

**EXAMINING FACTORS INFLUENCING
TOURIST LOYALTY TO RURAL FESTIVAL IN
CHINA: THE MEDIATING EFFECTS OF
EMOTION AND SATISFACTION**

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CHINA: THE MEDIATING EFFECTS OF
EMOTION AND SATISFACTION**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
GSB	Graduate School of Business
PRC	the People's Republic of China
MARAPRC	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China
GXCTD	Guangxi Autonomous Region Culture and Tourism Department
CAB	Cognitive-Affective-Behavioral
SET	Social Exchange Theory
SOR	Stimuli-Organism-Response
QR	Quick Response
PLS- SEM	Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
SPSS	Statistic Package for Social Science
WTCF	World Tourism Cities Federation
CASS	Chinese Academy of School Sciences
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
CMV	Common Method Variance
VIF	Variance Inflated Factor
HCMs	Hierarchical Component Models
HOC	Higher-order Component
LOC	Lower-order Component

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**FAKTOR-FAKTOR YANG MEMPENGARUHI KESETIAAN
PELANCONG PESTA LUAR BANDAR DI CHINA: KESAN PENGANTARA
EMOSI DAN KEPUASAN**

ABSTRAK

Dalam beberapa tahun kebelakangan ini, pembangunan pesat festival luar bandar sebagai sebahagian strategi pemulihan luar bandar telah menjadikan pengekalan pelancong isu penting bagi penganjur. Kajian ini meneliti hubungan antara pengalaman pelancong, kualiti festival, nilai dirasai, imej festival, emosi pelancong, kepuasan dan kesetiaan melalui rangka kerja berasaskan model Kognitif-Afektif-Tingkah Laku (C-A-B) dan Teori Pertukaran Sosial (SET). Sebanyak 384 soal selidik dikumpul di lokasi dari empat festival luar bandar di China. SPSS 26 dan SmartPLS 4 digunakan untuk analisis. Hasil kajian menunjukkan kesetiaan pelancong dipengaruhi oleh kepuasan; emosi pelancong oleh pengalaman dan kualiti festival; manakala kepuasan oleh kualiti festival, nilai dirasai, imej festival dan emosi pelancong. Kajian turut mendedahkan emosi pelancong memediasi hubungan pengalaman pelancong, kualiti festival dan kepuasan; kepuasan pula memediasi hubungan antara kualiti festival, nilai dirasai, imej festival dan kesetiaan; manakala keterikatan tempat tidak menguatkan pengaruh kepuasan terhadap kesetiaan. Kajian ini menyumbang integrasi baharu antara mekanisme emosi dan kognitif dalam pelancongan festival luar bandar, menggunakan model mediasi bersiri yang jarang diterapkan, serta memperkenalkan keterikatan tempat sebagai moderator tingkah laku kesetiaan. Dari segi praktikal, ia membantu penganjur mengenal pasti faktor untuk disepadukan dalam strategi pemasaran bagi memupuk emosi, kepuasan dan kesetiaan pelancong.

EXAMINING FACTORS INFLUENCING TOURIST LOYALTY TO RURAL FESTIVAL IN CHINA: THE MEDIATING EFFECTS OF EMOTION AND SATISFACTION

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the rapid development of rural festivals as part of the rural revitalization strategy has made tourist retention a crucial issue for organizers. This study examines the relationship between tourist experience, festival quality, perceived value, festival image, tourist emotion, satisfaction, and loyalty by developing a framework based on the Cognitive-Affective-Behaviour (C-A-B) model and Social Exchange Theory (SET). A total of 384 questionnaires were collected on-site from four rural festivals in China. SPSS 26 and SmartPLS 4 were used for analysis. Results indicated that tourist loyalty is affected by satisfaction; tourist emotion is influenced by experience and festival quality; and satisfaction is influenced by festival quality, perceived value, festival image, and tourist emotion. The study also revealed that tourist emotion mediates the relationship between tourist experience, festival quality, and satisfaction; satisfaction mediates the relationship between festival quality, perceived value, festival image, and loyalty; and place attachment does not strengthen the influence of satisfaction on loyalty. This study offers a novel integration of emotional and cognitive mechanisms in rural festival tourism, applies a serial mediation model rarely used in this field, and introduces place attachment as a moderator of loyalty behaviors. Practically, it helps organizers identify factors to integrate into marketing strategies that foster tourist emotion, satisfaction, and loyalty.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of rural festivals, specifically focusing on Chinese rural festivals. This chapter also further discusses the theoretical background of the thesis, the preliminary studies that contribute to developing research questions and research objectives, scope of the research and the structure of the thesis. Following, this chapter will include a discussion of the significance of the study, definitions of key terms, and a brief outline of the study's organization.

