

Article

Tourism-Led Commodification of Place and Rural Transformation Development: A Case Study of Xixinan Village, Huangshan, China

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Abstract: Rural commodification with rural transformation development is a potential research agenda for rural geography. Based on semi-structured interviews in five times fieldwork in Xixinan Village, Huangshan, China, this article examines how the township government as an actor with entrepreneurialism promotes the commodification of place in rural areas and its impact on rural transformation development. It was found that the township government has drawn economic returns from different subjects of tourism entrepreneurs, tourists, and lifestyle immigrants by the efforts of commodifying real estate, creative tourism experience, and nature. Rural transformation development is accompanied by rural commodification, showing rural gentrification, expansion of employment opportunities for women, and the readjustment of the social structure of the family in the demographic structure. Rural tourism and rural creative industries have developed, complementing the single agricultural structure, constituting a mutual intersection and integration among these three industries. Regarding social and cultural values, rural commodification promoted the awareness of place in protecting ancient buildings and indigenous culture, but it also brought a sense of deprivation for community and contested rurality among different groups. The development state of rural transformation is constantly changing, and the new challenges arising from it to the rural revitalization of China, in this case, are also identified. The contribution of this article is to expand the analytical dimension of the commodification of place in rural areas and examine the state entrepreneurship associated with it. It also contributes to improving the understanding of the current development state of rural transformation in China.



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Keywords: the commodification of place; state entrepreneurship; township government; capital accumulation; rural tourism; rural transformation development; rural revitalization; rural China

1. Introduction

Although the process and problems of rural development in the world vary from country to country, it is a common trend to reverse the decline of rural areas and stimulate the vitality of rural development in the process of urbanization when implementing rural revitalization strategies [1]. Promoting rural infrastructure construction, revitalizing rural land resources, improving rural production and living conditions, and attracting people to return to the countryside is, to a large extent, an effort to bring the market economy from the city to the countryside. Capital is continuously invested in rural areas, producing and reproducing the rural spaces [2]. Therefore, the commodification of place in rural areas is implicit in the process of rural revitalization. In China, rural tourism is regarded as a significant channel for promoting rural revitalization, as Wu illustrates, using the market instruments and means to achieve the state's strategic goals [3,4], which further overall promotes the rural transformation from productivism to post-productivism [5,6]. An increasing number of villages have become consumption sites for residence, dwelling,

tourism, entertainment, and recreation, becoming an essential force in the commodification of places in rural areas [2,7,8]. This article mainly investigates the tourism-led commodification of rural places and rural transformation development.

Rural China has always been a social-ecological system based on agriculture. With the development of tourism, the balance established based on agricultural production was broken and the necessary social relations also change, bringing instability [9,10]. The development of rural tourism promotes the investment of real estate capital across the country and the world in different rural areas. While the hotel industry, tourism real estate, and related supporting projects have been the center of this apparent investment flow due to their tangibility in land use. Critical human geographers have been keenly aware of this trend and have advocated applying the political economy perspective to analyze the power rooted in material forms in the tourism industry [11–14]. Although a few scholars have linked countryside used for tourism, leisure, recreation, and residence to the broader China's political and economic process, which indicate the relationship among rural tourism, urban-rural interaction, capital flow, and spatial fix [5,15,16], the role of township governments in the commodification of place in rural areas is still underestimated. In the context of China's rural revitalization strategy, the key issues and contradictions in rural transformation development caused by the tourism-led commodification of place also need to be identified and resolved by township governments. In addition, the form and content of commodification are diversified from place to place as commodification is negotiated by actors in a specific place to meet specific conditions and requirements, which indicates the necessity of conducting commodification research based on the different socio-economic backgrounds, especially in developing countries [17].

This article aims to address this gap by examining how the township government as an actor with entrepreneurialism promotes the tourism-led commodification of place in rural areas and its impact on rural transformation development. Specifically, the questions guiding this research are twofold: first, how does the township government draw profits from the process of tourism-led commodification of place by selling rural assets to different subjects? Second, what is the impact of the tourism-led commodification of place on the rural transformation development, and what characteristics and issues would show when commodifying the countryside? The case of Xixinan Village in Huangshan city, China, is used to illustrate the intricate relationship between tourism, commodification, and rural transformation. By doing so, we contribute to examining the application of state entrepreneurialism in rural areas and extend Britton's analytical dimension of the commodification of place by implementing the commodification of nature. We then associate the commodification of place with rural transformation development, providing an analytical method for the construction of the countryside changes during the socio-economic transition period by analyzing the evolution of the internal structure of the population, industry, and society in rural areas [18]. In addition, our research also has comparative significance for the study of commodification, revealing the role differences of government in different contexts between China and the West.

The typicality of Xixinan Village lies in that, in the absence of capital consortia leading the village, the township government plays an active role of state entrepreneurialism, striving to adopt various means and resources to attract investment in the commodification of place and promote economic growth. Besides, as a traditional village in China, Xixinan Village has rich historical and cultural relics of the Huizhou region and a high-quality natural and ecological environment. In recent years, it has gradually transformed from agriculture society to tourism and related creative industries, which provides a good lens for analyzing China's rural transformation development driven by tourism. In what follows, we first review the relevant literature on commodification, countryside, and tourism. After describing the research context and the fieldwork, we then focus on state entrepreneurialism in rural areas and rural transformation development. In the final section, we conclude by reinforcing the calls to combine the dimension of nature to examine the commodification of place and the critical application of state entrepreneurship in rural areas.

2. The Commodification of Place in Rural Areas and Tourism

Commodification has penetrated into every corner of modern life. In a commodified society, commodification represents an inversion of exchange value over use value [19]. From the theory of Marxist political economy, objects become commodities when they take on an exchange value over and above their use-values and can be traded, putting them into the realm of the quantitative [8,17]. Commodification has three distinct elements: goods and services are produced for exchange; exchange is monetized and conducted under market conditions, and the sale of goods and services is motivated by the pursuit of profit [20]. As the commodification process progresses, new sites are drawn into the commercial embrace and are given new meaning [19]. Toponymic commodification is a good example here. By selling naming rights of stadiums, metro stations, and other public infrastructures to corporate sponsors, government authorities have got a financial return, and the cultural landscape of that place is changed [21–23]. In these respects, commodification is one of the key forces in the creation of place under the interaction of global and local, regardless of urban or rural areas.

