



Ethnic Tourism as a Strategy for Poverty Alleviation: Insights from Guizhou and Lessons for Chiang Rai

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Abstract

This article examines whether the Xijiang model (Xijiang 1000 Household Miao Village) of ethnic tourism–based poverty alleviation in Guizhou Province, China, can inform development strategies in Chiang Rai, Thailand. Drawing on policy analysis and institutional comparison, the study analyzes how administrative coordination, fiscal capacity, regulatory enforcement, and community organization shaped outcomes in Xijiang and contrasts these conditions with those in Chiang Rai. The findings show that Xijiang's success depended on vertically integrated governance, centralized fiscal support, and enforceable spatial planning embedded within China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign. In contrast, Chiang Rai operates within a fragmented administrative structure characterized by dispersed tourism authority, limited provincial fiscal autonomy, uneven land-use enforcement, and market-driven revenue concentration. These institutional differences constrain direct policy transfer. Nevertheless, elements of the model can be recalibrated to Chiang Rai's institutional setting, particularly through enforceable revenue-sharing arrangements, coherent spatial planning, and strengthened community-based organizational structures.

Keywords

Ethnic Tourism, Poverty Alleviation, Guizhou, Chiang Rai

Introduction

Since the initiation of economic reforms and opening-up policies in 1978, China has made substantial progress in improving the quality of life for its population. It has experienced remarkable growth, significantly improving living standards compared to its early years. However, this economic development has not been evenly distributed across the country; most economic and urban progress has been concentrated in the eastern regions, while the central and western areas remain predominantly rural and underdeveloped. The geographical characteristics of the central and western regions, dominated by mountainous terrain, have posed substantial challenges to economic advancement and the creation of career opportunities for local populations. Consequently, income disparities between regions have widened, leaving residents of central and western China with lower living standards and significant socio-economic gaps compared to those in eastern China.

Guizhou Province, situated in southwestern China, exemplifies these challenges. With a population of approximately 39 million and a rugged topography in which highlands account for over 90 percent of the land area, Guizhou has long been classified among China's lowest-income provinces. Historically, rural residents relied heavily on subsistence agriculture, which, given the mountainous terrain and limited arable land, provided only modest and unstable incomes. Over the past decade, however, Guizhou has also been presented as a prominent case of tourism-based poverty alleviation. Official statistics indicate that between 2010 and 2020, the province's registered poverty incidence declined from over 26 percent to below 1 percent, within the framework of China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign (Donaldson, 2007; World Tourism Alliance, 2018; Qiushi Theory, 2024). In Xijiang 1000 Household Miao Village, reported per capita incomes increased from approximately 2,000 yuan in the late 2000s to around 8,000 yuan by 2020, as residents engaged in homestay operations, handicraft production, and staged cultural performances linked to tourism. Substantial public investment in transport infrastructure, visitor facilities, and village renovation projects expanded market accessibility and employment opportunities. At the same time, the integration of ethnic cultural practices into tourism markets raised ongoing debates about commodification and representation, particularly regarding how minority traditions are curated for external consumption. These developments suggest that tourism, when embedded within state-led development strategies, can contribute to income growth in marginalized regions. However, the social and cultural implications of such transformation remain contested.

Chiang Rai, Thailand's northernmost province, presents a contrasting case. Like Guizhou, it is geographically mountainous and home to diverse ethnic groups, including the Akha, Lahu, Karen, and Yao. With a population of approximately 1.3 million, Chiang Rai is economically less

developed compared with Thailand's national average. In 2018, Chiang Rai's gross provincial product (GPP) per capita was approximately 95,895 baht, significantly lower than neighboring provinces such as Lamphun (211,489 baht; population approx. 400,000) and Chiang Mai (137,316 baht; population approx. 1.8 million) (NESDC, 2021). Despite its cultural richness, Chiang Rai remains among Thailand's lower-income provinces, with around 5 percent of its population living below the national poverty line (SOS Children's Villages, 2021). Tourism has long been promoted as a mechanism for improving livelihoods, with cultural festivals, handicrafts, and eco-tourism constituting important supplementary income sources for rural households. However, structural challenges persist: income distribution remains uneven, external operators often capture a disproportionate share of tourism revenue, and tourism expansion has intensified pressures related to cultural commodification and environmental degradation (Sitikarn, 2021).

