




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Influencing factors of residents' subjective well-being in rural tourism destinations: A case study of Licha village in Guangdong, China

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Abstract

Sustainable rural development is increasingly important in the context of globalization, with rural tourism driving spatial revitalization and enhancing residents' well-being. This study investigates how rural tourism shapes residents' subjective well-being (SWB) in Licha village, Guangdong, China. Using semi-structured interviews with 23 residents and grounded theory coding (open, axial, selective), we inductively develop a three-stage mechanism linking tourism development to well-being. Our findings are as follows: (i) tourism improves living conditions and creates new opportunities for participation, strengthening social ties and cultural recognition. (ii) Residents' well-being is formed through a sequence of "structural support, relational embedding, and emotional transformation," driven by five factors: spatial adaptation, resident participation, relationship reconstruction, identity generation, and place attachment. (iii) While overall effects are positive, boundary conditions—such as cultural commodification and disruptions to everyday routines—can weaken this pathway unless mitigated through participatory governance and heritage stewardship. The main contribution is a resident-centered, transferable framework that explains how rural tourism converts material improvements into durable place attachment and SWB, offering actionable guidance for planning and community management in traditional village destinations.

Keywords: Rural tourism; Subjective well-being; Grounded theory; Place attachment; Influencing factors

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1. Introduction

Rural tourism has been widely adopted as a lever for revitalizing traditional villages, yet its implications for residents' lived experiences and subjective well-being (SWB) remain contested. In the context of global sustainable development goals, rural areas face numerous challenges in reducing poverty, improving residents' quality of life and well-being, and safeguarding ecological and cultural heritage (World Bank, 2008). In response, rural

tourism has become a key development strategy, facilitating industrial diversification, enhancing public services, and enabling the reuse of cultural resources (Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). In the European Alps, community-driven ecotourism has bolstered local infrastructure and local revenue while safeguarding natural landscapes (Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005). Similarly, cultural tourism in Kenya's Maasai community has delivered economic gains and strengthened cultural identity (Manyara & Jones, 2007). In Ecuador's rural heritage regions, tourism has created job opportunities for marginalized groups, enhancing their life satisfaction (Scheyvens, 2002). Rural tourism not only drives the revitalization of physical spaces and the influx of industrial capital but also reshapes residents' life experiences and value perceptions (Li *et al.*, 2023). While tourism can enhance household income, environmental quality, and community cohesion (Turčinović *et al.*, 2025), it may also trigger land-use conflicts (e.g., by transforming cultural landscapes into performative displays) and create disparities in participation opportunities, potentially disrupting residents' sense of identity and emotional belonging (Wang, 2021).

Subjective well-being is a fundamental concept in positive psychology and social science, employed to assess individuals' evaluations of their quality of life (Diener, 1984). This psychological construct comprises three interconnected dimensions: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Diener *et al.*, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Life satisfaction represents the cognitive evaluation of one's overall life circumstances according to personal criteria. Positive and negative affect capture the frequency and intensity of pleasant and unpleasant experiences over time (Diener *et al.*, 2010). Research suggests that SWB is shaped by a combination of cultural values, social structures, economic conditions, and psychological resources (Diener *et al.*, 2018; Oishi *et al.*, 1999). In addition, SWB findings have been used to compare development levels across societies and countries and to assess the effectiveness of public policies and social interventions (Helliwell *et al.*, 2023).

Tourism serves not only as a form of leisure and consumption but also as a transformative life event impacting cognitive and emotional experiences. It is recognized for enhancing life satisfaction and positive emotions (Neal *et al.*, 1999). Empirical studies demonstrate that tourism can elicit positive emotions, alleviate stress, and enhance quality of life through novelty, relaxation, social interaction, and environmental restoration (C. Chen & Petrick, 2013; Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004). For instance, Nawijn *et al.* (2010) found that holiday tourism significantly boosts well-being, though this effect diminishes over time, suggesting that the increase in well-being is temporary.

Tourism's impact on well-being varies by type. Social tourism offers leisure opportunities to vulnerable groups, fostering social connections and supporting mental health (McCabe & Johnson, 2013). Nature tourism boosts positive emotions and life satisfaction through environmental exposure and psychological restoration (H. Chen *et al.*, 2022). Positive psychology research suggests that tourism experiences enhance immediate emotions and contribute to long-term well-being by enriching life's meaning and purpose (Filep & Laing, 2019).