1.2 Background of the Study

In recent years, with the rapid development of the economy and the ongoing improvement of people's living standards, travel has become a popular leisure activity. The tremendous development of the tourism industry can be seen in the continuous growth of the global travel number and total tourism income from 2016 to 2019 (WTCF & CASS, 2020). Festival tourism has developed rapidly under such a background. Since the beginning of 2020, the pandemic has spread around the world, and the speed of global tourism development has declined sharply (Fan et al., 2022). In 2021, the total number of global tourist arrivals reached 6.60 billion, and the total global tourism revenue reached 3.3 trillion US dollars, recovering to 53.7% and 55.9% in 2019, respectively (WTCF & CASS, 2022). As the end of the pandemic, the global economy is gradually recovering. According to a report by the World Tourism Organization, the total number of global tourists reached 9.57 billion in 2022, with a total global tourism revenue of 4.6 trillion US dollars (UNWTO, 2023). The global

tourism industry has experienced a gradual recovery and steady growth, with international tourism rapidly rebounding from the pandemic downturn. World Tourism Cities Federation and Tourism Research Centre, and Chinese Academy of School Sciences jointly released The World Tourism Economy Trends Report (WTCF & CASS, 2024), which shows that global tourism gradually recovered in 2023, and the annual number of tourists has reached 12.67 billion, as seen in Figure1.1, with a total global tourism revenue of 5.54 trillion.

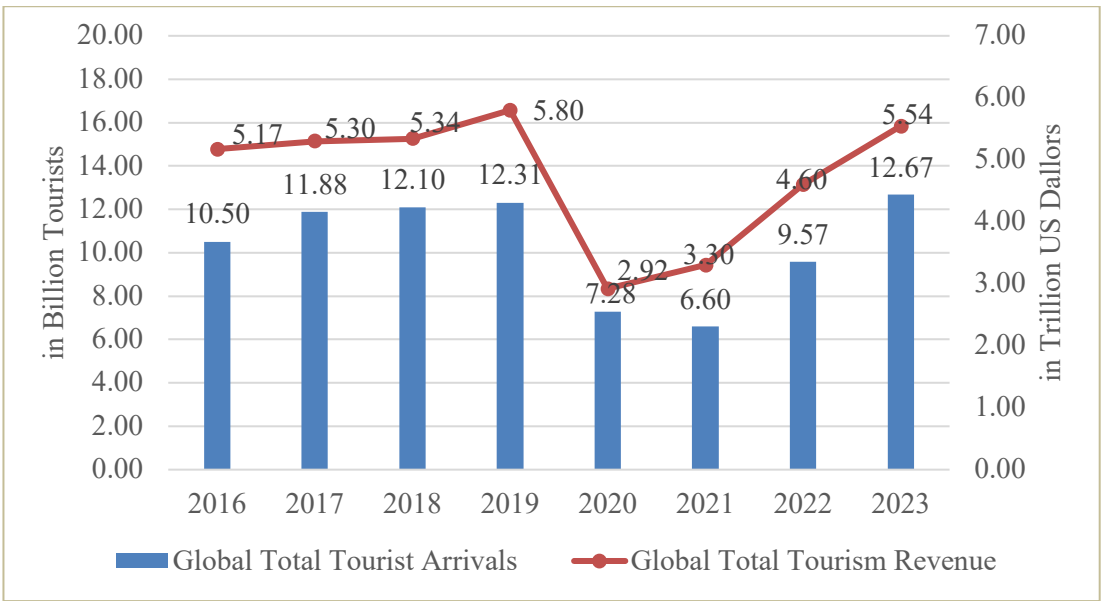


Figure 1.1 Statistics of Global Tourism, 2016-2023 (WTCF & CASS, 2024)

In China, the tourism industry experienced rapid growth, with both the number of tourist arrivals and revenue consistently increasing. In 2019, the industry peaked with 6.01 billion tourist arrivals and revenue of 5.7251 trillion yuan. However, the sector faced significant challenges from the pandemic starting in early 2020. In 2022, domestic tourist arrivals dropped by 22.1%, which is 2.53 billion, and domestic tourism revenue (total tourism consumption) decreased by 30.0%, which is 2.04 trillion yuan (MCTPRC, 2023), as seen in Figure 1.2. As the pandemic subsided, China’s tourism industry experienced a widespread recovery. According to statistics

from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, PRC, in 2023, the total number of domestic tourist visits is 4.89 billion, which is an increase of 2.36 billion compared to the same period of 2022, representing a growth of 93.3%. Residents’ total spending on domestic travel amounted to 4.91 trillion yuan, an increase of 2.87 trillion yuan, marking a growth of 140.3% (MCTPRC, 2024). In 2024, the total number of domestic tourist visits is 5.62 billion, which is an increase of 0.73 billion compared to the same period of 2023, representing a growth of 14.8%. Residents’ total spending on domestic travel amounted to 5.75 trillion yuan, an increase of 0.84 trillion yuan, marking a growth of 17.1% (MCTPRC, 2025), seen in Figure 1.2.



Figure 1.2 Statistics of China Tourism, 2014-2024 (MCTPRC, 2025)

1.2.1 Overview of Rural Festivals in the World

The World Tourism Organization defines tourist as an individual who leaves the usual environment for leisure, business, or other purposes, without engaging in remunerated activities at the destination, staying for no more than one consecutive year (UNWTO, 2001). Festival tourist is typically defined as an individual who travels to a destination primarily to attend a festival or cultural event

(Akhundova, 2024). This type of tourism is characterized by the pursuit of unique experiences, cultural engagement, and social interaction within the context of the festival environment (Akhundova, 2024). Festival tourists contribute significantly to the local economy, as their participation often involves spending on accommodations, food, and local attractions (Mitrović, 2022).

