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Social innovation for community development and environmental protection in natural reserve parks of China

A case study of Yunhe Centre in Ganzi
Tibetan Region of Sichuan

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Accounting for nearly 15% of its national territory area, China's 2,750 nature reserve parks (NRPs) play a vital role in protecting its biodiversity and natural resources. Most NRPs are occupied by rural poor populations and are also home to ethnic minority nationalities. This poses a dilemma for the Chinese government and development professionals as the participation of local farmers in environmental protection may be constrained by their traditional production methods that are based upon the intensive use of local natural resources. Furthermore, the narrow approach and policy of ecological compensation may not be enough to attract and change their behaviours given the nature of the complexity of local ecological, economic and social environments. To cope with this challenge, more than 20 non-government agencies across China have been involved in rural communities in NRPs since 2015, to explore new pathways for sustainable rural development and environmental protection.

The case of Dragon [Yunhe Centre](#), a social enterprise located in Ganzi Tibetan Prefecture of Sichuan Province, offers insight regarding the emergence and contribution of social innovation in farmer participation and community development in NRPs of Western China.

The story of Yunhe Centre can be tracked back to 1999 when the Murdo Mountain Area was officially defined as an NRP by the Provincial Government. This meant that the rural people living in Zhonglu Township of Danba County had to change their production mode and lifestyle and find new sources of livelihood security. Having recognised the potential of local tour resources for farmers' income growth, local government had tried to attract external capital to boost the local tourism industry but found poor collaboration between tourism companies and local farmers.

In this context, Ms Apple Liu was invited to develop a rural tourism development plan for Zhonglu Township in 2015. Ms. Liu had overseas training experience in environment management and community development, and jointly owned a private urban-rural planning company with her husband based in Shanghai.

After seven months of field research in this township (doubling the duration of a normal survey), Ms Liu and her team identified the causes of the failure of externally invested projects in the past: due to lack of participation from the local community, the projects were unable to reverse the outflow of young labourers, brain drain, and improve confidence and community cohesion.

To cope with this challenge, Ms Liu and her husband decided to establish Yunhe Centre (or "Forest School" in Chinese), a social enterprise and community centre in this location. They invested 10 million yuan RMB (about £ 1 million at that time) to explore Tibetan farmers' participation, environmental education and sustainable development. In practice, Yunhe Centre offered opportunities for local participation and community development through the following ways.

1) **International ecological education**

To improve the local community's environmental awareness, the Centre designed and developed a set of environmental education curricula for international gap-year students to learn local ecological, social and cultural systems, and to communicate and interact with the local community. By December 2019, Yunhe Centre had attracted more than 700 students from 20 countries (including UK, France, Canada, and Australia). The time spent in Zhonglu increased from two days to seven days. Their average cost had risen from 200 RMB to 5,600 RMB (about £22 to £616),

which created considerable income for local villagers. International environmental education has not only helped villagers gain a better understanding of the local environment, but also contributed to the development of their identity and confidence to protect their home environment and Tibetan culture.

2) **Community participation in ecological architecture construction**

Ms Liu viewed the architecture building work as a unique opportunity for local people to participate in and contribute their knowledge, skills and labour, and develop mutual trust despite a significant increase in financial costs (more than 20%) and delayed completion. In practice, it was a process of jointly exploring the most suitable ecological building for the local community, adapting local skills and employing local artisans instead of bringing in cheaper Han workers from outside.

During the construction process, more than 40 designers and 45 local craftsmen were involved. At the same time, Yunhe Centre also actively explored the treatment of waste, sewage and new sources of energy. It started with researching the local waste problems, promoting more land-friendly planting methods, and advocating the convention on tourists and villagers' environmental-friendly behaviour in the Zhonglu Township. The Centre paid special attention to the value of local traditional culture for ecological protection, which provided the villagers with vivid "ecological education courses."

3) **Developing ecological industry chain**

Rural poverty in this region is largely related to an agricultural production structure, which is heavily dependent upon traditional potatoes, corn, highland barley, and genkwan root for family consumption and feeding livestock.

Based upon a comprehensive investigation of local environment and agricultural development conditions, Yunhe Centre offered an agricultural innovation plan for the local community, and then introduced verbena, lavender, radishes and other crops. These new crops in the Centre's experimental field helped the local community - not only because they provided ways to change local landscape - but also because they have more economic value to increase the farmers' income.

Having recognised the potential of developing new crops, local government provided a 1 million RMB fund (about £110,000) to the local community to develop a lavender plantation as a cultural symbol and local brand representative of Zhonglu in the market.

4) **Sustainable community development**

Since the establishment of Yunhe Centre in 2015, about 700 local people from villages nearby have attended training courses, on subjects such as: ecotourism, dormitory management, tourist reception, catering skills, garbage disposal, and nature guided tours. This has led to the enhancement of the competitiveness of the community in the tourism market and the stimulation of the vitality of the villagers.

Through the regular import of domestic and international study tours for the community, the local residents have been provided with jobs such in fields such as catering services, accommodation services, vehicle services, and community guided tours. These have brought stable and practical economic benefits to the sustainable development of the community.

With the support from the Yunhe Centre, the first tourism cooperative has been established in Danba county, namely "Danba Jiarenyi Rural Tourism Professional Cooperative" to promote and enhance sustainable agricultural and community development for rural tourism and environmental protection. The local community development has also attracted more and more college graduates to return home to work and start businesses.

5) **Dissemination of environmental education in NRPs**

Not limited to the local community in Zhonglu township, the nature education curriculum of Yunhe Centre has been integrated into Danba County primary and secondary schools' formal education system and has received a warm response from teachers and students. Such collaboration has laid a solid foundation for cultivating many young people who love their hometown and want to consciously protect the environment. Furthermore, the successful model of community participation has been recognised by many management authorities of NRPs in West China. As a result, they have invited teachers from Yunhe Centre to provide training courses for their officers and staff with over 800 participants benefitting so far.

To conclude, this case study illustrates the importance of social innovation in mobilising local participation and community development for inclusive tourism development and environmental protection in economic poor - but tourism resource rich - areas of China. Not limited to national reserve parks, Yunhe Centre sheds new light on the role of social entrepreneurs in initiating sustainable rural development in marginal areas. This is based upon good understanding of the challenges and the needs of local communities, the limitations of conventional development/intervention approaches, and importantly, the better use of resources and opportunities, both externally and internally, for project design and delivery. This is also a good case study demonstrating international participation in local communities in marginal areas of China.