Early research on the nexus between rural tourism and well-being predominantly examined rural communities in the United States (U.S.), highlighting tourism's role in boosting economic conditions, social cohesion, and residents' life satisfaction. Allen *et al.*'s (1993) multiple regression analysis of U.S. rural residents revealed a significant positive correlation between tourism-related economic activities and quality of life, though environmental stress and increased population density could mitigate this effect. Reeder and Brown's (2005) comparative analysis, using national statistical data and community cases from the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, demonstrated that rural counties dependent on leisure and tourism economies outperformed non-tourism counties in employment, household income, and health indicators, significantly enhancing overall well-being. In cultural and social dimensions, Willits & Luloff's (1993) surveys and interviews in rural Pennsylvania identified "rural mystique" as a key psychological mechanism through which tourism bolstered residents' sense of belonging and well-being. As research has broadened, scholars have increasingly examined rural tourism in developing countries. Munanura & Shukla (2021) employed structural equation modeling in a Rwandan community ecotourism project, revealing that residents' perceived benefits and fairness expectations significantly influence SWB. T. Cheng (2021) applied an ordered logit model to rural tourist destinations in southwestern China, reporting that higher perceived benefits correlate with higher levels of well-being, though uneven benefit distribution markedly reduces it. Zhu *et al.* (2025) used the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model in a survey of Chinese rural tourist destinations, demonstrating that a perceived restorative environment enhances both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in tourists.

Previous studies on the relationship between rural tourism and well-being have predominantly utilized quantitative methods, concentrating on macro-regional surveys and model analyses of typical sites, with tourists as the primary subjects (Saayman *et al.*, 2018). While substantial progress has been made in hypothesis

formulation, model construction, surveys, and data analysis, there is a notable deficiency in systematic data synthesis, theoretical abstraction, and concept refinement.

This study focuses on Licha village in Zhaoqing city, Guangdong province, China, and examines the SWB of residents in the rural tourism destination. Employing grounded theory and semi-structured interviews with these residents, we developed a cognitive framework of well-being from their perspective. This study addresses key questions to offer theoretical support and practical insights for the sustainable development of rural tourism and the enhancement of local residents' well-being:

- (i) How has tourism development impacted the residents of Licha village?
- (ii) How feasible are qualitative research methods for studying the SWB of residents in rural tourism destinations?
- (iii) What key factors influence the SWB of residents in rural tourism destinations during tourism development, and how do these factors interact and take shape?

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Introduction to the research area

Licha village, situated in Huilong town, Gaoyao district, Zhaoqing city, Guangdong province, lies approximately 20 km from the urban center. Nestled against the Beiling mountains to the north and overlooking the tributaries of the Xijiang river to the south, it epitomizes a Lingnan water town with its intricate waterways and interwoven river networks (Figure 1). Established during the Jiading period (1208–1224) of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), the village boasts a history spanning over 800 years. Its



Figure 1. Aerial view of Licha village

Source: Photo from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China (https://www.moa.gov.cn/ztlz/2024dnq/202412/t20241216_6467975.htm).

spatial design adheres to the Bagua Diagram from the *Classic of Changes*, radiating outward from a central point (the lucky platform) in a circular manner (Figure 2). With water as its lifeblood, stones as its foundation, and houses as its walls, the village integrates defensive functions with regional characteristics, reflecting a spatial wisdom that harmonizes practicality and culture. The village is steeped in Confucian culture, featuring 11 gate towers named after Confucian classics (Figure 3). It houses 18 ancestral halls, each dedicated to specific family ancestors, creating a structured integration of space and ethics. Intangible cultural heritage practices, including bamboo weaving, pottery-making, and Han opera, continue to thrive. Festive activities such as dragon and lion dances and dragon boat races remain popular, offering tourists a vivid experience of Lingnan culture.



Figure 2. Lucky platform in Licha village
Source: Photo by the authors (2025).



Figure 3. Renhuali Gate Tower in Licha village
Source: Photo by the authors (2025).

Licha village has been recognized for its tourism development, earning designation as part of the “First Batch of Ancient Villages in Guangdong Province” and “First Batch of Characteristic Tourist Villages in Guangdong Province” in 2008. It was named one of the “Top Ten Most Beautiful Ancient Villages in Guangdong Province” in 2012, included in the Fourth Batch of Chinese Traditional Villages in 2016, and achieved National AAA-level Tourist Attraction status in 2021. The village emphasizes cultural sightseeing, ecological leisure, and research-based tourism. Annually, on the 3rd day of the 2nd lunar month, Licha village hosts the Chaguo Festival, when the entire village becomes vibrant with activity as each household prepares various *chaguo* (茶果; traditional glutinous rice cakes), drawing numerous tourists. Licha village, a quintessential Lingnan village known for its rich traditional culture and emerging tourism, offers a valuable case for examining the impact of tourism development on the SWB of residents in rural tourism destinations. Consequently, this study takes Licha village as the case study area.

