

The Coupling Coordination Degree between Tourism and Urbanization in Rural Revitalization: A Case Study of the Wuling Mountain Area

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ABSTRACT

Regional coordinated development should be promoted for high-quality economic development. An effective way for regional economic development is to enhance the coupling coordination degree development of tourism and urbanization. This paper reviews the literature on the coupling coordination degree between tourism and urbanization. Moreover, it collates and analyzes the literature on tourism development and urbanization in the Wuling Mountain Area. It explores the evaluation index system and development mechanism of the coupling coordination degree of tourism and urbanization in the area. It proposes countermeasures for improving the coupling coordination degree of tourism and urbanization. Thus, China's regional economy and society can develop faster and more harmoniously.

Keywords: Regional coordination, Tourism, Urbanization, The Wuling Mountain Area, Coupling degree.

The Wuling Mountain Area is a contiguous poor area with old revolutionary base areas, ethnic minority areas and poverty-stricken areas. It spans Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing and Guizhou, featuring concentrations of ethnic minorities, a wide distribution of impoverished populations, and severe poverty. Moreover, it is one of the most important cross-regional economic collaboration areas (Gao, 2015), featuring regional characteristics and abundant tourism resources. In 2009, the State Council instructed to build the Wuling Mountain Area as a national demonstration zone for poverty alleviation and cross-provincial innovation collaboration (Long, Du, & Zhou, 2015). In 2011, the State Council promulgated the Outline of Development-driven Poverty Alleviation in Rural Areas (2011-2020), which prioritized enhancing the self-development capacity of targets for poverty alleviation. The Wuling Mountain Area was identified as one of the 14 contiguous poor areas (Li, 2017). In the same year, the Plan for Regional Development and Poverty Alleviation in the Wuling Mountain Area (2011-2020) ("the Plan") proposed combining poverty alleviation in contiguous poor areas and cross-provincial cooperation and synergistic development. The Plan indicates the path for poverty alleviation in

the Area. In 2013, Xi made his inspection tour to Shibadong Village, Huayuan County, Hunan Province. Xi proposed giving differentiated guidance for targeted poverty alleviation in line with local conditions for the first time. It led the way for the Wuling Mountain Area to fight against poverty (Li, 2017) and allowed the counties in the Area to develop differently. In the report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed implementing the rural revitalization strategy. Xi also advocated opening up a new urban-rural integration and modernization situation by revitalizing the countryside (Xi, 2019). In September 2021, the committees of CPPCC of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing and Guizhou reached the Enshi Consensus. It specifies that they should jointly press to create the National Pilot Area for Rural Revitalization in the Wuling Mountain Area.

Moreover, the relevant national ministries and commissions must jointly promote the preparation of the Plan for Building the National Pilot Area for Rural Revitalization in the Wuling Mountain Area (2021-2035). Also, governments must revitalize rural areas (Chen, 2021). Specifically, businesses should flourish, and the environment should be eco-friendly with social etiquette and civility. Also, effective governance should guarantee the rural population a well-off life (Xi, 2019).

With the all-area tourism-based development and poverty alleviation model, we should vigorously develop the tourism economy. Thus, we can resolve the contradiction between people's desire for a better life and unbalanced and insufficient development in poor areas (Tang et al., 2021). Based on the beautiful natural landscape and resources, tourism has gradually become the pillar industry of the Wuling Mountain Area to escape from poverty, eliminate poverty stickiness and break the cycle of poverty (Gan & Wang, 2021). However, tourism in the Area started from a low base and grew slowly due to its unique geographical location and political and historical reasons. Urbanization is a profound change in industrial structure due to urban advantages and productivity development (Xin, 1985). The tourism system and the urbanization system of a region are two relatively independent entities. However, tourism development is inextricably linked with the progress of urbanization. Therefore, examining the coupling coordination degree of tourism and urbanization in the Wuling Mountain Area is vital to accelerate rural revitalization and help poverty alleviation. On the new journey of building a modern socialist country in all aspects, China should construct a sound indicator system for the coupling coordination degree of tourism and urbanization.