The commodification of the countryside refers to the use of the rural environment to meet the needs of contemporary consumption [7]. It transcends the traditional narrow category where commodification only occurs when entities are given economic value [8]. For Woods, there are five prominent elements in the commodification of the countryside: rural production sites as tourist attractions, such as farm tourism, forest tourism; repackaging of rural heritage, emphasizing the nostalgia, the experience of the past and authenticity; the promotion of fictional rural landscape by film and TV program; the rural as a site for extreme experience through adventure tourism; and the use of rural of as a brand to sell goods and products to urban consumers [7]. Perkins further summarizes four types of the commodification of rural space: the first type of rural commodities includes established agricultural and horticultural products such as rice, vegetables, fruits, and various kinds of livestock products; the second type of rural commodities is associated with consumers' lifestyle, health, and fashion; the third is the consumption of rural spaces by counter-urbanization; the fourth type includes rural consumption for recreation and tourism [19]. On this basis, Akira added a fifth type of rural commodities: there are activities to improve the quality of life by conserving and managing landscapes and natural environments and understanding traditional rural culture and society [24]. This article focuses on the fourth type to further respond to Young and Markham's call for a critical research agenda on commodified tourist spaces [25].

Commodification is the starting point for understanding how rural tourism is constituted and represented in modern rurality in China. Although there has been considerable research on the commodification of culture, more attention should be paid to the material relations in the critical turn of tourism study [12,26]. Regarding tourism and the commodification of place, early research emphasized the role of entrepreneurs [20,27,28], and then gradually realized the significant status of state regulation in commodification [19,29,30]. In particular, as a structural force, the state can lead the production and transformation of rural space through policies, funds, and infrastructure. For example, the rural policy in the Thatcher era in England promoted rural commodification. In addition to the commodification of agricultural products, it also opened up markets for various "commodities" such as rural communities, rural lifestyles, rural culture, and rural landscapes [19,24]. In Japan, to promote rural revitalization, the state has put enormous investment in constructing leisure facilities to attract tourists, encourage companies to build factories in rural areas, and actively mobilize rural communities to integrate into the economic network [31,32]. While in China where the state provides market tools by institutional innovation and extends the position into the market, the state is situated in a salient position in the commodification of spaces [4,5]. Some scholars draw on the terms such as neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics and urban entrepreneurialism proposed by Harvey to denote the combination of solid-state governance and market economic reform [13,33,34].

Recently, Wu advocated adopting state entrepreneurialism to highlight further the role of the state as an actor in commodification or a means of promoting market formation and expansion in marketization. For Wu, state entrepreneurialism is defined as, through commodification and creation of market instruments, the state gives its officials the power and capacities to conduct economic development for the prospect of their political career and economic growth [3,4]. However, the arena of China's economic and social development is centered on the city, leading the role of the state in rural commodification to be still underestimated. From a practical angle, especially in the context of China's current rural revitalization strategy, it shows that all level-state functions as the subject of decision-making and implementation. Therein, the township government, as the end of China's national administrative system, is the grassroots practitioner in the rural revitalization strategy and the specific implementer of various tasks. The complex interaction between the state and the market in China indicates that it is inadequate to unilaterally emphasize the penetration of the market into the countryside and deliberately ignore the variegated roles of the state in the process toward commodification [5,33].

Simultaneously, we emphasize the commodification of rural "places" rather than "spaces." The reason is that the township government's prominent entrepreneurial spirits and its role as a geographical competitor endow the rural development with multiple political and economic goals and values. As a way of constructing meanings [35], the place reflected more than the space how the social meaning and materiality of place is created through the practice of tourism itself, and how these representations are then incorporated into the accumulation process [36]. Britton claims that the commodification of place is a central element of much leisure and tourism development. He points out the commodification of place can take two generic forms [36]. First, the legal recognition or transfer of commercial property rights involves ownership or lease of the site itself, which is verified in the real estate market; second, the tourist experience is included or the site is attributed to a saleable commodity if the site cannot be privately used directly, which is demonstrated in the tourism market [13].

Based on the attributes of the countryside and the current trend of rural development, we further expand Britton's viewpoint and argue that the production and consumption of nature is also another dimension of the commodification of place, which has been incorporated into the rural transformation. The commodification of rural nature is not only for tourists, but also to cater to the lifestyle immigrants' search for rurality. To avoid overlapping with the second dimension mentioned above (tourists), here we mainly focus on the latter. Drawing from the concepts of the production of nature and the commodification of nature proposed by Marxist geographers Smith and Castree, Duff and Rainer claim that rural nature is increasingly included in the logic of exchange value, creating economic value from the landscape and experience [37–39]. Urry also asserts that the countryside is more natural because of the fewer people and a non-artificial environment [40]. Based on this characteristic, developers have constructed the natural environment as a landscape for visual aesthetic consumption. As such, a framework of the commodification of place that includes materiality and discourse, tangible and intangible elements is established.

Once a place becomes a commodity through commoditization and is integrated into the capital circulation, it will trigger a series of changes in settlement patterns, industrial structures, spatial representations, and different stakeholders' relationships [41–43]. Therefore, the commoditization of places is closely related to rural transformation development. According to Long, "rural transformation development is a term that captures changes in traditional rural industries, the employment consumption structure, and the social structure. These changes signify a transformation from previously isolated urban and rural economic structures toward more coordinated urban-rural development" [44]. From a macro level, he reveals that China's rural development level has shown a gradient, declining spatial pattern from east to west since 2000. Fan et al. investigate the relationship between the commoditization of rural space and rural transformation by literature analysis. They point out that the former is subordinated to the latter. However, the study

of commoditization of rural space focuses more on the micro-level by using empirical research, to provide evidence for the flow of elements and the evolution of functions in rural restructuring [45].