With the growth of tourism, destinations around the world compete to provide unique attractions, and festivals have become one of the effective ways to attract tourists and provide unique experiences (Batinoluho & Basera, 2022). This is in line with Getz's(2008) view that festivals and events serve as a typical attraction for tourists, and feature prominently in the tourism development and marketing plans of numerous destinations. Festivals also play a crucial role in promoting rural tourism, showcasing the charm of the countryside to tourists and enticing them to explore and experience it through festival activities (Xie & He, 2022). The successful application of this strategy has become an effective means to attract tourists, promote destinations and enhance the attractiveness of rural tourism (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018).

Festivals and special events not only attract tourists, but also provide a rich cultural and entertainment experience that attracts more tourists (Ossowska et al., 2023). These celebrations cover a variety of themes, including harvest celebrations, music shows, cultural exhibitions, traditional temple fairs, etc., providing tourists with a variety of choices. This strategy also provides business opportunities for local communities and businesses, creating jobs and helping to promote sustainable rural tourism (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018). Through the clever use of festivals and special events as a tool to attract tourists, the rural tourism industry has achieved significant growth while also contributing to the prosperity of

local communities (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021). The Local Festival not only has a good influence on the promotion of the destination, but it also has an impact on the local community in terms of the economy, the socio-cultural environment, and the environment (Altunel & Erkut, 2015). In the beginning, some local festivals may have been just a ceremonial activity with special significance. As society develops, the value and contribution of festivals and events to community development is reassessed (Mahon & Hyyryläinen, 2019).

Rural festival is a form of cultural event that breathes life into the host place by focusing on regional cuisine, music, folklore, artisans and produce of a rural area (Richards & King, 2022). Rural festivals have a variety of themes, from celebrating farmers' harvests to reflecting various aspects of rural life, some of which are closely related to local farming, fishing, animal husbandry and forestry, reflecting the real state of rural life (Lee & Roh, 2016). As the development of rural tourism, rural areas showcase the unique and vibrant traditions, music, dance, cuisine and celebration activities of their communities through rural cultural festivals, thereby attracting a large number of tourists (Amr Saad, 2022). Rural festivals are usually held within a limited time, but they can generate strong attraction, attracting domestic and foreign tourists to arrange their trips and experience the unique charm of rural life (Liu et al., 2023). For instance, festivals such as La Tomatina in Spain (Quintal et al., 2020), the Highland Games in Scotland (Jepson & Clarke, 2014), and the Pumpkin Festival in Australia (Yoo et al., 2015) represent important aspects of the cultural heritage of their respective communities. Similarly, the Lavender Festival in Turkey (Giray et al., 2019), the Grape Festival in France and Kiwifruit Festival in New Zealand (Siimes, 2023) also showcase

unique cultural elements. Moreover, these festivals offer distinctive experiences that attract tourists from around the world.

Compared with urban festivals, rural festivals are unique in their in-depth exploration and display of regional characteristics. Rural festivals are often held at specific times and places, emphasizing community involvement and family friendliness, allowing tourists to participate directly in the celebrations and experience the natural environment and agricultural resources of the countryside. These festivals are often modest in scale and offer a personalized and authentic experience that urban festivals struggle to replicate. For example, rural festivals usually include food and beverage concessions, folk music, dance and other live entertainment, arts and crafts displays, games, competitions and parades, all presented in a way that is closer to nature and culture (Liu et al., 2023). These characteristics of rural festivals make them an important carrier to reflect cultural diversity and regional characteristics, and also become the attraction of rural tourism, providing tourists with a completely different experience from the city.

Festivals are means for tourism, economic development and local marketing (Dychkovskyy & Ivanov, 2020). Different rural festivals have different meanings to the local people and tourists. In particular, the objective is to create a sense of purpose for the countryside by organizing festivals to increase its appeal. For instance, it is recommended that policymakers employ festivals to empower residents, foster rural development, and preserve and revitalize certain rural cultural traditions that are in danger of extinction. Enhance the quality of life in rural areas and mitigate rural migration and decline (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Rural festivals can do more. In Japan, rural festival activities are quite rich, with an aging and declining rural population, many traditional festivals in rural areas are at risk of

dying out owing to the depopulation of villages; researchers are calling on young people to take part in rural festivals to save rural cultural traditions (Yamashita, 2021).

The impact of rural festivals is multifaceted. Tourists are drawn to rural festivals, and they visit the festival venue to observe the local cultural traditions and natural landscapes. Moreover, the consumption of festival-related goods and services has a beneficial impact. Additionally, rural festivals preserve local traditions and strengthen community identity by conveying social and cultural values (Okubo et al., 2014). However, for the kind of small rural festivals or events, the social impacts spread beyond the economic benefits (Alves et al., 2010). Currently, the rural area is confronted with numerous development challenges, including the aging of the population, sustainability, and local identity. To a certain extent, festivals can assist rural areas in addressing these issues, or at least in bringing them to the public's attention (Lin & Bestor, 2020). In Denmark, food-themed rural festivals are used as branding efforts for the small town, attracting a large number of tourists. Rural festivals have become a salvation for the small-town facing ageing, depopulations and economic decline (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2014). In Ireland and Finland, rural arts festivals as contributors to rural development and resilience are held in many places (Mahon & Hyryläinen, 2019). Turning the countryside into an art destination by hosting a rural festival to attract more tourists is a good way to support the revitalization of regional culture and local tourism businesses (Qu & Funck, 2021). Similarly, Japan is reviving declining tourist islands with rural festivals (Qu & Cheer, 2020). Rural festivals in New Zealand serve as a way to enhance social connections and revitalize rural areas (Teevan, 2021).

