COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND THE OPTIMIZATION OF NATIONAL CULTURAL PARK DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM XINGWEN NATIONAL CULTURAL PARK, CHINA

Chen yinuo

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Abstract. *National Cultural Parks have become an important policy instrument for heritage protection and tourism development in China, yet local residents often remain structurally disadvantaged in decision-making and benefit-sharing. Drawing on community empowerment theory, this paper examines how community disempowerment is manifested in Xingwen National Cultural Park and identifies practical pathways for more inclusive development. The study adopts a qualitative case-study design based on participant observation and 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in Jianwu Village in August 2023. The findings show that community disempowerment is expressed in four interconnected dimensions: economic, psychological, social, and political. While the park has created some employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, residents still face unstable income, weak self-efficacy, unequal access to infrastructure and benefits, and limited channels for participation in decision-making. In response, the paper proposes three empowerment pathways: educational empowerment, organizational-information empowerment, and institutional empowerment. The Xingwen case also offers lessons for cultural-heritage destinations in Central Asia, including Silk Road sites in Uzbekistan, where balancing heritage governance, tourism development, and local benefit-sharing remains equally important.*

INTRODUCTION

National Cultural Parks are not only projects of heritage conservation, but also governance spaces in which the state, market actors, and local communities must negotiate rights, responsibilities, and benefits. Existing studies show that community participation is crucial to the sustainable development of heritage tourism, yet

participation often remains symbolic when residents are merely informed rather than genuinely involved in planning and decision-making (Scheyvens, 1999; Zuo & Bao, 2008). In the Chinese context, this problem is particularly important because the development of National Cultural Parks is closely tied to public cultural rights, local livelihoods, and multi-stakeholder coordination (Liu, 2024; Geng & Zhang, 2022). Empowerment theory offers a useful analytical lens because it shifts attention from participation as a technical procedure to participation as a question of power, rights, voice, and benefit distribution (Wang & Zheng, 2015; Zuo & Bao, 2012).

This paper investigates Xingwen National Cultural Park in Jianwu Village, Sichuan Province, a representative case within the Long March National Cultural Park. The site combines revolutionary heritage, local culture, and rural tourism development. Since construction began in 2021, the park has generated new business opportunities for some households, but it has also produced tensions over employment, information access, infrastructure, and community voice. Against this background, this paper asks two questions: how is community disempowerment

manifested in the development of Xingwen National Cultural Park, and how can community empowerment help optimize the development path of National Cultural Parks? 1

Methods

This study uses a qualitative case-study approach. Fieldwork was conducted in Jianwu Village in August 2023. Data were collected through participant observation and 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with town and village officials, visitor-centre staff, business owners, workers, students, and farmers aged 19 to 75. Interviews focused on residents' experiences and perceptions in the economic, psychological, social, and political domains of park development. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed, producing a corpus of more than 60,000 Chinese characters. The materials were analysed through thick description, with repeated comparison between interview narratives and field observations in order to reconstruct the meanings residents attached to tourism development, community participation, and power relations.

No.	Gender	Age/years	Occupation
A01	Male	38	Member of the Town Government Party Committee
B02	Male	27	Deputy Head of the Village Committee
C03	Male	53	Member of the Village Committee
D04	Male	51	Head of the Visitor Centre
E05	Male	51	Security Guard at the Visitor Centre
F06	Female	21	Receptionist at the Visitor Centre
G07	Female	42	Grocery shop owner
H08	Female	19	University student
I09	Female	67	Resident of Jianwu (farmer)
J10	Male	43	Resident of Jianwu (farmer)
K11	Male	38	Resident of Jianwu (farmer)
L12	Male	56	Resident of Jianwu (farmer)
M13	Male	75	Jianwu resident (farmer)
N14	Male	61	Jianwu resident (farmer)
O15	Female	46	Snack bar owner
P16	Male	68	Fruit shop owner
Q17	Male	49	Worker
R18	Male	43	Worker
S19	Female	48	Grocery shop owner
T20	Female	52	Guesthouse owner
U21	Male	56	Guesthouse owner
V22	Male	37	Owner of a performing arts company
W23	Female	24	Resident of Jianwu (migrant worker)
X24	Male	65	Resident of Jianwu (farmer)
Y25	Female	71	Resident of Jianwu (farmer)

Results

Economic disempowerment coexists with limited economic empowerment. On the one hand, the park has brought some tourism-related employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. A guesthouse owner explained that team-building groups and institutional visits had increased local demand and that "we get over twenty tables a day" (U21). A snack-bar owner likewise noted that "we used to just do farm work, but now … we've rented a house … to sell snacks here" (O15). These statements indicate that park construction has stimulated a degree of local economic participation. On the other hand, residents repeatedly stressed that the tourism market remained small, unstable, and unevenly distributed. A grocery shop owner stated that there was "no steady flow of visitors," so prepared goods often remained unsold (G07). Another respondent observed that "most of the workers are still brought in from outside," while local people are only hired for occasional odd jobs (V22). In this sense, local residents do not participate on equal terms in employment or business development. Economic opportunities exist, but they are limited, uncertain, and insufficiently shared.