In her series of influential studies on the creative destruction model, Mitchell summarizes the commoditization trend of rural areas and the performance of rural transformation. Mitchell finds that as the degree of commoditization increases, the dominant landscape of tourist destinations would show changes from productivism to post-productivism heritage landscape and then to non-productivism leisure landscape. The attitudes of community residents would also change from positive to negative and then back to the positive cycle [27,28]. Similarly, Tonts and Greive examine the destructive tendencies associated with the commodification of rurality in some of Australia's more scenic and accessible rural areas and their impact on those attributes that attract consumers to the countryside [46]. Despite these efforts, existing studies seldom systematically analyze the characteristics and issues of the current rural transformation stage caused by the commodification of place.

As Long et al. note, the research emphasis of rural transformation development is to analyze the evolution of the internal structure of the population, industry, and society in rural areas, so as to construct the changes of state in the countryside during the socio-economic transition period [18]. The importance of understanding the state of rural development is that it can more comprehensively describe the characteristics of the regional pattern of rural development and provide a reference for revealing the process of rural transformation. Finally, it contributes to uncovering the evolution of the "human-land" relationship in rural transformation development [18]. To this end, we proceed from the three aspects of population structure, industrial structure, and social and cultural values to analyze the characteristics and issues of the current rural transformation development caused by the commodification of place. Especially for the social and cultural values, there are few empirical studies in this area in the past theme of urban-rural interaction. Through case-based qualitative research, we provide a lens for capturing the changes in the countryside. This study is also a response to Hall and Zhang's viewpoint that "the place as a product to be commoditized requires a critical assessment of the impact of selling places on the people and society which constitute places" [41,47], as well as a further supplement to the performance of rural transformation by Mitchell [28,29].

3. Research Context and Methodology

3.1. Study Area

Xixinan Village (hereinafter: Xixinan) is one of the six administrative villages under the jurisdiction of Xixinan Town, Huangshan City, China. It consists of 11 natural villages. Xixinan is an ancient village with a history of about 1200 years which was originally built in the Later Tang Dynasty, passed through the Song Dynasty, and flourished in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The village is backed by the Fengxing Mountain at the southern foot of Huangshan Mountain and faces the Fenge River, a tributary of the upper reaches of Xin'an River. This combination of topography and landforms provide Xixinan many springs and abundant water sources. The Fenge riverside preserves the most intact natural wetland maple forest in the southern Anhui Province, a unique type of arbor wetland in the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Simultaneously, the village is surrounded by bamboo forests and vegetable gardens around the folk houses, making Xixinan full of rustic style. As the third batch of traditional Chinese villages, Xixinan once gave birth to the earliest champion scholar (Chi: Zhuangyuan) and 46 presented scholars (Chi: Jinshi) in the Huizhou region, which can be described as a place where there is an intense learning atmosphere and many celebrities. After a long period of accumulation, Xixinan has left a wealth of historical heritage, such as more than 110 old buildings from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, two classical private gardens, five ancient water conservancy projects that are still functioning, rubbings culture, and Huizhou merchant culture.

For a long time, Xixinan has been a quiet village dominated by agriculture and rarely visited. Xixinan also developed rural tourism in the early period. However, due to the many

well-known tourist destinations in Huangshan City, such as Xidi Village, Hongcun Village, Chengkan Village, and Tangmo Village, Xixinan has not achieved success under their shielding effect and homogeneous competition. Developers have to withdraw because of capital chain problems. In the early days, only a few middle class from Shenzhen and other metropolises migrated to live here, but they did not cultivate any commercial businesses. The opening of the Huangshan High-speed Railway North Station, which is only 1.8 km from Xixinan in 2015, and the policy issued by the Chinese central government and Anhui Provincial government, which aims to build characteristic towns (Chi: Tese Xiaozhen) in 2016 broke the tranquility of Xixinan. Xixinan Town has been consecutively selected as the first batch of characteristic towns in Huangshan City and Anhui Province, while Xixinan Village is planned to be built as the core area of that town, which started the process of the commodification of place. The township government hired a Planning and Design Co., Ltd. from Beijing (hereinafter: Turenscape) to compile the conceptual planning of the creative town, advocating the development positioning of the two-wheel-drive of the tourism industry and creative industry. It is in this context we discuss the tourism-led commodification of place and rural transformation development in Xixinan.

3.2. Research Design and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders were mainly applied to collect data. From October 2018 to November 2020, the authors went to Xixinan five times to conduct fieldwork in 17 days. These interviews with local residents running businesses were mostly carried out after the authors lived in their guesthouses or consumed at their restaurants and vendors, and established interpersonal relationships with those people, ensuring sufficient interview time and depth. The remaining relied on the introduction via government staff, directly approaching villagers, and snowball sampling processes. Our purpose is to reveal the agency of various actors in the process of rural commodification and their perception of rural changes. In total, we conducted 46 interviews in Mandarin with government officials, tourism entrepreneurs, lifestyle migrations and local residents. The in-depth interviews lasted from 30 min to two hours. Some respondents were interviewed twice or thrice for clarification. They were taped with permission and subsequently transcribed. All names are fictitious to ensure anonymity.

A common topic in interviews with all stakeholders is about the rural changes in Xixinan in recent years and what problems they have met. Besides, the interviews with government officials mainly focused on background and process when applying for the construction of the characteristic town; how they interact with the investors; and how they play roles and transform government functions in the rural development process. The planning scheme of the creative town, government work report, investment promotion scheme, and tourism development statistics were also provided by the township government of Xixinan.

We interviewed tourism entrepreneurs to understand their reasons, commercial activities, earnings of investing in Xixinan, and how they embedded in the village. Lifestyle immigrants were also interviewed to know their settlement processes and daily life experiences. Other stakeholders, including the mobile vendors, owners who use their homes to operate homestays and catering, temporary workers or regular employees employed in the tourism industry, and older people are involved in interviews by focusing on their behavior in participating in rural commodification. Moreover, the official media's propaganda and marketing texts on Xixinan, and the texts of some operators using self-media to record their daily life, were also adopted as auxiliary materials for analysis.