2.2. Research methods

This study utilized grounded theory to explore the perceived characteristics and mechanisms influencing residents' SWB in Licha village amid rural tourism development. By analyzing and coding data from semi-structured interviews, we conducted theoretical exploration and constructed an explanatory model. In the 1960s, Glaser & Strauss (1967) introduced grounded theory, which emphasized building theories “from the bottom up” using empirical data and prioritized the “logic of discovery” over the “logic of verification.” This approach addressed the issues of insufficient depth and low validity often found in quantitative research. The method involved three steps: first, data collection and analysis; second, data coding, which included open, axial, and selective coding through integrating disparate materials and extracting concepts; and finally, theory generation and testing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

2.3. Data acquisition and organization

Data for this study were collected in Licha village, Gaoyao district, Zhaoqing city, from February to May 2025. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 23 permanent residents (R1–R23) to collect qualitative data. The participants represented a range of social groups within the village, ensuring diverse and representative data. The respondents included village committee members, handicraft business operators, ordinary residents, young entrepreneurs returning to their hometowns, seniors aged 60 or older, convenience store owners, and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage. They exhibited substantial

diversity in age, gender, occupation, education, and tourism involvement, providing a broad spectrum of subjective perspectives on well-being across different backgrounds. Of the 23 in-depth interview transcripts, 18 were included in the coding phase, while the remaining 5 were used to verify thematic saturation and conduct comparative analysis, ensuring the stability and integrity of the research findings (Table 1).

The interview outline was designed to accommodate the cultural and linguistic contexts of the participants, adhering to principles of clarity, expressiveness, and open-endedness. This approach ensured that interviewees could freely and accurately convey their perspectives on

Table 1. Demographic and involvement profile of interview participants (n=23)

Demographic profiles	n	%
Gender		
Female	11	47.8
Male	12	52.2
Age group		
18–34	2	8.7
35–44	6	26.1
45–54	6	26.1
55–59	4	17.4
60+	5	21.7
Education level		
Primary or below	5	21.7
Secondary	10	43.5
Vocational/tertiary	8	34.8
Occupation		
Agriculture/manual	4	17.4
Service/commerce	6	26.1
Cultural/handicraft	6	26.1
Village committee/public affairs	2	8.7
Student/retired	5	21.7
Tourism involvement		
High	8	34.8
Medium	7	30.4
Low/none	8	34.8
Household income (relative to village median)		
Low	7	30.4
Middle	10	43.5
High	6	26.1
Length of residence		
1–9 years	5	21.7
10+years	18	78.3

rural tourism development and well-being. The primary interview questions included: (i) How do you perceive the recent changes in tourism development in Licha village? (ii) In what ways has tourism development impacted your life? (iii) When do you feel “happier” or “more fulfilled?” (iv) What unique emotions do you experience during village festivals or cultural activities? (v) How does the current village compare to your childhood memories, and which do you prefer? During the interviews, residents were also encouraged to discuss topics such as rural historical memory, traditional festival customs, changes in the living environment, improvements in public services, shifts in social relationships, participation in cultural heritage activities, and perceptions of policies.

3. Results

3.1. Open coding

In the open coding phase, the research team thoroughly analyzed the transcripts from 18 in-depth interviews conducted in Licha village, examining each sentence and paragraph. The focus was on residents' daily experiences, emotional experiences, and subjective evaluations in the context of rural tourism development, aiming to uncover the social meanings and cognitive frameworks embedded in their narratives. In the coding process using NVivo11 (Version 11, QSR International, Australia), guided by principles such as “priority of residents' stance,” “subjectivity of well-being,” and “embedding in social context,” we eliminated non-substantive content, such as polite remarks, formulaic expressions, and repetitive statements, to ensure the extracted content holds genuine social-psychological significance. By clustering and integrating recurring emotional descriptions, participatory behaviors, and cognitive judgments in the text, 54 initial concept nodes were identified. Through multiple rounds of comparison and consolidation, these were refined into 13 representative sub-categories: environmental perception, accessibility, participation experience, social interaction, self-identity, other-identity, sense of responsibility, emotional connection, sense of achievement, sense of gain, satisfaction, sense of voice, and sense of contentment (Table 2).