Guizhou demonstrates the effectiveness of a state-supported ethnic tourism model in alleviating poverty, while Chiang Rai highlights the limitations of a more market-driven approach. Examining whether and how the Xijiang Model can be adapted to Chiang Rai not only enriches comparative scholarship on ethnic tourism and poverty alleviation but also provides policymakers with practical insights for designing culturally grounded, community-based strategies for sustainable development in the region.

Literature Review

Research on ethnic tourism highlights both the opportunities for cultural preservation and the risks of commodification, with some scholars arguing that commodification can generate new forms of authenticity rather than destroy traditional meanings (Cohen, 1988; Shepherd, 2002; Oakes, 1998). In parallel, the literature on tourism and poverty alleviation emphasizes pro-poor tourism (PPT), which seeks to channel benefits to marginalized groups through employment and supply-chain linkages (Ashley et al., 2001; Goodwin, 2008), and community-based tourism (CBT), which stresses local ownership and empowerment (Saayman & Giampiccoli, 2016; Scheyvens, 2007). These studies connect with the concept of "sustainable tourism," which scholarship defines as a form of locally based tourist development that balances economic gains, socio-cultural resilience, and environmental stewardship. Such scholarship also cautions against the rhetorical or discursive use of "sustainability," which may occur without robust governance mechanisms to ensure that such aspirations are translated into action (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019). Finally, studies on tourism development strategies emphasize the importance of governance frameworks, public-private partnerships, and participatory planning to ensure equitable distribution of benefits and long-term viability (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). Synthesizing these

strands, the literature underscores the central issues of cultural integrity, equitable benefit-sharing, sustainability, and governance, which frame the key questions this study addresses as it assesses the transnational, transcultural, and transferable nature of ethnic tourism models for poverty alleviation.

Early scholarship on ethnic tourism was deeply skeptical of its cultural consequences. Researchers argued that tourism often erodes “authentic” traditions by transforming lived cultural practices into staged performances tailored to external consumption (Cohen, 1988; Oakes, 1998). From this perspective, tourism risks objectifying minority communities, essentializing ethnic identities, and reducing complex social realities to marketable cultural symbols. Critics further suggest that such processes may institutionalize marginalization by encouraging communities to perform fixed cultural identities rather than pursue broader political and economic aspirations. Subsequent scholarship, however, complicates this narrative. Some authors contend that commodification does not necessarily destroy authenticity but can instead generate new forms of negotiated or emergent authenticity shaped through interaction between hosts and visitors (Cohen, 1988; Shepherd, 2002). Rather than viewing authenticity as static, these studies interpret it as socially constructed and continually redefined within tourism economies. In parallel, the literature on tourism and poverty alleviation emphasizes pro-poor tourism (PPT), which seeks to channel benefits to marginalized groups through employment and supply-chain linkages (Ashley et al., 2001; Goodwin, 2008), and community-based tourism (CBT), which stresses local ownership and empowerment (Saayman & Giampiccoli, 2016; Scheyvens, 2007). These debates intersect with the concept of “sustainable tourism,” defined as a form of local tourism-based development that seeks to balance economic gains, socio-cultural resilience, and environmental stewardship. At the same time, scholars caution against the rhetorical invocation of “sustainability” without governance mechanisms to translate normative aspirations into institutional practice (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019).

Finally, research on tourism development strategies emphasizes governance structures, public–private partnerships, and participatory planning as central to ensuring equitable benefit distribution and long-term viability (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). Synthesizing these strands, the literature highlights the tensions between commodification and authenticity, empowerment and dependency, and sustainability and market expansion. These tensions frame this study’s central inquiry into the cross-context transferability of ethnic tourism models for poverty alleviation.

Studies on Poverty Alleviation in China

Extensive research has documented China's remarkable achievements in poverty alleviation, particularly highlighting its innovative and systematic approaches to addressing long-standing socio-economic challenges. According to New China Research (2021), China successfully eradicated absolute poverty by 2020, an entire decade ahead of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. This accomplishment has been described as "one of the greatest global stories of the 21st century" and a "blueprint for global poverty alleviation." The study emphasizes that China's efforts transcend traditional theoretical frameworks, suggesting the need for new interpretations and methodologies to address contemporary socio-economic realities. This novel field aimed to utilize the PRC's take on political economy to analyze the country's specific poverty alleviation needs and methods, core principles in relation to the prevailing national ideology, and their global relevance.