Regarding the use of interview data in this article, one point deserves elaboration. Considering the need to summarize rural changes, the presentation of the interview results is not a format of direct quotes largely, more often, they are organically integrated into the narrative and analysis of the findings. This fits with Russell Hitchings and Alan Latham's conclusion that interview is a major qualitative method of human geography, wherein indirect quotes are also one of the conventions [48].

4. The Role of Township Government and the Commodification of Place

4.1. Selling the Real Estate to Tourism Entrepreneurs

In 2016, the National Development and Reform Commission of China proposed building characteristic towns. As the policy scaled down from the central government to the provincial government and then to the city government, Xixinan Town actively responded to this call. The township government first formed a growth alliance with Turenscape company and proposed to create a creative town as in the early days, Turenscape entered Xixinan for the overall operation of the scenic spot, which was highly consistent with the township government's intention. Relying on its professionalism, the Turenscape compiled a creative town planning for the township government for free in response to the application of a creative town at the provincial level. In return for the cooperation partner, the township government transferred some idle state-owned assets in the village, such as the old town government site, old warehouses, and old primary school to the Turenscape at a low price, attempting to depend on the operation of this company to help increase the reputation of Xixinan and attract external capital. However, the business Turenscape operated in Xixinan was mainly rural hotels and homestays, which did not follow the development policies and directions of the township government due to limited funds and market operation capabilities. For these reasons, the early growth alliance broke down.

To create the diversified business formats required by the creative town and implement the rural revitalization strategy issued by the State Council of China in 2018, the township government of Xixinan actively introduced social funds to participate in the development and utilization of ancient folk houses and promoted the process of attracting investment. As such, the rural land was included in the speculation commodification chain. The procedure is similar to the general land acquisition process, that is, the village collective land is converted into state-owned construction land [49], which is beneficial to attract foreign investors to settle in Xixinan and develop rural tourism. The government work report showed that:

The model of protection and utilization of property rights of ancient folk houses has transformed the keeper of ancient building protection from the government to market and obtained more funding channels to maintain rural heritage. It clarified the ownership of ancient residential property rights, avoided the ownership disputes that may occur between merchants and villagers, and strengthened the developer's investment confidence, which effectively solved the problem of idle collective-owned assets in the village and provided a basis for capital accumulation.

The property rights transfer of the ancient folk houses has initially achieved success. Until July 2018, 73 entrepreneurs from Beijing, Shenzhen, Shanghai, and other cities have been successfully brought into Xixinan to develop rural tourism. The township government has implemented 30 protection and utilization projects of ancient folk houses (Figure 1), attracted social investment of 220 million yuan, and realized tax revenue of 6.3 million yuan.

In the Shangxitou natural village, the township government integrated an abandoned factory building and surrounding woodland and sold it to a tourism company for commercial housing construction, building 3.9 hectares of Huizhou-style houses. Although there is no exact data to show how much return the township government has obtained in the land sales process, it has become a consensus that local governments in China are the biggest beneficiaries of real estate. The pre-sale price of commercial housing is 17,000 yuan/m². According to the estimation of conventional land transaction cost, the government has also received much revenue. Land is the most essential commodity in rural areas, and it may also be the most valuable asset [19]. As Kan pointed out in his research on the commodification of land in the suburbs of Guangzhou, by promoting the circulation of land use rights in the market, the township government has obtained an amount far exceeding the compensation to the village collectives and farmers, which has become a lucrative mechanism for local government to accumulate capital [49].



Figure 1. The project of protection and utilization of ancient folk houses. Source: the authors.

4.2. Selling the Creative Tourism Experience to Tourists

In China, most tourism destinations obtain income primarily from tickets. While in Xixinan, this village has done the same thing but was unsuccessful. Thus, Xixinan began to embark on open scenic spots and became a famous historical and cultural village in China that does not require tickets. In the construction of the creative town, based on the ancient folk houses, the township government cultivates various creative business activities, such as Huizhou-style homestays, rural dwellings, agricultural experience, organic food production, country music, creative handicrafts, cultural salons, photography, exhibition, collection, study tour, and other innovative formats, which make them an important vehicle for implementing creative strategies (Figure 2). “Creative atmosphere” makes the place attractive. Creative development also articulates with cultural tourism, which provides tourists with more knowledge about characteristic local arts and cultural heritage, rather than the tedious experience of traditional mass tourism [50]. Additionally, Xixinan is adjacent to the Huangshan High-speed Railway North Station, benefiting to attract more tourists.

The first way for the government to draw profits from the tourism market is the taxation from tourism enterprises. After the tourism enterprises pay taxes to the Huizhou District, the Huizhou District will transfer part of the payment to the Xixinan Town government as part of its fiscal revenue. This system setting mobilizes the enthusiasm of local government: the more taxes paid in the region, the more fiscal transfer payments they will eventually receive [33,34]. Moreover, the achievements of the local political elites in the tourism industry are linked to their political career promotion. This institutional arrangement has strengthened the entrepreneurialism of the township government [4]. Our fieldwork showed that due to the growth-oriented political performance appraisal, the township government needed to bear great pressure from the superior government in the investment promotion project of the creative town. Therefore, generating income and bring economic benefits from these projects are expected to be realized. The head of the government often goes to the village to inspect the business of tourist places. If a non-operator is found, the township government will urge them to do business and even use administrative means such as contract cancellation and taking back the property rights to interfere.

Our government hopes for them to do business. The contract we signed with these tourism entrepreneurs clearly stipulates that the company is needed to be run routinely, and taxes must be paid annually. If they do not operate, we will not issue the real estate ownership certificate. We keep the right to take back their property rights according to the contract. We don't object to them living on their own, but they should open their business (Li, the government official of Xixinan, interviewed in September 2020).