According to statistics, by 2020, 70 of the 71 counties in the Area had been lifted out of poverty. Also, regional poverty has been largely resolved (<http://www.mzb.com.cn/>, 2020). The Wuling Mountain Area is the largest inter-provincial multi-ethnic area in China. During the "12th Five-Year Plan" period, with the strong support of the government, the minority communities in the area have been developed into distinctive villages of tourism and culture. With the integration of culture and tourism, tourism has been flourishing. The ethnic groups in the Area have united to turn their rich ethnic and folk resources into strengths for development (China Ethnic News, 2016).

The Wuling Mountain Area is located at the intersection of the two major western development strategies and central China's rise. Hence, it can link the east with the west and the north with the south. From the spatial structure of the six centers, tourism has become a strategic pillar industry of the Wuling Mountain Area. The Area features diverse and abundant resources,

unique natural geographic landscapes and inimitable ethnic backgrounds. In 2021, the Alliance for Cultural Tourism Development of the Wuling Mountain proposed to make sustained efforts in joint top-level design and joint construction of major projects. Also, the regions will share development resources, jointly promote cultural tourism brands, attract investments, and establish a favorable environment for development. In this way, it can promote the complementary advantages of the region beyond the administrative barriers, accelerate the integration of culture and tourism, and establish the Wuling Mountain Area as a new highland for green and innovative development (CNR News, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have shown that more research has been done in developed regions with mature tourism industries but less research on the relationship between tourism and urbanization in less economically developed regions. The research has focused more on the contribution of tourism to the economy and less on other perspectives. More studies have been conducted on how to improve the quality of urbanization. However, few studies address the factors influencing urbanization, especially in tourism. The scale of research on tourism and urbanization is becoming more and more refined. However, scholars mostly study developed areas or urban clusters and seldom study poverty-stricken areas due to various constraints. Covering a vast area, the Wuling Mountains Area is inhabited by multiple ethnic groups with a huge gap between regions. Also, the Area's industries are underdeveloped and uncoordinated. Therefore, it is not easy to collect and refine the relevant data of the Wuling Mountain Area. Coupling is a common perspective in the extant research on the interaction between tourism and urbanization. Feng (2012) suggested that tourism industrialization and urbanization can be better if governments support local tourism development. Urbanization depends on the economic linkage effect of tourism. Over the past ten years, the Wuling Mountain Area has been fully lifted from poverty. Many scholars in China have been following and researching the Area's development, mainly focusing on the tourism industry and the effectiveness of poverty alleviation.

Tourism Development of The Wuling Mountain Area

The Plan for Regional Development and Poverty Alleviation in the Wuling Mountain Area specifies that the Wuling Mountain Area should deeply explore tourism resources, improve infrastructure, promote tourism cooperation, and accelerate the establishment of an eco-cultural tourist area. Regarding tourism development, Chinese scholars mostly examine the differences in tourism economic development across time and space in the region based on the theory of regional economic development differences (Tang et al., 2021). Gao (2015) argued that the Wuling Mountain Area enjoys comparative advantages in developing cultural tourism due to its profound ethnic, revolutionary and regional cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the industries in the Area are poorly developed synergistically. Therefore, he concluded that cultural tourism should be considered a pioneer industry to promote the Area's socio-economic development. Liu & Wang (2021) investigated the potential of the Wuling Mountain Area for tourism in terms of the socio-economic environment, tourism development environment, and natural ecological environment. They found that the Wuling Mountain Area had high potential but showed significant spatial heterogeneity, with large differences between cities and prefectures in the same province. Based on this conclusion, we summarize the current tourism situation in the Wuling Mountain Area from three influencing factors.