3.2. Axial coding

Using the initial categories as a foundation, axial coding examined the internal connections within the interview content to establish logical relationships between various concepts and categories. From the 13 sub-categories identified through open coding, this study further aggregated concepts and integrated related meanings, classifying them into five main categories: spatial adaptation, resident participation, relationship

reconstruction, identity generation, and place attachment (Tables 3 and 4).

3.3. Selective coding

Building on open and axial coding, the selective coding stage sought to establish relationships among refined categories. It articulated residents' well-being in rural tourism destinations and the factors that influence this well-being through a narrative approach, ultimately developing a pertinent model (Figure 4).

The development of well-being among residents of rural tourism destinations is multifaceted, influenced by numerous factors. An analysis of primary and secondary categories reveals the narrative of this well-being formation as follows:

Amid efforts to promote sustainable rural development, Licha village enhances living conditions, traffic accessibility, and public service availability by upgrading tourism infrastructure and the residential environment. Concurrently, residents now have greater opportunities to engage in cultural exhibitions, festivals, and community affairs, increasing their sense of responsibility and agency. Structural conditions facilitating tourism have markedly enhanced social interactions and emotional bonds among residents, thereby bolstering community cohesion and stability. In addition, engagement and feedback from tourists and cultural consumers have reinforced both residents' self-identity and their perception of others. As social relationships and cultural identity accumulate, residents increasingly solidify their attachment to the village. The interconnected emotional experiences of achievement, gain, and satisfaction collectively propel the emotional transformation from external satisfaction to internal emotional attachment. Ultimately, through ongoing positive feedback and self-assessment, residents develop a favorable psychological evaluation of their living conditions, leading to a stable level of SWB.

The development of residents' SWB in Licha village follows a three-stage progression: structural support, relational embedding, and emotional transformation. This process illustrates the multidimensional drivers and socially constructed nature of well-being in the context of rural tourism development.

3.4. Factors influencing rural residents' SWB in Licha village

3.4.1. Physical environment

Good accessibility, naturalness, and a sense of security in the physical environment can significantly enhance residents' SWB by bolstering their sense of environmental control and life satisfaction (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Improving

Table 2. Examples of open coding

Coding	Category	Conceptualization	Original data (excerpts from villagers' words)
OC-01	Environmental perception	Environmental improvement	"Previously, village roads turned muddy when it rained. Now, they are paved with bricks, making walking much more comfortable" (R04, personal communication, February 07, 2025)
		Enhanced safety	"With street lights and surveillance cameras installed, we feel safe walking at night" (R08, personal communication, March 02, 2025)
		Comfortable environment	"The environment feels more comfortable now than before" (R13, personal communication, March 25, 2025)
OC-02	Social interaction	Resident interaction	"With the village developing tourism, neighbors meet more often, strengthening their relationships" (R02, personal communication, February 05, 2025)
		Collective awareness	"We discuss and manage village affairs collectively, fostering a sense of community" (R10, personal communication, March 13, 2025)
OC-03	Self-identity	Identity affirmation	"I grew up in Licha village. Sharing the village gates and Han Opera with tourists allows me to convey our history and culture" (R03, personal communication, February 06, 2025)
OC-04	Other-identity	Tourist recognition	"When I discuss the ancestral hall's history with tourists, they commend my efforts, which is truly an honor" (R14, personal communication, April 05, 2025)
		Elite recognition	"The village head's resourcefulness has been crucial in developing rural tourism. Without his leadership, our progress would not have been possible" (R09, personal communication, March 13, 2025)
OC-05	Sense of responsibility	Main expression	"In the Han opera performance, we convey authentic traditional culture to tourists" (R07, personal communication, March 02, 2025)
		Cultural inheritance	"Numerous such techniques still thrive in the village. By showcasing them, we enable tourists to gain a deeper understanding of the traditional culture and intangible heritage of Licha village, thereby extending the reach of our culture" (R12, personal communication, March 25, 2025)
OC-06	Emotional connection	Authentic interaction	"During activities, we collaborate and support each other like family" (R06, personal communication, February 18, 2025)
		Mutual understanding between hosts and guests	"Some tourists return and greet us with 'I'm back again,' suggesting they see our village as their home" (R11, personal communication, March 13, 2025)

Note: For brevity, only six representative sub-categories (out of 13 identified) are shown.