Second, the township government has led the operation of the village collective economy of Xixinan and has continued to develop towards marketization and commodification. At present, the village collective of Xixinan has fixed assets of 20 million yuan, of which operating assets have exceeded 8 million yuan. In 2019, the village collective realized an operating income of 1 million yuan, increasing 65% over three years. Existing operating assets mainly include the workshops in the entrepreneurial base, farmer's market, bee product trading center, tourist parking lot, Simu Temple and collective land, etc. Income is increased by revitalizing the stock assets, developing the property economy, supporting tourism services, and characteristic planting. Although the township government has not directly gained profits from the operation of the village collective, the work done by the village collective is obviously to pave the way for the development of rural tourism and cultivate a more profitable tourist market. This can be seen from the planning projects being promoted by the township government.



Figure 2. Traditional Huizhou style folk market in the maple forest. Source: the authors.

For example, the Smart Innovation Industrial Park Project will cover an area of about 10 hectares, with a total investment of 1 billion yuan. After completing the project, it will attract 3000 creative talents, with 200,000 visits annually, an estimated annual benefit of 80 million yuan, and a profit of 30 million. Another example is the Xixinan Ancient Garden Restoration Project, which will cover about 10 hectares. The total investment is 200 million yuan, aiming to maximize the reproduction of the ancient Huizhou landscape style. It is estimated that it will attract 60 high-end people to settle in, attract 300,000 tourists annually, and hold 30 summit forums, with an estimated annual benefit of 6 million yuan. Creative tourism, coined by Sofield, is defined as a new type of tourism formed by the successful integration of creativity into the tourism industry as an element. It is also an extension of cultural tourism into a more specialized form [50]. Waitt and Gibson's research on tourism and creative economy in Europe and the United States show that creativity has been increasingly combined with the pursuit of profit and has been strategically incorporated

into tourism activities [51]. As for China, where creative tourism development is still in its infancy, the Xixinan township government's practice of creative branding will undoubtedly open up a niche tourism market, which in turn stimulates the increase in property value, investment, and tourists, and accelerates rural commodification.

4.3. Selling the Nature to Lifestyle Migrations

Perkins argues that lifestyle is also one of the most significant forms of commodities arising from rural commodification. Particular types of rural lifestyle are available for purchase by those who can afford to do so [19]. This observation is particularly true within the case of Xixinan. As introduced in the study area section, Xixinan consists of white walls and black tiles shaded by green trees and flowing streams, radiating the charm of Huizhou's cultural heritage and the vitality of nature and ecology. In the early tourism development, the township government realized that the unique natural environment of this village has great exchange value and paid attention to its protection, renovation, and landscape construction. For instance, through the Human Settlements Remediation Project, domestic waste and sewage treatment and the village's roads have been improved to enhance the village's appearance. The maple forest wetland, known as the "natural oxygen bar", has been invested in vegetation restoration and landscape enhancement primarily. At present, a hydrophilic trail loop has been built, running through Fenge River, a maple forest wetland park, and the Xixinan ancient village.

The high amenity landscape produced in specific rural areas is not only a part of attracting tourism but also an important asset for attracting lifestyle immigrants to settle in Xixinan. Realizing that the desire to experience ideal rural life is a growing trend in the development of global cities [27], the township government also stresses the rare ecological advantages of Xixinan when marketing outside (Figure 3). For example, Xixinan's official WeChat account, which is frequently updated, describes it like this:

The environment of Xixinan is just like its (Chinese) name, full of poetic and artistic flavor. Streamlets, small bridges, ancient folk houses, maple trees, alleys, simple aboriginal life... There is no commercial atmosphere here, everything is so natural. It is far from the city and is rarely disturbed by the outside world. Come on, this is a heaven of peace and happiness.

Nature has "market value" for people who are willing to spend money to view and experience the specific landscapes [8,38]. Surrounded by wetland, policy discourse has constructed Xixinan as "the ideal closest to the pastoralism" and a place escaping city and return to nature. This is exactly the ideal home for the middle class who have lived in big cities for a long time, and many lifestyle immigrants yearn for it.

In the Shangcun Village of Xixinan, which was originally a ruined building construction site abandoned for a long time, its land could not even be traded on the market at a meager price. To improve local image, increase immigrants' favorable impression towards Xixinan and their determination to purchase real estate, the township government organized to replan and transform the ecological environment of Shangcun, such as building gardens, ponds, and cultivating bonsai flowers to reshape nature, aiming to make it match the whole rurality of Xixinan. Transformed from a deserted land, Shangcun has been defined by policy discourse as the "Creative Park Area of Craftsman" and regarded as the vital area of the Creative Town of Xixinan. The value of the land has also increased. Currently, four-fifths of the limited property houses have been sold, and the house price has reached 3000 yuan/m².



Figure 3. The ecological environment of Xixinan. Source: the Xixinan township government.

The first step for lifestyle immigrants attracted by the nature of Xixinan, and wanting to move there, is to buy land or house from the township government, which directly brings economic returns to the government. Under China's land management law, people with urban hukou cannot purchase homesteads in the countryside. However, in Huangshan, out of the need to protect ancient buildings and traditional culture, the "Hundred Villages and Thousand Buildings" protection project has been specially formulated. Those who meet the conditions are eligible to purchase rural land. The commodity with a combination of ancient buildings and rural nature is more expensive than traditional urban commercial houses because of its artistic, aesthetic, and collection value. After their settling down, these lifestyle immigrants are actively encouraged by the township government to engage in tourism and creative industries and are specifically provided a convenient channel for their business license procedures if there is an intention. No matter what kind of business type they operate, they generally perform the rurality through self-media marketing to attract visitors. After the spread of a good reputation, more potential consumers are mobilized, laying the foundation for tax creation. Some visitors are even attracted by the unique nature of Xixinan, and they do not hesitate to spend money to settle in Xixinan, thus superimposing on the first and second circuits of the commodification of place.

Nature is a potential asset. The commodification, regulation, and appropriation of nature by the Xixinan township government indicate that the logic of state participation in the market has been expanded and strengthened. In the case of Xixinan, not all profits are made directly by selling nature itself similar to the wildlife tourism mentioned by Duffy [38,52]. Instead, the value of nature is brought into the commodity of real estate, pricing in the form of currency through the combination of that two. From the production of nature, the township government still creates value from the meaning and image represented by the landscape, experience, and nature [39].