Wang et al. (2020) investigated the implementation of China's targeted poverty alleviation policies and proposed potential applications for Thailand. Their study identifies several key mechanisms that underpin China's success: operational guidance, resource mobilization, target group identification, policy execution, and independent external evaluations. These mechanisms have transformed conventional poverty alleviation strategies, leading to substantial improvements in the well-being of impoverished populations. The study advocates adapting localized poverty alleviation policies in Thailand, emphasizing community engagement, resource mobilization, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Recommended strategies include establishing clear accountability among government agencies, enhancing transparency through robust monitoring systems, and providing targeted training to empower local communities.

Other scholars have offered diverse perspectives on poverty alleviation policies in China. Yang and Hu (2018) examined Guizhou Province's integrated approach, which includes relocating impoverished residents from ecologically vulnerable areas while improving education, healthcare, and social security systems. Similarly, Li (2015) analyzed targeted poverty alleviation in Haichuai Village, emphasizing the significance of geographic, resource, and community awareness in addressing structural poverty. Li suggests enhancing educational opportunities, healthcare services, and financial mechanisms to mitigate poverty effectively.

In a comparative study, Yu (2017) examined poverty alleviation efforts in China and Thailand, focusing on tourism-driven economic development. The study identifies disparities in educational resources as a significant structural cause of poverty in Thailand, highlighting the need to improve infrastructure, expand educational access, and implement targeted economic initiatives. However, although these comparative studies were of political and ideological origin,

they provided important insights into tourism-related poverty alleviation in marginal areas. They underscored the importance of contextualizing poverty alleviation strategies to reflect local socio-economic conditions.

Ethnic Tourism Development in Guizhou

Guizhou Province, renowned for its rich ethnic and ecological diversity, has emerged as a leading example of leveraging cultural heritage for economic and social development. Home to 18 ethnic groups, including the Han majority and 17 minority groups such as the Bouyei, Miao, and Dong, Guizhou has strategically capitalized on its cultural richness to promote ethnic tourism as a development tool. Yin and Yan (2018) examined the role of Guizhou's natural and cultural resources in promoting tourism and related industrial development. Their study demonstrates that ethnic tourism stimulates the local economy and plays a vital role in poverty alleviation. The authors argue that Guizhou has created new economic opportunities by promoting cultural heritage through tourism while preserving its unique cultural identity.

Moreover, Feng and Wei (2020) analyzed Guizhou's 13th Five-Year Plan, which explicitly incorporates ethnic tourism into broader poverty alleviation strategies. They identified key elements of this approach, including targeted village development, improvements in tourism infrastructure, and the creation of income-generating opportunities for residents. The study underscores how Guizhou's model effectively balances cultural preservation with sustainable economic growth, offering a valuable reference point for similar initiatives in other regions.

Ethnic Tourism Development in Thailand and Chiang Rai

In Thailand, ethnic tourism has emerged as an important means of cultural preservation and economic development. Sompanyathiwong and Wannapachai (2016) examined the readiness of Hmong communities in Loei Province for cultural tourism. Despite the communities' rich cultural assets, the study found that limited organizational capacity, inadequate marketing strategies, and the absence of coordinated management structures constrained tourism initiatives. Local groups lacked formal training in hospitality standards, financial planning, and visitor management, leading to fragmented service delivery and weak revenue capture. The authors therefore argue that government support was necessary not only to provide training programs but also to establish clearer administrative coordination and long-term planning mechanisms capable of sustaining cultural tourism without diluting community control.