However, rural festivals have increased sharply and diversified from traditional country shows to evermore whacky niches (Gibson & Stewart, 2009). Scholars and organizers are focusing on the significance of rural festivals for rural communities. The influence of rural festivals varies across various groups of festival participants, such as organizers, tourists and locals (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). These rural festivals and events are mainly aimed at promoting rural tourism and revitalizing rural communities, rather than purely pursuing commercial interests (Hjalager & Kwiatkowski, 2018). Around the world, various rural festivals are used to cope with the decline of rural areas, brand rural tourism destinations, promote rural cultural traditions, and improve the sustainable development of rural areas.

1.2.2 Overview of Rural Festivals in China

In the years after reform and opening up, China has achieved significant progress in the growth of its national economy (Liu, 2020). Residents' income has increased significantly, travel become an indispensable part of people's life consumption, and China has gradually entered the era of mass tourism (Tang & Zeng, 2021). Since tourism is a comprehensive service industry, it has a high degree of correlation with other sectors and can promote the growth of other sectors (Rasool et al., 2021). Therefore, during the industrial restructuring procedure, the government has listed tourism as the driving force of national economic development (Liu, 2020).

Cultural tourism is a significant component of this strategy, as it contributes to economic growth and cultural heritage (Richards, 2018). According to the World Tourism Organization, cultural tourism includes all travel activities that are focused on cultural exploration and experience, including participation in festivals (Jahić, 2016). In China, traditional cultural festivals have a long history, but they have not been used as tourist attractions for a long period. Festival tourism has modern tourism

significance, starting from a theme activity 28 years ago. In 1995, the China National Tourism Administration (which is renamed the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China) launched the activities, named “China-56 Nationalities’ family”, “Many People-Different People”, “Visit Amorous Feelings of the Chinese Nation - Unforgettable Story” as the theme slogan of “Folk Customs Tourism Year”. These activities had aroused the attention of local governments and tourism enterprises to the festival and special events tourism. Festival and event tourism is kind of comprehensive consumption experience activity, that integrates sightseeing, leisure and entertainment and business activities. Since 1995, China has hosted a lot of events and festivals, such as, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the 2010 Shanghai World Exp, and the 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit. Additionally, the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference in Hainan has been held since 2001, the China-ASEAN Expo has been hosted in Nanning, Guangxi every year since 2004, and Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, has been the venue for the World Internet Conference annually since 2014, etc. Regarding festivals, many traditional festivals (i.e., Chinese New Year, Lantern Festival, and Dragon Boat Festival etc.), and other themed festivals are also celebrated, such as music festivals, beer festivals, food festivals, and rural festivals, etc. During these festivals, more measures are taken to attract tourists and investment. Festivals have become a common way for local governments to enhance local awareness, brand image and tourism value. More traditional cultural festivals have been explored and new festivals have been launched. Therefore, whether in the countryside or in the city, there are various kinds of themes and different scales festival activities held all over the country, ranging from regional to those celebrated nationwide. Among them, with the support of the policy of rural

revitalization, rural festivals continue to grow and evolved rapidly as a popular form of festivals.

In recent years, the rise of festival tourism in China has increasingly become an important part of tourism and has driven the development of local areas, especially in rural areas. According to the report from China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the total number of rural tourism employees nationwide reached 7.12 million in 2025, up 2.2% year-on-year. During rural festivals, a large amount of manpower is needed in all aspects, from activity organization and planning, scenic spot services, catering and accommodation services to the sale of agricultural products, providing abundant employment opportunities for local residents and boosting farmers' incomes (CEN, 2025). These show the huge market value of rural festival tourism. Under the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, rural tourism has also encountered unprecedented development opportunities (Bi & Yang, 2023). Rural festivals have gradually become an effective way for rural destination promotion and set up the image of a rural tourism destination, which promotes the development of rural tourism in all aspects (Ding & Huang, 2016). In 2017, the Chinese government put forward The Rural Revitalization Strategy, since then, the Chinese Farmers Harvest Festival has been held every year. 100 rural festivals selected are recommended across the country, this can further promote the excellent farming culture, promote the revitalization of rural culture, better in the vast rural areas to carry out local folk characteristics, also for the development of rural tourism economy.

Some scholars classify festivals based on the themes and activities. For example, Getz's (2008) divided festivals and events into several types, namely cultural celebrations, political and official events, arts and entertainment events, business and trade events, educational and scientific events, sporting events, and

special events. While the other scholars have categorized festivals according to factors such as the number of participants, investment costs, popularity, and overall impact, grouping them into three main types: large-scale festivals, medium-scale festivals, and small-scale festivals (Andersson et al., 2013).