Table 3. Primary categories emerged from axial coding

Main category	Corresponding category
Spatial adaptation	Environmental perception
	Accessibility
	Satisfaction
Resident participation	Participation experience
	Sense of responsibility
	Right to speak
Relationship reconstruction	Social interaction
	Emotional connection
Identity generation	Self-identity
	Other-identity
Place attachment	Sense of achievement
	Sense of gain
	Sense of contentment

village infrastructure and spatial accessibility increases residents' convenience and satisfaction, thereby providing structural support for well-being. As one resident noted:

"Previously, rain rendered the roads muddy, deterring both the elderly and children from venturing out. Now, with brick paving and streetlights, residents can walk confidently at night" (R04, personal communication, February 07, 2025).

Situated on the western edge of the Pearl River Delta, Licha village has historically lacked robust infrastructure. However, recent tourism-driven development has led to gradual improvements in roads, drainage systems, and night lighting, thereby enhancing residents' perceived environment quality and living comfort. Another interviewee highlighted the improved reliability of electricity:

"The voltage stability has improved, enabling nighttime festival performances without the frequent power outages of the past" (R08, personal communication, March 02, 2025).

A third resident further emphasized the improved accessibility:

"Additionally, a parking lot at the village entrance accommodates tourist buses, and the roads have

Table 4. Relationships between the five identified factors and existing theoretical concepts

Empirical factor	Corresponding theoretical concept(s)	Role in the three-stage mechanism
Spatial adaptation	Environmental affordance (Gibson, 1979); stimulus component in the SOR framework	Structural support—provides material and perceptual foundation for positive experience
Resident participation	Community empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999); agency and co-production theories	Link between structural and relational stages—fosters a sense of control and collective ownership
Relationship reconstruction	Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000); relational embedding	Relational embedding—reinforces mutual trust, cooperation, and cohesion
Identity generation	Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986); cultural identity	Bridge to emotional transformation—translates recognition into meaning and self-worth
Place attachment	Place identity and place dependence (Williams & Vaske, 2003); organism–response link	Emotional transformation—psychological outcome of preceding stages

Abbreviation: SOR: Stimulus–organism–response.

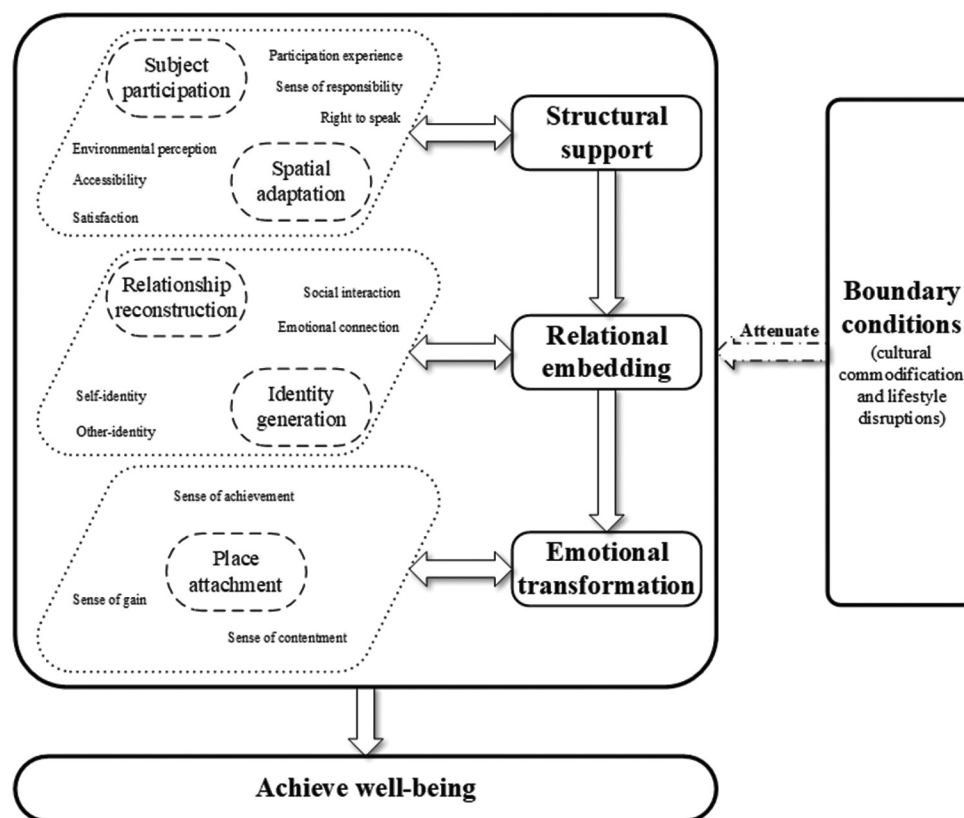


Figure 4. Model of influencing factors of residents' well-being in rural tourism destinations
Source: Diagram by the author.

been widened" (R13, personal communication, March 25, 2025).