Economic Growth:

Economic growth is strong external support and a driver of the Wuling Mountain Area's potential for tourism development. Tourism can help alleviate poverty by boosting the regional economy, increasing the income of people experiencing poverty, and reducing their unemployment rate. The tourism economy was first explored in the late 1890s in L. Bodio's book "SUL MOVIMENTO DEI FORESTIERI IN ITALIA E SUL DENARO CHE VI SPENDONO." Zhao (2007) suggested that ethnic areas have been economically disadvantaged due to heavy historical burdens, small economic aggregates, poor foundation, and backward infrastructure. Tang et al. (2021) investigated the spatial variation pattern of total tourism income in the Wuling Mountain Area in 2018 and found that it was normally distributed with convergent and homogeneous characteristics. It indicates that people have gained some economic resources through tourism development. However, all regions are weakly correlated, and resources are unevenly distributed.

The Wuling Mountain Area has made significant economic achievements after several years of continuous development and strong support from national policies. The Area's industrial structure has been restructured to be dominated by tertiary industries, followed by secondary and primary industries. However, Liu & Wang (2021) concluded that the regions within the Area with developed tourism have overly homogeneous internal sectors. There is a huge gap between the north and the south, but only a small gap between the east and the west. Wang et al. (2020) studied the coupling relationship between the level of transformation and upgrading of industrial structure and the efficiency of tourism-oriented poverty alleviation in the Wuling Mountain Area, indicating the consistently low coupling degree in Fenghuang County. It is confirmed that the over-proportion of the tourism economy in the regional GDP of Fenghuang County may lead to production factors being overly concentrated in tourism. However, the local government neglects other industries that must be developed simultaneously. Therefore, in an effort for development-based poverty alleviation in the Wuling Mountain Area, we should optimize the regional industrial structure and promote high-quality economic development. Moreover, the market should allocate resources instead of resources allocating the market, and we should not solely pursue the growth of economic income.

Resource Endowment:

Resource endowment is a prerequisite for the tourism development potential of the Wuling Mountain Area and is the basis for developing and constructing scenic spots. Tang et al. (2021) found that the attractions in the Area were unevenly distributed using the GWR model, with more attractions in the north and fewer in the south. Due to the poor infrastructure in the Area, the region with an advanced tourism economy has a weaker radiation effect. However, the high-quality scenic spots in the Area are more spatially connected and have a stronger radiating effect, facilitating the integration of tourism resources (Gan & Wang, 2021), such as supplying tourists and interconnecting scenic spots. At the same time, they identified the Wuling Mountain Area as having unique advantages in topography, river systems, and air quality. The forest cover is over 70%, positively correlated with the distribution of high-quality scenic spots. It indicates that the Wuling Mountain Area has significant development potential for natural resources.

Traffic Accessibility:

Traffic accessibility is necessary for the Wuling Mountain Area's potential for tourism development. The rapid development of modern tourism depends largely on advanced modern transportation systems. The transportation network can shorten the psychological distance of tourists and enhance their willingness to travel through the spatial and temporal compression effect (Zhou et al., 2018). Moreover, it can shift scenic spots from point-like distribution to an axial or mesh-like layout. When investigating the current situation of cultural tourism in the Area, Gao (2015) found that the Wuling Mountain Area has few transportation options and single paths connecting famous tourist attractions, with insufficient connections between resource points. A poor tourism transportation network generally characterizes the Area. Gan & Wang (2021) analyzed that the high-quality scenic spots in the Wuling Mountain Area are mostly distributed along the highway lines.

Liu & Wang (2021) pointed out that ground and air transportation networks are well developed within the Area, especially in northeastern Guizhou. Moreover, they promote the effective connection and resource integration of scenic spots in the region and further optimize the spatial pattern of high-quality scenic spots in the Area. Nevertheless, Zhang & Tu (2020) noted that internal and external transportation affected the efficiency of tourism-oriented poverty alleviation differently. Internal transportation has a positive and then a negative non-linear effect on improving the efficiency of tourism-oriented poverty alleviation, while external transportation has a positive and linear effect. Hence, it is necessary to plan how to develop the transportation network rationally to maximize the efficiency of the tourism industry.