Chinese scholars adapted the classification methods of western scholars to classify festivals, which are generally divided into the following concentration: political or government events, cultural celebrations, educational and scientific events, art and entertainment events, leisure events, trade and exhibition, sports events, and private events (Sun, 2019). However, as a subdivision of festivals, there is no unified standard to classify rural festivals. According to the level of the festival, it can be divided into the forms of government holding, non-governmental spontaneous holding, government and non-governmental co-holding, and industry association holding. According to the festival theme, rural festivals are divided into political category, cultural category, commercial category, sports category, science and education category. Based on festivals' attributes, rural festivals can be divided into three categories, namely seasonal festivals, folk festivals and comprehensive festivals (Xie, 2011). The themes of rural festivals are not only related to agriculture, some are related to local traditional culture, and some other are an integration of both. Agricultural harvests are seasonal. Hence, harvest celebrations and related festivals are often seasonal. However, some festivals show more about local folk culture. When organizers expect rural festivals to give full play to the tourism value and attract more tourists, the current rural festivals are often endowed with both characteristics. Obviously, the development of the last type of rural festival needs more suggestions and support from tourism marketing research. Such rural festivals

that showcase local culture and celebrate agricultural harvest are focused in this study.

This study collected some typical festivals from websites, and classified them. Table 1.1 shows the list of part of Chinese Farmers Harvest Festivals. In 2020, due to COVID-19, during the Chinese farmers' harvest festivals, inter-regional travel was affected to some extent, rural festivals were held by the local government as parallel sessions, in the events, rural culture performance was shown, video interviews, live streaming of agricultural activities and product display exhibition through the internet. Celebration around the country reflects the central government's determination to see a thriving agricultural industry, beautiful countryside and well-off farmers. The popularity of rural festivals has been more widely spread through the Internet. By the end of 2022, the coronavirus epidemic in China was over, and tourism gradually recovered. In 2023, rural festivals across China received more tourists than in previous years (CFHF,2023). The table below only shows the collection of typical Chinese rural festivals in 2023.

Table 1.1 Selected Chinese Rural Festivals

Name of the festival	Time	Place	Description
Chrysanthemum Culture Festival	From September to October	Yang Town, Shunyi District, Beijing	An exhibition of various varieties of chrysanthemums, both indoors and outdoors, shows the culture of chrysanthemums and the application of new energy technologies in the development of the flower industry.
Gongcheng Persimmon Festival	From November to December	Hongyan Village, Gongcheng Town, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	It is an annual autumn celebration of the Persimmon harvest, which features an opening ceremony with artists performing traditional songs and dances, alongside local product fairs and folk competitions. Tourists can savor unique Yao snacks, experience Yao customs, and enjoy lively performances.
Orange Crab Fat Rice Fragrant Tourism Culture Festival	In October	Luhua Town, Chongming District, Shanghai	Crab theme program performance, Crab farmer catching scene, "Crab king" and "Crab queen" selection, full of beautiful things in Chongming special excellent agricultural products market.
Lipu Taro Festival	In December	Lipu Town, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	It is an annual festival with activities including the King of Taro to recognize the largest taro and award its cultivators, Taro Cooking Competition, and Painting and Calligraphy Competition. The festival showcases cultural activities such as dragon-lion dance, taro gourmet food exhibition, martial arts, paper handcraft exhibition, and a float parade.
Waxberry Festival	Harvest In June	Aosang Town, Jingzhou Miao and Dong Autonomous County, Hunan	Tourists pick red bayberry, taste the plum challenge, experience the Dong customs, buy red bayberry fresh fruit, and enjoy the scenery of Jingzhou.

“Table 1.1 Continued”

Name of the festival	Time	Place	Description
Guanyang Farming Tools Festival	on lunar February 8th	Guanyang County, Guilin, Guangxi	It is a unique rural festival. people will bring a variety of homemade farming tools to the festival area and display and sell them in turn, such as wooden tables, chairs and benches, bamboo cages, baskets, etc. Furthermore, there are some agricultural machinery exhibitions. The local government also organizes many activities, such as Gui Opera, CaiDiao Opera, folk song and dance performances, traditional folk sports, farming experience activities, etc., also set up various local food and agricultural products exhibition.
Hengzhou Jasmine Festival	From April to May	Hengzhou, Nanning, Guangxi	It is the time to pick jasmines, the picking ceremony organized by the local government. There will be some events held, just like jasmine flower picking, tea ceremony and flower art performances, tourists experience picking jasmine flowers and making jasmine, tasting the local food and specialties, tea garden sightseeing etc.
Cattle-drafted Culture Festival	In August	Jiaohe Village, Jiaohe Twon, Luanchuan County, Henan	With cattle as the theme, the cow culture paradise for leisure, entertainment, viewing and learning is created, and a rural tourism route for cattle culture sightseeing and experience is designed.
Harvest Lantern Festival	In September	Cui Zhuangzi Village, Shengfang Town, Bazhou City, Hebei	Around 3,000 river lanterns are displayed throughout the festival and fireworks are displayed in the sky. In addition, there are parades and performances. It is the carrier for the preservation, inheritance and display of local traditional culture such as traditional music, martial arts and dance.