3.4.2. Public participation

Public participation bolsters SWB by enhancing autonomy, social connections, and political efficacy (Frey & Stutzer, 2000). When residents engage in cultural exhibitions and tourism, they assume responsibility for cultural heritage. This active involvement in public affairs fosters a sense

of agency and control, crucial for enhancing SWB. From event setup and historical narration to handicraft displays, residents actively engage and express themselves in tourism development. As one resident described:

"This year's dragon dance team is composed of middle-aged individuals who trained independently. We were surprised when tourists gathered around us, recording videos" (R01, personal communication, February 05, 2025).

Another explained how tourism participation revitalized traditional crafts:

"I have established a small ceramic experience center in my ancestral home, where I instruct tourists in clay kneading, a favorite activity among children" (R12, personal communication, March 25, 2025).

Similarly, engagement in heritage performances has strengthened residents' sense of self-worth and pride:

"I have enrolled in the village Han opera competition. Wearing the opera costume, I felt a renewed sense of worth" (R07, personal communication, March 02, 2025).

Transitioning from "passive participants" to "active contributors," they are now both cultural inheritors and participants in local development. This role shift has bolstered their initiative, sense of responsibility, and SWB. Moreover, participation in public affairs has increasingly become institutionalized, providing residents with more opportunities to express their opinions and fostering a sense of agency and belonging in village governance. As one participant noted:

"We can participate in festival decorations and stall arrangements, and the village head visits our homes to hear our views" (R10, personal communication, March 13, 2025).

3.4.3. Social relationships

High-quality, stable social relationships are a key characteristic of individuals with high well-being, suggesting that positive interpersonal connections significantly enhance SWB (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Tourism development has heightened interactions among residents, bolstering community cohesion and tightening the emotional bond between hosts and guests. This synergy cultivates a strong sense of belonging and collectivism, underpinning residents' well-being. In Licha village, festival activities and tourism events provide residents with ample opportunities for interaction, rejuvenating waning neighborhood ties and fostering an "acquaintance-based relationship characterized by empathy" between residents and tourists. As one resident recalled:

"In the past, everyone focused on their own tasks. Now, with tourists visiting, we collaborate to welcome them" (R02, personal communication, February 05, 2025).

Another explained how collective preparation deepens neighborhood connections:

"For festival decorations, we rotate group responsibilities. My family teams up with those from East Alley to craft lanterns and decorate

Gate Tower, fostering closer relationships" (R06, personal communication, February 18, 2025).

Similarly, personal encounters with returning visitors have strengthened emotional reciprocity:

"One tourist returned the following year, recognized me, and said, 'You were the uncle who shared stories about the Gate Tower last year.' I was deeply moved by this encounter" (R11, personal communication, March 13, 2025).

The recurring presence of this "familiar other" not only enhances residents' sense of value but also shifts the host-guest relationship from a commercial interaction to one of emotional mutual recognition, fostering deeper social connections.

3.4.4. Sense of identity

A robust and consistent sense of identity can mitigate stress by bolstering self-esteem and fostering a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing individuals' SWB (Thoits, 1991). Residents continually construct their self-identities through cultural narratives, historical legacies, and interactions with tourists. The affirmation they receive from others' feedback cultivates cultural pride and local identity, establishing a profound spiritual basis for well-being. Licha village boasts a distinctive Lingnan clan spatial system and intangible cultural heritage. Festivals and tourism development offer residents a platform to exhibit traditional culture, enhancing their cultural identity and emotional connection. As one resident explained:

"Our village's ancestral hall is rich with stories, with names like Renheli and Juheli steeped in historical significance" (R03, personal communication, February 06, 2025).

Another expressed how visitors' appreciation reinforces their sense of pride:

"When I describe the village alleys to tourists, they often remark, 'This place is full of culture,' which inspires me greatly" (R14, personal communication, April 05, 2025).