Psychological disempowerment is equally evident. Some residents reported that

the development of the Long March National Cultural Park had deepened their knowledge of revolutionary history and strengthened local pride. One respondent stated that the project had "enhanced people's awareness of the Long March" and deepened their understanding of "the revolutionary spirit" (P16). This suggests that heritage-based tourism can generate symbolic value for the community by reinforcing historical memory and local identity. Yet many interviewees also displayed low self-efficacy and weak recognition of the tourism value of their own community. One resident asked, "What's there for others to see? This street has no sightseeing value" (L12). Another stated, "Why would they ask us ordinary folk? We know nothing" (Q17). Such responses reveal that some residents do not perceive themselves as capable actors in tourism development. The problem is not only a lack of skills, but also a lack of confidence in their own knowledge, rights, and ability to influence public affairs.

Social disempowerment appears in both community relations and everyday infrastructure. Some residents appreciated landscape improvement and new leisure spaces, describing the park as "a good thing" because it gave local people somewhere to go after meals and in their spare time (X24). These improvements show that park construction can enhance the public environment and offer local communities new social spaces. However, social tensions have also become increasingly visible. Respondents complained that the benefits of redevelopment were concentrated on "Red Army Street," while other parts of the village were neglected. A resident on the lower street argued that "the street up there and our street are worlds apart" and that tourists mostly visited the upper section, leaving goods on the lower street unsold (J10). Infrastructure conflict was also severe. Residents reported long-standing shortages of water and noted that park development had aggravated the problem, even rendering tourist toilets unusable and forcing visitors to rely on private household toilets (H08). These accounts show that unequal spatial planning and resource allocation can undermine community cohesion and directly interfere with residents' daily lives.

Political disempowerment is perhaps the most structural problem. Residents were

usually informed that the park would be built through formal meetings, but many felt that information-sharing ended there. One interviewee remarked that villagers "were told at the very

beginning that this was going to be built, but we haven't heard anything since." Another stated that there was currently "no organisation for villagers to express their views or communicate" (N14). Although some information was conveyed through Party-member meetings and villagers' representative assemblies, residents did not feel that they had real channels to influence decisions. This suggests that local people remain politically voiceless in relation to major development decisions. They are treated more as passive recipients than as co-governors of the destination. Without stable channels for consultation, complaint, or negotiation, residents cannot effectively shape tourism planning, monitor implementation, or defend their interests. Political disempowerment also worsens other forms of disempowerment because it prevents communities from addressing unequal benefit distribution, information asymmetry, and everyday conflicts through legitimate institutional means.

Discussion

The Xingwen case shows that community disempowerment in National Cultural Park development is multidimensional. Economic, psychological, social, and political forms of disempowerment reinforce one another: unstable benefits weaken confidence, weak confidence reduces participation, and limited participation exacerbates unequal planning outcomes and mistrust. For this reason, policy responses must go beyond short-term income generation and address the deeper governance conditions of community participation. This is precisely why community empowerment should be treated not as a supplementary slogan, but as a core principle of National Cultural Park governance.

Three empowerment pathways are especially important. First, educational empowerment should improve tourism skills, legal awareness, and residents' understanding of both heritage value and tourism impacts. This can strengthen self-efficacy, allow residents to recognize their rights, and improve their ability to participate in tourism-related employment and negotiation. Second, organizational-information empowerment should create transparent communication mechanisms linking government departments, village organizations, enterprises, and residents. Regular briefings, public forums, and designated community liaisons can reduce information asymmetry and make tourism governance more transparent. Third, institutional empowerment should establish stable mechanisms for participation and benefit-sharing, including clearer legal safeguards for local rights, more formalized procedures for consultation, and community-based governance arrangements capable of representing residents' interests over the long term. In the Chinese context, such measures are especially important because empowerment depends not only on willingness to participate, but also on whether institutions genuinely protect participation rights and distributive justice (Zuo & Bao, 2012).

This case also has relevance beyond China. UNESCO describes Samarkand as a "crossroad" and "melting pot" of world cultures, and the transnational Silk Roads: Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor as a heritage space that requires coordinated management, information-sharing, monitoring, and site-specific management planning. These descriptions suggest that major cultural-heritage destinations in Uzbekistan and wider Central Asia face governance challenges similar to those identified in Xingwen: multi-level coordination, uneven benefits, and the need to align conservation with local livelihoods. The Xingwen findings therefore suggest that resident training, transparent communication, and fairer institutional arrangements are not only important for China's National Cultural Parks, but also relevant to Silk Road heritage destinations pursuing

more inclusive tourism development. Overall, community participation in heritage tourism cannot remain symbolic. Sustainable development requires communities to be informed, organized, represented, and institutionally protected as genuine stakeholders.

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