5. Commodifying Place, Changing Countryside

5.1. Changes in Demographic Structure

Much of the urban middle class moved into Xixinan, followed by rural gentrification, which changed the original single rural population structure. For example, the Shangcun natural village, which did not exist before, now is entirely populated by migrants mainly from big cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Hefei, thus forming a new village. They

are running high-end homestays with their own ideas. In Xixinan ancient village, although a small number of villagers have moved out, it is more often that the migrants coexist with the local villagers. Simultaneously, the problem with rural gentrification is that the connection between outsiders and locals is weak, which is related to the social class difference mentioned by Eimermann, who argues that the divergence of values generated by different social classes profoundly affects the behavior and practice of immigrants [53]. Although the migrants also establish social relations with local communities, our fieldwork shows that they are embedded to a limited extent. For example, their interactions with villagers are mostly employment relationships and less participation in rural governance. After the tourism entrepreneurs and lifestyle immigrants have settled down in Xixinan, their practice is based on their hobbies and special interests to achieve their desired lifestyle and the meanings of existence.

The commodification of Xixinan has also provided many employment opportunities for local women, which is reflected in occupational structure. In the past, local women primarily engaged in agriculture or took care of their families full-time. Now many of them can apply for positions in the service industry, such as housekeepers, front desks, support staff, and temporary workers. Women with handicraft expertise even participate in cultural creativity industries such as ceramic art production. Some lifestyle immigrants will hire part-time workers to cook and clean due to their older age, lack of physical strength, or other business needs. In short, to a certain extent, rural tourism in Xixinan provides rural women with local work opportunities, reconciling family care, and farming arrangements. However, the current labor market is chaotic. To improve the living conditions of the workers themselves, problems such as vicious competition, random job-hopping, and unstable employment have emerged. Market relations begin to penetrate into the relatively marginal village, and more requirements are placed on the shaping and discipline of rural labor. For example, rural women are required to learn reception etiquette and follow the schedule, etc., reflecting how tourism's practices of commodification subordinate multiple dimensions of rural socio-spatial life to capital accumulation [36,54].

In terms of family structure, some villagers who have gone out to work perceive development opportunities in their hometown and have begun to return to start businesses. The common practice is to use their own estate to operate a homestay, which directly impacts the family. For example, for the homestay Xibianrenjia, the husband and wife no longer live in different places and have more time to accompany and educate their children, which increases the harmony of the family. For the homestay Xidilinshe, because the parents are old and the mode of business operation is not keeping up with the trend of the times, their son returns to his hometown to inherit the family business, better maintain the family assets, and assume the responsibility for the elderly. For the homestay Xishixiaozhu, the wife is the main undertaker of operating the homestay, including receiving guests, doing catering and cleaning rooms, etc., earning more income, and becoming the master of the family, changing the passive role without any income in the past. Overall, the demographic changes in Xixinan are apparent, but not all residents choose to leave their property to migrant businesspersons and to monetize their property through rent, as Su described in Lijiang Old Town, China [13]. On the contrary, they can gain a foothold by their rural homes and get benefits by actively engaging in rural tourism, which further promotes rural commodification and is consistent with Fløysand and Jakobsen's argument that the producers of the countryside as a commodity can be insiders within a community [20].

5.2. Changes in Industrial Structure

Xixinan is a large traditional agricultural village, owning a long history of planting and breeding as the leading industries and farm and sideline product processing. Grain, rapeseed, silkworm cocoons, pollution-free vegetables, high-quality livestock and poultry, and green fruits are abundant in Xixinan, whose agricultural industrialization is at the forefront of Huangshan city with six leading enterprises. Notably, the beekeeping industry is advantageous in Xixinan, known as "the hometown of bees" in China. There are

700 households engaged in beekeeping production in this town. Each household keeps an average of more than 60 bee colonies, and the total number of bee colonies is 80,000. After several years of development, the agricultural product processing industry has gradually grown, and the production model has initially formed a model of “company + farmer”.

Since Xixinan Town successfully applied for a creative town, the township government began to deliberately guide the development of tourism and creative industries, and there has been a trend of crossover and integration of the two. According to the planning, eight thematic sections of “landscape design, education and training, forum exhibition, animation production, mobile game development, film and television creation, advertising media, and art publishing” will be vigorously developed. In terms of the tourism industry, there are currently 48 homestays, 15 tourist restaurants, and 13 tourist attractions in Xixinan. Significantly, some homestays have become tourist attractions after creative placemaking by owners and become a consumption site for many tourists. A typical example is the Homestay of Mengxifanghui, which incorporates artistic elements including classical furniture, calligraphy and painting exhibitions, and film and music culture salons to the internal design. Some “Architecture and Interior Designers Forums” were also held there to jointly explore the integration of Huizhou regional culture and contemporary architecture. Another example is Xixianghuayuan Homestay, whose owner once was an executive from a decoration company in Hefei but gave up his previous job to pursue countryside life. The feature of his homestay is to provide guests with an organic food experience by growing their own crops organically and using local medical knowledge to develop Huizhou-style creative crafts.

With regard to the creative industry, 73 creative talents have been attracted to Xixinan Town, and 19 creative businesses have been built. The most rapid development is the education and training industry, and the Turenscape Company is the most typical. It has three reception rural hotels in Xixinan and has also set up a training institution, which cooperates with organizations in the United States, Britain, Switzerland, Australia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to carry out education training services. On the one hand, this institution provides landscape design training for adults, including design boot camps, cultural training camps, art experience camps, and software application workshops. On the other hand, it provides study tours for elementary and middle school students. Turenscape has grasped the emerging opportunity of out-of-school education activities that combine research learning and travel experience in China. Research courses with local characteristics have been developed, such as leading students to explore the architectural culture of ancient Huizhou village, rural water conservancy project, Huizhou cuisine, Huizhou opera, which are deeply loved by students, parents, and study tour institutions. In addition, animation production and film and television shooting have also begun to enter the cultivation stage.