“Table 1.1 Continued”

Name of the festival	Time	Place	Description
Rice Flower sickle Festival via	In September	Longfengshan Town, Wuchang City, Heilongjiang	During the festival, a sickle-opening ceremony is held and local farmers share the joy of rice harvest. Tourists can experience harvest crops, planting experts are selected and local specialty foods banquet and other special cultural and recreational activities are held.
Watermelon festival	In May	Yangbei Town, Sucheng, Suqian, Jiangsu	During the festival, watermelon exhibition and sales are held. Watermelon farmers share their planting techniques. The organizer set up the stage, and various artists are invited to perform and promote watermelon. A series of activities such as picking watermelons and cycling are held. The local government tries to promote rural tourism with watermelons as the medium.
Cultural tourism and food Festival	In November	Mashan County, Nanning, Guangxi	Organizers hold folk culture activities and outdoor sports, advocating donations for the poor. Set up the black sheep food street, mainly featuring Mashan special food, focuses on displaying the series of special flavor delicacies of various towns and villages in Mashan county. Tourists can have dinner in a kind of banquet called Liu Shuixi, where with 100 tables indoor and a long table banquet outdoor, guests arrive at various times and are served with food as they arrive. Tourists can also visit the beautiful countryside of Mashan, watch the folk culture performance.

Source: Compiled from the website of Chinese Farmers' Harvest Festivals (<http://nmfsj.moa.gov.cn>) and organizers of some rural festivals in China

1.2.3 Rural Festivals in China's Rural Tourism

Rural tourism growth can contribute to the establishment of a favorable image of rural areas and potentially attract more investment (António & Machado, 2022). The rural region possesses a vast cultural and ecological inheritance that contributes to its variety, making it a valuable resource for anyone interested in fostering rural tourism (Shcherbachenko et al., 2021). In China, rural tourism includes a wide range of tourism offerings that revolve on the scenic beauty of rural areas, farming practices, immersive experiences with local farmers, and the rich cultural heritage of the region (Chi et al., 2020). Events and festivals are a common occurrence in rural communities. Over the last while, events and festivals have also emerged as one of the popular ways of attracting tourists to rural areas, acting as drivers of rural tourism (Rich, 2023). To be more specific, rural tourism is benefiting from rural festivals held regularly. Data from China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism show that in the first quarter of 2025, the country's rural tourism received a total of 707 million trips, an increase of 8.9% year-on-year, while the country's rural tourism received a total income of 412 billion yuan, an increase of 5.6% year-on-year. Among them, the driving role of festivals is creditable. Rural festivals attracted a large number of tourists and greatly enhanced the tourism heat and income of rural tourism areas (CEN, 2025).

Rural tourism is a type of tourism located in rural areas within a destination, these places are characterized by their distant locations, low population density, reliance on local resources, traditional practices, authenticity, and mostly agricultural activities (Rosalina et al., 2021). In these areas, tourists have the opportunity to immerse themselves physically, psychologically, or socially in the particular characteristics of the destination (Rosalina et al., 2021). Rural tourism was initially based on the rural ecological environment. With the intensification of tourism

competition, Chinese rural ecotourism attractions have recognized the importance of integrating regional characteristics of culture elements to attract tourists (Rui et al., 2023). However, in the process of urbanization and modernization, traditional agriculture and rural culture tend to disappear or undergo assimilation (Gao & Wu, 2017). Rural culture is a unique cultural heritage of the countryside and an important rural tourism resource. In the context of tourism, traditional cultural elements, such as folk customs, handicrafts, festivals, etc., are important factors in attracting rural tourists (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021). Folk festivals in rural areas, rural scenic sightseeing (including ancient town farms), as well as rural leisure and vacation, are included in rural tourism, and have become important components of prosperous rural tourism (Li et al., 2021). Under such a special background, rural festivals have been fully explored and innovated to meet the needs of intensifying competition in the rural tourism market and the revitalization of rural culture.

Local festival activities in rural areas can attract a large number of tourists, thus new events and festivals are created for tourism development purposes (Mair & Duffy, 2021). Festivals can attract people to get together, and tourists can take part in them to release pressure and relax their moods (Nkemngu et al., 2019). In China's traditional rural communities, for example, thousands of visitors come to enjoy the event of grape picking during the Grape Festival (Yin, 2022). A variety of folk intangible cultural heritage exhibits and performances are also an attraction for a large number of tourists during the rural cultural festival (Wang & Dahlan, 2023).

The festival provides an opportunity to promote rural tourism (Mair & Duffy, 2021). By holding festivals and promoting rural tourism in combination with its own characteristic culture, more tourists can be attracted to visit. For example, the Farming Culture festivals show tourists the rural culture through the display of farming tools,

farming skills, etc.(Nie et al., 2018); and during the Frost's Descent Festival, the Zhuang people, one of China's ethnic minorities, organize ceremonies to express gratitude for nature and celebrate the harvest, which is a popular festivalscape for tourists (Wang, 2022). Festivals bring diversified development opportunities for rural tourism. Activities held by rural communities can not only display traditional culture, but also create new business opportunities (Moisescu et al., 2019). In China, during rural festivals, there are often rural fairs or outdoor activities, which provide more development opportunities for the tourism service industry and promote the diversified development of rural tourism. Through the attraction of theme activities, the urban population is promoted to the countryside for festival activities, which directly drives rural tourism consumption. Some difficulties are encountered in categories of rural tourism products, features, brands, etc., however, the rural festival can be a chance to enrich the content of rural tourism from the uniqueness, depth, experience and continuous improvement.