Urbanization in the Wuling Mountain Area

Urbanization is the only way to develop the regional economy of the Wuling Mountain Area. Ye (2001) was the first to establish an evaluation index system to analyze the quality of urbanization from urban modernization and urban-rural integration. Ma (2014) examined the factors influencing urbanization in China from demographic, economic, and social perspectives. After years of efforts against poverty, the Wuling Mountain Area has seen a significantly reduced incidence of poverty and continuously improved urbanization quality. However, the Wuling Mountain Area has disadvantages such as remote locations of some regions, high average altitude, and uneven development within the Area. Thus, the Area's urbanization is not coordinated in speed and quality (Gan & Wang, 2021). Urbanization research involves several dimensions. This paper will summarize the current urbanization progress of the Wuling Mountain Area from economic, ecological, demographic and social dimensions.

Economic Growth:

Economic factors are an important determinant of high-quality urbanization. As of 2019, rural residents' per capita disposable income in the Wuling Mountain Area was 11,544 yuan, 3.3 times higher than in 2010, indicating remarkable progress in poverty eradication. However, it comes with the problems of severely homogenized agricultural products and tourism projects and high market competition pressure. Xiong and Xiao (2021) argued that industrialization is the main driver of urbanization. Also, the Area must be urbanized and industrialized simultaneously for faster growth. However, we should consider whether the general environment of the Wuling Mountain Area allows for sustainable economic development as we develop traditional industries. Yang et al. (2021) concluded that governments should encourage rural residents to work nearby, encourage them to start their businesses and create

a diversified system to increase farmers' income. At the same time, the government should supply sufficient financial support to enhance the economic development of the Wuling Mountain Area by leveraging the advantages of its special industries. The Area should also be actively integrated into the Belt and Road Initiative and engage in deep regional cooperation with developed city clusters.

Ecological Environment:

The ecological environment is the bottom line of urbanizing the Wuling Mountain Area. So we cannot develop the Area at the expense of the ecological environment (Xiong et al., 2021). Xiong and Xiao (2021) investigated the urbanization and ecological environment of six Wuling Mountain area central cities. They found that their urbanization and ecological environment were highly coupled during the development period and were developed in a stable and orderly manner. However, the urban system in the area is not perfect, and it varies significantly from region to region. The urbanization rate has been increasing yearly but still lags behind the national average. Yang et al. (2021) indicated insufficient synergy between ecological civilization construction and urbanization in the Wuling Mountain Area. Although the Area has abundant resources, the ecological environment is fragile. As urbanization proceeds, the contradiction between economic growth and environmental protection is becoming more and more prominent (Mu, 2014). Such contradictions restrict urbanization to some extent. Tourism has also affected the Wuling Mountain Area's ecological environment. Tang (2020) pointed out that the Wuling Mountain Area is popular among visitors because of its rich ethnic culture and recreational and sports tourism development. However, the spreading of household waste and the destroyed natural resources have damaged the ecological environment of the Wuling Mountain Area. Therefore, while emphasizing economic development and improving social structure, we must improve the internal ecological carrying capacity of the Area. Also, we should effectively manage and control environmental protection. In addition, the public infrastructure of each county should be improved to ensure the physical and ecological environment of urbanization based on the protection of the Area's natural and ecological environment.