The rural development of Xixinan, however, also faced some serious challenges. On the one hand, the township government believed that the tourism project launched by Turenscape was progressing slowly, and the original intention of the overall operation for the scenic spot was not implemented, leading to the breakdown of the growth alliance. Now the township government is seeking new partners. However, the existing critical assets are still in the hands of Turenscape, which slows down the rural development process and makes the prospect and path of Xixinan increasingly uncontrollable in the market economy. On the other hand, Xixinan has enough natural scenery and cultural heritage to become idyllic pastoral pursued by outsiders. However, regarding the operational performance of the creative industry, especially under the COVID-19 epidemic, the dilemma of business and life is needed to face in negotiation. Even so, Xixinan is just a transit point for external capital to pursue profits where the land speculation has already been reflected. This is similar to the findings of many scholars conducting their study in the UK, Ireland, Spain, and Australia that the mobility of creative talents is relatively high. Under this circumstance, the contribution of rural creative industries to rural economic development will be challenged [55–58], As Gibson put it, creates activities contribute to the accumulation of cultural capital of place, translating into higher property values in locations connected

to cultural activities [58]. However, through such cycles—of cultural industry activities, accumulation of cultural capital, and consequent shifts in residential property markets—the viability of the very artistic ‘scenes’ that gained places reputations as ‘creative’ in the first place has become increasingly threatened [58].

5.3. Changes in Social and Cultural Values

Britton reminds us that the tourism industry is driven by the inherent social driving force from a society, producing social and ideological relations and promoting the awakening of the consciousness of place [36]. This argument can be concretely reflected in the case of Xixinan. As many foreigners came to Xixinan to buy ancient houses, it directly promoted housing prices. Villagers have had a new understanding of the ancient buildings, perceiving their economic value. Ancient buildings are no longer directly demolished to build the new but will be protected first. The organic vegetables and agricultural and sideline products planted by the villagers were always sold at a low price or even unsalable in the past. Now they are keenly aware of the preference for organic food by tourists and immigrants from cities, and they have learned how to market healthy food.

Concerning cultural awareness, some country gentlemen with a sense of family responsibility are attempting to defend the indigenous culture and avoid alienation in the process of rural commodification. The homestay Yuqingzhai is derived from the calligraphy created by Wu Ting, a well-known master of calligraphy and painting in the Ming Dynasty and a historical celebrity in Xixinan. Half of the calligraphy and paintings collected by the royal family of the Qing Dynasty of China are Wu Ting’s old collections, but few people now know this historical origin. The owner of the homestay is a descendant of the Wu family clan. He said a company once wanted to buy their ancient ancestral building, but he refused. He further noted that Yuqingzhai was very famous in the historical period of Ming and Qing Dynasties of China, but Xixinan has not fully presented this culture now and has even forgotten this most important cultural relic. It is his responsibility to maintain the ancestral ancient building, showing tourists an authentic experience of glorious family history and Huizhou architectural culture, and preventing destruction from foreign developers in the process of rural commodification. From this, it can be seen that in the wave of commodification, individuals are not simply subservient to a logic of capital accumulation [13]. The strong place attachment as a kind of cultural resistance, indigenous communities rely on their homes to maintain local traditions and identity, showing one side of complexity in rural commodification [59].

However, some villagers who have a low perception of benefits from rural tourism have developed a sense of deprivation and even jealousy, thereby interfering with the tourism operation. For example, the manager of the homestay Xuliqiaoge mentioned that neighbors accused him of disturbing their daily lives by the noise from the floor heating of his homestay. Thus, they colluded with the surrounding residents to make trouble. In fact, his heating system has been tested by professional equipment and has not exceeded the standard. Their real intention was to ask the homestay to give them money as compensation. Additionally, villagers would come to the homestay to sell their agricultural products, which is how they earn income from tourism. If the owner refused to buy, there will be disagreements and even quarrels with the owner, taking the opportunity to stigmatize the homestay. Peng et al. and Xu and Sun suggest that there is a negative correlation between the extent to which host residents benefit from tourism and the level of relative deprivation [60,61]. Rural transformation development necessitates solving the problem of relative deprivation generated by tourism-led commodification as it can directly influence host community residents’ attitudes towards tourism and the stability of rural society and economy [60].

The contested rurality has been sparked due to the rural hybridity. As various subjects settled in Xixinan with different purposes, the village has formed a new and progressive, identity and values under the interweaving of different forces but sometimes destroyed the human-land relationships [62]. The Shangcun natural village is now called a “homestay

village” formed by a gathering of migrants. Through their own resources, funds, and creative network, they have become a benchmark of Xixinan creative town. At first, the head of the township government placed high hopes and trust in these homestay owners. However, with capital flows and changes in personnel and business principle, the township government has now formed a bad impression of the migrant owners in Shangcun, as well as prejudices and divergent views on rural development. Of course, Shangcun is now evolving into an enclave. In the Xixinan ancient village, some entrepreneurs occupied good resources but failed to drive rural development, which was also criticized by locals. Although these different stakeholders’ disputes over rurality have not yet evolved into the direct social and political conflicts mentioned by Tonts and Greive and Woods [46,63], the tensions from rural commoditization are ubiquitous and should be promptly mediated.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

This article investigates the tourism-led commodification of place and rural transformation development by the qualitative method. Our research further responds to the viewpoint that “commodification is not just the actions of rural communities and entrepreneurs [28,29], but also projects actively sought by local governments” [5], and “the potential of rural transformation is explored through the study of rural space commodification from a micro perspective” [45]. The results show that the tourism-led commodification of places in rural areas is not only for real estate and tourists but can also be manifested in the dimension of nature. Moreover, the trend of the commodification of nature is increasingly obvious in the context of interaction between urban and rural. The township government plays an active role in the process of commodification, attempting to make profits from the above three dimensions to promote capital accumulation. The commodification of place also drives rural transformation development, including the changes and state in demographic structure, industrial structure, and social and cultural values, showing the multiple collisions and coexistence of tradition and modernity, rural and urban, endogenous and exogenous. Of course, this dynamic is still going on and poses new challenges for rural revitalization. The local governments need to solve: the integration of immigrants and local residents following rural gentrification; the management of rural labor market; the changes in the social structure of rural family; the embeddedness and sustainability of new rural industries under the capital seesaw movement; and the ability of local communities to derive material and non-material benefits from tourism development.