Similarly, the village leadership's encouragement has strengthened collective awareness of cultural value:

"The village head emphasized the importance of sharing our culture with tourists; otherwise, they might see nothing more than a collection of bricks" (R09, personal communication, March 13, 2025).

The transition from "telling history" to actively embodying "cultural identity" signifies the residents' process of reconstructing their identity. By being seen and understood, traditional villages such as Licha are being reinterpreted and revalued within a modern framework.

3.4.5. Place attachment

Strong place attachment significantly enhances SWB by fostering a sense of belonging, emotional security, and life satisfaction (Lewicka, 2011). Through spatial improvements, relationship rebuilding, and identity recognition, residents gradually attain personal accomplishments. They assess their well-being based on economic gains and life satisfaction, and these assessments serve as the ultimate psychological expression of their well-being. As one resident expressed:

“While my income is modest, I find great well-being in pursuing my passions daily” (R05, personal communication, February 07, 2025).

Another described how tourism opened new horizons for social connection:

“Though I have never traveled extensively, I now have the opportunity to meet people from diverse places right at the entrance of my village” (R17, personal communication, April 15, 2025).

Similarly, the revitalized village atmosphere has enhanced emotional vitality:

“The village feels more vibrant, and I am more energized than before, when it was sparsely populated and exceedingly quiet” (R15, personal communication, April 05, 2025).

Residents assess their living conditions by considering factors such as spatial enhancement, active participation, relationship building, and cultural identity. They express their experiences with phrases like “a sense of achievement,” “a sense of gain,” and “a sense of satisfaction,” highlighting the deep emotional impact of tourism development. These feelings are not fleeting emotional outbursts but stem from sustained engagement, ongoing recognition, and the accumulation of emotional resonance, and they embody the culmination of the “emotional transformation” mechanism.

3.5. The risks and boundary conditions associated with cultural commodification and lifestyle disruptions

While tourism development in Licha village has improved accessibility, infrastructure, and cultural participation, some residents expressed concerns about cultural commodification and disruptions to everyday routines. The increasing visibility of intangible heritage—such as Han opera, handicrafts, and local festivals—sometimes transforms daily practices into staged performances for visitors, accompanied by noise, congestion, and loss of privacy. These experiences reshape how residents internalize structural improvements and reveal critical boundary conditions in the three-stage model.

From the perspective of structural support, infrastructure upgrades and open spaces facilitate tourism but also blur the boundary between commercial and residential areas, leading to an “encroachment of commerce” that some residents view as a source of strain rather than a shared benefit. Within relational embedding, frequent events and dense visitor flows create role tensions as villagers alternate between hosts, performers, and vendors, generating fatigue and weakening neighborhood cohesion. At the level of emotional transformation, residents’ pride in cultural recognition is often mixed with discomfort over ritual staging and time pressures, resulting in ambivalence that limits deeper place attachment and reduces the stability of well-being outcomes.

To address these tensions, community-led governance is essential. Measures such as event zoning, visitor flow management, rotational participation, and heritage stewardship can balance authenticity with development needs. Integrating these safeguards into the existing model helps sustain residents’ emotional connection and ensures that tourism-driven cultural exposure enhances rather than undermines SWB.

4. Discussion

4.1. Linking findings to existing literature

Few international studies have examined the relationship between rural tourism and residents’ SWB, as most prior research focuses on tourists or policy-level evaluations (Uysal *et al.*, 2016). Consistent with earlier work emphasizing tourism’s potential to improve quality of life through infrastructure and service enhancement (L. Cheng & Xu, 2021), the present study demonstrates that tourism-led spatial upgrades—such as road paving, drainage, and lighting—serve as structural support that enhances residents’ perceptions of safety and comfort. At the same time, community events and heritage performances have strengthened relational cohesion, aligning with studies highlighting the importance of social capital and participation for well-being (Gu & Ryan, 2008).

However, this study extends previous findings by centering residents’ discourse rather than external policy evaluations. Grounded theory analysis identifies the generative logic linking spatial and participatory improvements to emotional transformation, thereby filling a research gap in understanding how well-being emerges from everyday life experiences. The identified five factors—spatial adaptation, resident participation, relationship reconstruction, identity generation, and place attachment—correspond to the SOR framework, where environmental stimuli (infrastructure and participation) shape internal psychological states (identity and

relationships) that lead to emotional outcomes (attachment and well-being). This extends existing SOR-based tourism studies by emphasizing resident-centered emotional pathways rather than focusing solely on visitor responses.