Population Distribution:

A new type of human-centered urbanization is proposed in The Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035. The gathering of the urban population supplies the labor force and economic base for urbanization. Liu and Deng (2007) suggested that the Wuling Mountain Area covers many cities and provinces, so the labor market is severely fragmented across urban and rural areas, regions and sectors. It hampers the unification of the labor market and restricts the progress of urbanization to some extent. Yang et al. (2021) tested the significance of factors influencing the quality development of urbanization in the Wuling Mountain Area. They suggested that economic and demographic factors particularly influence the quality development of urbanization in the Area. Therefore, economic and demographic factors should prioritize urbanization within the Area. The larger the urban population, the better the Area's urbanization quality. However, urban residents can hardly gather in the Wuling Mountain Area with its high altitude, vast area and complex population distribution. It restricts the quality development of urbanization (Gan & Wang, 2021). In recent years, the government has invested more in allocating public resources, thus enabling the effective sharing of education and medical resources. However, the urbanization of the population in the

Area remains sluggish, with significant regional differences. According to Xiong et al. (2021), urbanization should not just transfer farmers to the cities or change their jobs but also share public resources equitably. Moreover, we should speed up building a modern service industry system to drive the high-quality urbanization of the Area's population.

Social Services:

When examining the development level of a region, we must look at the quality of its social services, i.e., the degree of infrastructure development, in addition to its economic growth. It also confirms the people-oriented concept of urbanization. For the Wuling Mountain Area, in addition to the flourishing tourism industry, the sales of agricultural products are also a major source of income for residents, especially farmers. The efficient distribution of agricultural products ensures the quality of life of urban residents, and urbanization also stimulates the market demand for agricultural products. Xiong (2020) measured the synergistic development of agricultural product distribution and urbanization in six central cities of the Wuling Mountain Area. Due to China's financial and policy support in recent years, all six cities have demonstrated positive growth, despite the gap between the distribution of agricultural products and the high quality of urbanization. Yang et al. (2021) suggested that the government should accelerate the improvement of social and public service infrastructure based on policy and material support.

Furthermore, it should promote the high-quality growth of urbanization in the Wuling Mountain Area to increase farmers' income. Education is always the key point in urbanization, and poverty alleviation through education can improve students' quality in all aspects and contribute to rural revitalization. However, Li & Chen (2020) point out that the Wuling Mountain Area suffers from a shortage of teachers and inadequate coverage of students' education, which are common problems in poor areas. At the same time, they pointed out that the multi-faceted cooperation mechanism of the Area is not well developed. As a result, information is not transmitted smoothly, and communication between education departments and schools remains slow. Also, the mechanism of poverty alleviation through education is not standardized. In addition, students' psychological status, teachers' ratings and school facilities are poorly evaluated. The people generate economic benefits, so the economy should serve them. The government should allocate economic resources to the people, serve the people, and enhance the quality and scale of social services. Moreover, it should allow people to perceive improvements in every aspect.

CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS

China is at a critical moment in its rural revitalization strategy, and promoting the development of urbanization and the tourism industry is an integral part of the strategy. The improved coupling coordination between urban and rural tourism and urbanization boosts the regional economy. And it also facilitates the implementation of new urbanization in the region. Therefore, we should conduct more research on the coordinated development of tourism and urbanization to optimize the allocation of tourism resources between urban and rural areas. It is conducive to the rapid development of tourism and urbanization in China. A review of the above literature shows that significant progress has been made in the existing research on tourism and urbanization. In this paper, based on the existing research results and the reality of the Wuling Mountain Area, we built the tourism and urbanization systems of the Wuling Mountain Area following the principle of index selection. When studying urbanization, we may

investigate how to turn rural populations into urban populations and how societies grow urban with faster economic growth. Evaluating the tourism industry by the tourism development level and resource base is recommended. Fruitful results have been produced on the coordinated development of urbanization and tourism. However, little research has been done on the coupled and coordinated development of urbanization and tourism in the Wuling Mountain Area. Some prospects are proposed in this paper for promoting the coupled and coordinated development of urbanization and tourism. Firstly, we should improve the construction of tourism infrastructure and public service facilities. Secondly, more investment should be made to protect and develop tourism resources.

We should make more efforts to coordinate urbanization and tourism, maintain stable and rapid economic growth, and boost the local economy. Moreover, tourism should be further transformed and upgraded to create a new brand image of local tourism. Thirdly, we should adhere to the integrated development of urban and rural areas and reinforce the coordination of tourism and urbanization.

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