Our research contributes to expand the analytical dimension of the commodification of place and examine the role of state entrepreneurship associated with it. With the diversification of emerging tourism types and rural leisure, it is increasingly necessary to incorporate nature into the analysis of commodification to explain its hidden capital accumulation. As Rainer notes, profits can be made by producing nature, such as lakes, forests, open green areas, nature reserves, and golf courses which are taken for granted for tourism and leisure to increase land value and speculation [64]. Tourism and leisure natures are the material expression of what Harvey calls spatial fix, capital’s geographical expansion through actors’ fixing investments spatially, embedding the abstract components of the rural experience (fresh air, nature, and tranquillity, etc.) in the land, to create an entirely new landscape for capital accumulation [64]. Commodification is structural because commercial forces and state policies constitute structural power relations to sell things for economic returns [65]. Therefore, the analysis of the commodification of place needs to be linked to the broader political and economic process. The state entrepreneurship that emerged during the market transition contributes to the spatial reconstruction in the urban-rural interface and leads to the infiltration of state entrepreneurship from the city to the surrounding rural hinterland [49,66]. Both the efforts of the Xixinan township government to establish a partnership with private enterprises or direct participation in the market economy demonstrate the agency of the township government in the process of rural commodification. In short, a combination of analysis of commodification in land ownership, tourism market, and natural environment, this article reveals the township government with entrepreneurialism

obtains economic returns from tourism entrepreneurs, tourists, and lifestyle immigrants, adding an empirical case to the commodification and state entrepreneurialism in rural areas, and reinforces the call by Bianchi to address the systemic forces of accumulation, constellations of class power and models of innovation that will continue to radically restructure complex, multi-scalar modes of industrial organization and profit extraction in contemporary tourism [67].

Our research also contributes to the understanding of China's rural transformation development. Similar to Woods's observations in the West, the commodification and rural transformation development in Xixinan are driven by multiple factors such as immigrant population, capital, and information flow under the background of globalization and modernization [7]. Woods adds that the commercial development of rural resources is reflected in the market economy and people have enough capacity to pay for the commodification of rural landscapes, lifestyles, artifacts, and experiences [7]. However, neither the local culture of Xixinan is shocked by external market forces, nor is the commodity separated from the original material referents of the village. Instead, it has been actively exploited by rural innovators to reproduce Huizhou culture's historical glory in the past. This is mainly attributable to the development of rural creative industries because creativity *per se* requires fully exploring the rural elements and combining them with the place itself for creative making [50]. Agricultural products and other economic activities in the rural space are not entirely for commercial purposes, but sometimes are self-sufficient. There is no obvious situation of forced displacement of the rural population, aging society, and high unemployment rate in Xixinan [68]. Likely, it has not yet reached the development stage of counter-urbanization similar to the West. Nevertheless, long-term follow-up research is needed to cautiously assess how the established rural environments, production processes, and social arrangements are continually being modified or abandoned and replaced [19].

Through the case of Xixinan, we can also have a glimpse of the trend of rural transformation in East China. East China is a traditional plain and hilly agricultural area in China, and it preserves a large amount of historical culture from the farming period. Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, East China, especially the Yangtze River Delta region, has taken the lead in developing into a developed region. Due to the high level of urbanization, the urban middle class's massive demand for consuming rurality, and more opportunities to participate in the global economic network, the villages in East China present the co-existence of consuming countryside, multi-functional countryside, and global countryside. The map of rural transformation reflects the comprehensive restructuring of economy, society, and culture, instead of a single dimension.

Then how does the Xixinan case inform us about the role differences of the government in commodification between China and the West? Woods argues that "the government is a central player in the production and re-production of the rural. It contributes to the discursive construction of the rural, not least through the development and articulation of various political constructions of the rural in which the rural society, economy and environment are described and problematized as objects of governance" [8]. In Xixinan, the township government promotes its connection with national strategic goals, such as characteristic town construction and rural revitalization strategy, and rural resources are also actively mobilized to achieve this discursive construction. In the process of rural commodification, Western governments (completely) withdrew from market operation [33]. While the township governments in China, just like those in the city, still have the capacity to decide whether and how to cooperate with corporations, and even directly participate in the market operation. However, unlike urban governance, rural public finance is relatively weak [4], and the risk of capital seeking profits by entering the countryside is greater. The forced withdrawal of corporations from the rural also makes the growth alliance between the government and corporations often unstable. Once the pace of rural commodification begins, the township government is forced to participate in the market economy with more roles, leveraging the rural revitalization process. Therefore, to compare and examine the role differences of the government in rural commodification

between China and the West: firstly, we need to recognize the agency and dominance of Chinese governments at all levels. Especially for the local governments, they are the (most) active and efficient agents for rural commodification. Secondly, it needs to realize the local governments' characteristics, namely acting through the market, in achieving rural strategic and developmental objectives and addressing the ensuing discipline and risks [66]. Finally, in the context of China, it is necessary to consider the relationship between the township government and the village collective and how they cooperate or exclude mutually to promote or resist the rural commodification, which is worthy of further study in the future.

The enlightenment and significance of this article on practice also deserve elaboration. The trend of commodification in rural areas is unstoppable. One of the advantages of the collective ownership of rural land in China is that it ensures the utilization efficiency of rural land by local governments when needed. However, it requires more thinking on how to enable the local community to gain a more proactive role and a leading position and benefit more in the process of commodification. Through this case, the township government can work with the superior governments to cultivate the village collective to engage in tourism development and improve their operation capacity, instead of relying more on external capital and help them control the resources belonging to the village collective. Additionally, the township government can make efforts to attract entrepreneurs who have gone out from their hometowns to return to start businesses, maintain their place attachment and emotional solidarity with the local community, and encourage them to drive rural development and prosperity. Of course, to achieve these goals also means putting forward higher requirements on the governance level for local governments.

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