The purpose of rural festival is to celebrate or commemorate a special event, special person or special time, which makes people know about cultural information, the characteristics of the rural itself or to sell local agricultural and sideline products. Meanwhile, the periodicity of festival holding time can make up for the off-season phenomenon caused by the simple dependence of agricultural resources in the development of rural tourism (Pirnar et al., 2019). Therefore, planning is rich in ideas and features of rural festival is an effective way to expand rural tourism customer market. Under the promotion of the rural revitalization strategy, in 2022, more than 3,000 rural festivals were held around China (MARAPRC, 2022).

The development of China's economy and the continual improvement of residents' consumption levels have shown an increasing trend in people's travel

demands. They now seek more diversified and high-quality leisure and cultural experiences. Local festival activities in rural areas fulfill the people's requirements of and attract a large number of tourists, which directly drives rural tourism (Qu & Cheer, 2020). Therefore, it is common practice in many places to regard rural festivals as the driving force of rural tourism. In the past 10 years, rural tourism has grown rapidly. In 2020, the number of rural tourists decreased due to the impact of COVID-19. The three years of the epidemic had some negative effects on festivals and tourism (Davies, 2021). However, due to the restrictions of cross-city and cross-province travel caused during the epidemic, tourists took the lead in choosing the suburban rural areas with vast space and safety as tourist destinations (Li & Zhu, 2021). Meanwhile, during this period, the cultural and tourism departments in different regions are shifting towards utilizing social media and video-sharing platforms for promotion. This mode of promotion has now become a regular practice. Based on the reports from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China, it can be observed that festivals are one of the important reasons to stimulate tourists to visit the rural area, both rural festivals and rural tourism have experienced a recovery in 2023 (MARAPRC, 2023). Therefore, rural festivals will continue to play an important role in the development of rural tourism and rural communities.

1.2.4 Rural Festivals in China's Rural Revitalization

In the perspective of policy, the revitalization of rural culture is an important part of the rural revitalization strategy (Bi et al., 2019), culture plays a leading role in the overall development of rural areas and the lasting prosperity of rural culture (Liu, 2023). In the past decades, under the tide of rapid industrialization and urbanization, a large number of rural residents' flocked to cities and towns in search of better living environments and employment conditions (Gao et al., 2020). Vast rural-urban

migration, land unfarmed, rural culture homogenization and unbalanced development imply rural recession in China (Wu & Yuan, 2023). Therefore, local government in China emphasizes the revitalization of rural culture in the revitalization of rural areas. In rural China, the festival as a carrier of the agricultural civilization and the folk custom culture, prosperous rural economy and the revitalization of rural civilization is an important way, to prosper the rural tourism market, and promote the new rural construction and industries transformation. Gradually, various festivals have become a driving force for promoting rural tourism development and revitalizing the local economy, especially in some regions that are rich in cultural resources but relatively underdeveloped economically, such as Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Inner Mongolia (Liu et al., 2023). For this reason, local governments strive to explore and increase the number of rural festivals, and expand the investment in rural festivals (Yang et al., 2020). In addition to traditional rural cultural festivals, new rural festivals have become increasingly popular and more numerous (MARAPRC, 2023).

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that after nearly three years of the epidemic, China's social environment and people's lifestyles have undergone considerable changes, such as the wide application of digital technology in various industries and people's lives. In rural revitalization, digital technology is also widely used in rural information dissemination due to its high efficiency and diversity of information presentation (Nancarrow et al., 2021). The wide application of digital technology has injected new vitality into rural festivals, which spread at a faster speed.

1.3 Problem Statement

In the era of globalization, the increasing number of rural festivals, the upgrading and diversification of tourist demand, and the wide application of digital

technology have led to fierce competition in the Chinese rural festival market (Qiao, 2024; Wu et al., 2023). This competition further deteriorates due to tourist switching behavior caused by the homogenization of festival activities, unsatisfied travel experience (Liu et al., 2023) , and over-commercialization (Choi et al., 2021), all of which eventually lead to a down-trend in the number of loyal tourists. Diminishing tourist loyalty may lead to various negative results for festival organizers and rural communities, including reduced market share, visibility and competitiveness (Heerden & Saayman, 2018). This kind of influence could already be seen in the Chinese rural festival market. With the rapid growth of rural festivals, many face challenges such as a lack of prominent themes, limited diversity in activities, and a lack of local uniqueness. These issues contribute to insufficient appeal, a shrinking tourism market, and difficulties in achieving festival goals. In some cases, certain rural festivals quietly disappear after being held for several consecutive years (CCN, 2022). The limited gains from a decline in tourist numbers in festivals present a significant obstacle to the overall sustainability of festival tourism (Choi et al., 2021; Heerden & Saayman, 2018). Several studies have examined the role of rural festivals in developed countries, focusing on the elements that impact tourist loyalty (Rossetti & Quinn, 2021; Vesci & Botti, 2019). Nevertheless, there has been a scarcity of studies conducted on rural festivals in China (Xiao et al., 2019), and even fewer studies have focused on Chinese domestic tourists of rural festivals, indicating a significant research gap in the population.