4.2. Contextual insights from Licha village

The case of Licha village demonstrates how cultural heritage, peri-urban accessibility, and transitional development stages interact to shape residents' well-being. Long-standing traditions, such as Han opera and Gate Tower culture, reinforce collective identity and attachment, while proximity to the urban core brings intensified visitor interactions and market opportunities. These contextual features echo findings from rural revitalization studies in East Asia (Liu *et al.*, 2021), showing that heritage continuity and urban connectivity jointly drive the transformation of social relations and SWB. As participatory mechanisms mature, infrastructural improvements are increasingly internalized as social trust and emotional stability, strengthening the sense of belonging and shared prosperity.

4.3. Boundary conditions and negative effects

Despite overall positive outcomes, the findings reveal boundary conditions that qualify tourism's benefits. Similar to observations in rural tourism commercialization (P. Chen & Kong, 2021; Yan, 2024), Licha residents reported concerns about cultural commodification and lifestyle disruptions. These challenges can convert structural improvements into relational strain and emotional ambivalence, thereby weakening place attachment. Management strategies should therefore include temporal coordination of events, spatial buffers between residential and commercial zones, and community-led curation of heritage performances to maintain authenticity and safeguard residents' emotional well-being.

4.4. Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, this study advances understanding of mechanisms of resident well-being formation by proposing a three-stage model: structural support, relational embedding, and emotional transformation.

This framework integrates material, social, and emotional dimensions of well-being, positioning place attachment as a dynamic outcome of identity-rich social processes rather than a static construct. It thus enriches existing SOR and place attachment models with grounded, context-sensitive evidence. Practically, the findings highlight that sustainable rural tourism should:

- (i) Move beyond physical improvements to design for attachment through participatory cultural spaces
- (ii) Encourage inclusive participation and benefit-sharing to foster long-term social cohesion

- (iii) Mitigate commercialization pressures through local governance and adaptive scheduling
- (iv) Establish well-being monitoring systems combining qualitative and quantitative metrics to evaluate long-term impacts.

4.5. Limitations and future research

This study is limited by its single-case qualitative design focused on Licha village. While the mechanisms identified in this study are conceptually transferable, broader generalization requires multi-site comparative studies across different development stages and cultural contexts. Future research could employ mixed methods, integrating large-scale surveys with longitudinal qualitative tracking to verify and refine the proposed model. In addition, exploring gender, age, and socioeconomic variations may deepen the understanding of differentiated well-being outcomes within rural communities.

5. Conclusion

Tourism development in Licha village has reshaped the physical environments, social networks, and cultural identity, transforming the community from passive observers of tradition into active cultural participants. Improved infrastructure has enhanced daily convenience and safety, while festivals and cultural performances have strengthened social ties and fostered a sense of belonging. Residents' authentic narratives—ranging from pride in cultural revival to anxiety about commercialization—reveal the complex and dynamic nature of well-being in transitional rural contexts.

By identifying five interrelated factors—spatial adaptation, resident participation, relationship reconstruction, identity generation, and place attachment—this study constructs a “structural support, relational embedding, and emotional transformation” framework that captures the multidimensional formation of residents' well-being. It demonstrates that well-being is not a single emotional outcome but a synergistic process rooted in both material improvements and sociocultural renewal.

Ultimately, promoting residents' well-being requires balancing development with authenticity, addressing emotional as well as physical needs, and enabling communities to participate meaningfully in tourism governance. These insights offer transferable guidance to policymakers and planners seeking to achieve sustainable and inclusive rural revitalization through tourism.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: All authors

Formal analysis: Yana Zhang

Investigation: All authors

Methodology: Yana Zhang, Azizan Marzuki

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

In this study, verbal informed consent was obtained from all individual participants through a verbal presentation and explanation. All respondents agreed to participate before the interview began. The study did not involve the collection of identifiable personal information and was conducted under the university's general guidelines for minimal-risk research. As such, a formal ethics approval ID was not required, and no separate approval record is available.

Consent for publication

All participants provided verbal informed consent for the publication of the findings derived from this study. Where applicable, participants gave explicit permission for the publication of any data, images, or information that could potentially reveal their identity. The authors affirm that all relevant consent forms have been obtained and are available upon request.

Availability of data

The data used in this study are confidential due to ethical clearance requirements and to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

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