Chaikulab and Puangmanee (2017) explored Tai Dam communities in Loei Province. They proposed three tourism models based on "visitor engagement," including short cultural education programs, half-day nature-based tours, and full-day immersive experiences guided by

local experts. Their findings highlight the structural tension between expanding visitor numbers and preserving community-defined cultural practices, underscoring the need for strategic planning to prevent tourism from overwhelming local institutions. In the context of Mon communities in Kanchanaburi Province, Thongchomnooch and Lapanan (2018) analyzed tourism's dual role as both an economic opportunity and a mechanism for cultural representation. While tourism contributed to supplementary income, the study documented concerns about the standardization of performance, external influence from tour operators, and the gradual reshaping of rituals to meet tourist expectations. The authors advocate calibrated state intervention to regulate visitor flows and protect community-defined cultural boundaries. Specifically regarding Chiang Rai Province, existing studies primarily focus on tourism's cultural and economic impacts. Nindam et al. (2017) identified three primary ethnic tourism routes—nature trails, mountain lifestyle experiences, and heritage tours—linking six ethnic groups: Lahu, Akha, Yao, Lisu, Karen, and Hmong. While positioning Chiang Rai as a potential ethnic tourism hub, the study also notes fragmented stakeholder coordination, uneven revenue distribution, and limited institutional mechanisms to manage pressures from commercialization.

The reviewed literature highlights four interrelated strands—ethnic tourism, tourism and poverty alleviation, sustainable tourism, and development strategies—that collectively frame the core issues addressed in this study. Research on ethnic tourism demonstrates the dual potential for cultural preservation and commodification, emphasizing the need for governance structures that safeguard authenticity (Cohen, 1988; Shepherd, 2002). Studies on poverty alleviation distinguish between pro-poor tourism approaches, which focus on redistributive mechanisms (Ashley et al., 2001; Goodwin, 2008), and community-based tourism models, which prioritize empowerment and equity (Scheyvens, 2007; Saayman & Giampiccoli, 2016). These debates align with sustainability scholarship, which emphasizes that achieving long-term benefits necessitates balancing economic growth with cultural resilience and environmental stewardship (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019). Finally, strategic planning research highlights the importance of integrated frameworks, public-private partnerships, and participatory planning in achieving equitable outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). Together, these strands illuminate the key issues of cultural integrity, equitable benefit-sharing, sustainability, and governance, which directly inform this study's central objective: to examine how the Xijiang Model of ethnic tourism can be adapted to Chiang Rai's socio-economic and cultural context in order to alleviate poverty while safeguarding heritage.

Research Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory research design to investigate the mechanisms and organizational structures of poverty alleviation policies in Guizhou Province and to assess their applicability to Chiang Rai Province. Given the novelty of the research topic and the limited availability of prior comparative studies, the methodology relied on document-based research (Thomas, 2013) rather than primary informant fieldwork.

For the document analysis, a wide range of sources was collected, including government policy papers, strategic development plans, official poverty alleviation reports, peer-reviewed academic articles, and reputable media publications. Selection was guided by three criteria: (1) direct relevance to poverty alleviation and ethnic tourism, (2) credibility of the issuing body or author, and (3) publication within the last fifteen years to ensure contemporary validity. The research instrument employed was qualitative content analysis, which enabled systematic coding and categorization of recurring themes, strategies, and policy mechanisms. To verify the quality of the findings, triangulation was used by cross-checking evidence across different document types (government, academic, and media) to enhance validity and reliability.

In adapting the findings into strategic guidelines for Chiang Rai, the study used a comparative synthesis process. Policies and practices identified in Guizhou were systematically analyzed against Chiang Rai's socio-economic, cultural, and tourism contexts, based on existing statistical reports and secondary studies. While no direct stakeholder feedback was collected, the iterative comparison of multiple document sources served as an alternative validation mechanism, ensuring contextual relevance and theoretical rigor. The research procedures followed four explicit steps: the collection of relevant documents from government, academic, and media sources; and screening and selection based on relevance, credibility, and timeframe. Content analysis and triangulation were then employed to extract themes and validate findings across multiple sources, utilizing comparative synthesis to adapt Guizhou's strategies into practical guidelines for Chiang Rai. This systematic and transparent methodology ensured clarity in the research process, strengthening the study's contribution to both theoretical discourse and practical policy design in ethnic tourism and poverty alleviation.

