and asking the government to intervene to improve the situation.

This paper may help potential homestay operators to analyze the market condition and local environment. It clearly displays the positive impacts and problems brought by the operation of the homestay program. However, the homestay program is just one of the thousands of plans to realize rural development. In the future, more and more young people like Mrs. Huang may go back from cities to their rural hometowns to develop their homeland. The less developed regions, such as mountainous areas in Anhui Province, are still waiting for the younger generation to develop.

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