In this highly competitive market, the increase in the total market size does not equal more tourists and tourist spending for each rural festival. Different tourist destinations are striving to provide tourists with local characteristics and tourism value (Zhang et al., 2020), which will stimulate tourists' switching behavior, festival tourists

switching from one rural festival to another, if tourists are not satisfied with the products or services offered by a rural festival (Wu & Ai, 2016). To be specific, it leads to a gradual decline in the number of tourists (including first-time and revisit tourists) to rural festivals with insufficient characteristics and attractions. Therefore, tourism managers of rural tourism destinations always need to pay attention to the factors influencing tourist loyalty. For regions that rely on festivals to revitalize rural tourism culture and economy, once they lose tourists, the impact will be multifaceted and serious.

In light of the increasing homogenization of destinations, visitors are increasingly drawn to those that provide unique tourism resources and services that provide highly memorable and remarkable experiences (Zheng et al., 2022a). Therefore, tourism managers seek to improve attractions' competitiveness by exploring the uniqueness of event (Novello & Fernandez, 2016). In China, rural festivals play a significant role in shaping their respective cultural identities, inheriting cultural traditions, revitalizing villages and promoting rural tourism (Wu & Ai, 2016). Over the past few decades, under the influence of its combined comprehensive benefits, rural festivals and special events have grown phenomenally. More than 5,000 festivals and/or events are held in China each year (Lu et al., 2009), of which more than 3,000 are held in rural areas (MARAPRC, 2023). The development path of rural festival tourism in China is similar to that of other countries in the world (Sun, 2019). Rural areas combine agriculture, special festivals, tourism to promote rural revitalization (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020; Sarale et al., 2020; Qu & Funck, 2021). According to media and travel agencies reports, short-distance travel became the first recovery of the market, rural tourism attracted greater attention (Li et al., 2021). Tourists flock to rural tourism areas in large numbers, especially during rural festivals, which will be an

opportunity and also a challenge. Hence, rural festivals attract tourists to rural areas (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020), then maintaining tourists and improving word-of-mouth is an important task for local governments, rural communities, festival organizers and tourism agencies.

Tourist experience, from different perspectives, has been explored in various contexts, in which the dimensions include entertainment, educational, escapist, aesthetic, sensory, emotional, thinking, acting, relating experience, etc. (Li et al., 2021). However, research on tourist experience is not comprehensive in the context of China rural tourism. Due to the imperfection of rural infrastructure and environment, the development of rural festivals and rural tourism is still in its infancy. When organizing rural festival activities, the organizer ignores the personalized needs of tourists, and rural festival activities lack creativity, resulting in poor tourist experience, which may reduce the perception of quality and value (Chi et al., 2020). Perceived value and perceived quality also have significant influence on tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Chi et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2019; Pai et al., 2021). According to the development of rural areas in China, it is vital to improve tourism satisfaction and loyalty by solving the problem of poor rural festival tourists' experience.

In tourism industry, perceived quality is an important factor affecting tourist loyalty (Shen et al., 2023). However, existing studies in the context of Chinese rural festival tourism have paid little attention to this, especially regarding the impact of specific festival quality elements, such as information services, programs, souvenirs, food and facilities. These quality elements often have certain deficiencies in actual operation, which may not fully meet the expectations of tourists, thus affecting their emotions, satisfaction and subsequent loyalty behavior (Wong et al., 2015).

The image is a fundamental element in the promotion of tourism destinations (Huete Alcocer & López Ruiz, 2020), tourists visit a rural area for rural festival, in the process of participating in rural festival activities and experiencing the tourism services and atmosphere of rural festival, the image of rural areas formed in their mind. In 2018, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the PRC designated Chinese Farmers' Harvest Festival in the third week of September, which is a nationwide celebration of crop harvest. In local area, or it still depends on when all crops had been output. Almost all rural festivals are related to the celebration of crop harvest, and the image of tourists involves the unique local attractions and atmosphere of joy and hope during the festival (Zhao, 2021). However, some rural festivals have no local characteristics and are just commercial operations based on the popularity brought by the rural festival, which has a negative impact on tourists' image. Tourists' image has been confirmed to have a positive impact on revisiting intention and recommendation (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Lee & Xue, 2020). Thus, it is crucial to explore more about the dimensions of festival image, the factors that influence it, and the relationship between festival image and tourist loyalty.

Emotion substantially influences tourist satisfaction, the spread of positive recommendations, and the likelihood of tourists returning (Ma & Xie, 2019). Studies on the influence of tourists' emotional responses toward a particular destination on tourists' satisfaction and destination loyalty are increasing (Godovykh & Tasci, 2021; Matsuda et al., 2018; Samaan, 2020). The emotions evoked in participants during the festival experience are contingent on the festival's quality, as well as its significance and the individual's personal interpretation (Wong et al., 2015). Due to the rapid development of Chinese society, tourists' emotion towards rural festivals is changeable. There is a lack of effective monitoring of tourists' emotion and emotional