Mian Findings

Mechanisms for Policy Formulation and Solutions

Poverty remains a complex and multifaceted issue in China, with significant regional disparities that necessitate context-specific solutions. Guizhou Province, once one of the poorest regions in the country, illustrates both the challenges and opportunities involved in poverty

alleviation through strategic policy implementation. The concept of poverty alleviation through tourism development underscores tourism's potential to address poverty, particularly in remote and underdeveloped areas. Scholars have identified tourism's role in job creation, labor redistribution, and income generation, collectively contributing to economic development and poverty reduction. However, while tourism can significantly aid poverty alleviation, its success depends on external factors such as economic stability, environmental sustainability, and active community involvement. Scholars have noted that challenges, including economic volatility, inadequate infrastructure, and opportunity costs, can impede the effectiveness of tourism-driven poverty alleviation. To address these barriers, successful models often incorporate government-led initiatives, community engagement, and eco-tourism strategies.

Guizhou Province effectively leverages its abundant ethnic and ecological resources to alleviate poverty through tourism. By promoting cultural heritage and natural attractions, the province has created sustainable income opportunities for local communities. This strategy demonstrates the practical mechanisms of tourism-driven poverty alleviation and serves as a valuable case study for other regions seeking similar outcomes.

1. Policies on Poverty Alleviation in Guizhou

The Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China set a clear objective: eradicating poverty nationwide by 2020 and building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. This vision was operationalized at the provincial level, where the Guizhou Provincial Committee and government were tasked with formulating concrete action plans to meet these targets.

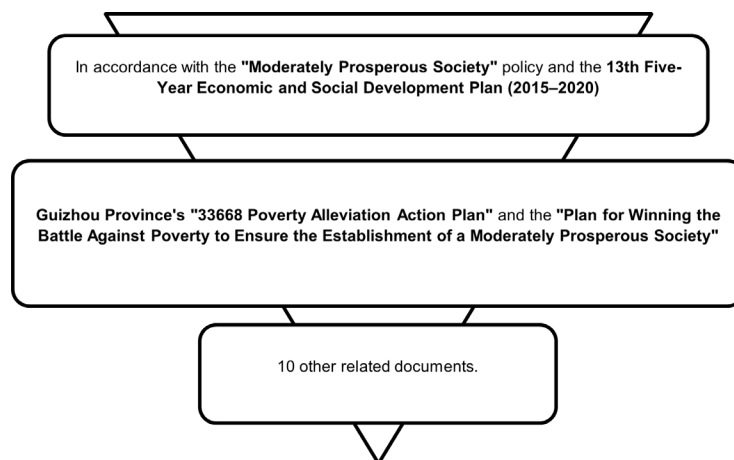


Figure 1 Policy Transmission Structure for Poverty Alleviation: From Central Government to Provincial Implementation

Source: Author's compilation based on the Guizhou Provincial Government.

Guizhou meticulously studied national poverty alleviation policies to align with central government directives. Subsequently, it introduced the “33668 Poverty Alleviation Action Plan” and the “Decision on Winning the Battle against Poverty and Ensuring the Establishment of a Well-off Society,” along with more than ten related policy documents. These policies are designed to provide clear guidance to local implementers, enabling them to understand their roles and develop targeted strategies to alleviate poverty.

These provincial initiatives demonstrate a structured approach to policy transmission from the central government to the local level, emphasizing coherence and practical application in poverty reduction efforts. The policy transmission mechanism facilitated the effective implementation of central directives by adapting them to provincial and local contexts, enhancing their relevance and impact. The Guizhou Provincial Poverty Alleviation Investment and Development Corporation played a key role in this process, serving as a pivotal player in planning, coordinating, and monitoring poverty alleviation initiatives. The corporation ensured that local efforts aligned with the central government's broader poverty alleviation objectives, thereby promoting consistency and effectiveness across the implementation process.

2. Policies for Poverty Alleviation through Tourism Development in Guizhou

Guizhou is one of China's provinces with a notably high poverty rate. In 2011, approximately 11.5 million people in the province earned less than 2,300 yuan annually, accounting for one-quarter of the provincial population. At that time, Guizhou ranked last in per capita GDP among China's 31 provinces and regions, making it the country's poorest province. Despite these challenges, Guizhou has made significant progress, with improvements in GDP per capita and total GDP.

Focusing on tourism-related poverty alleviation, three key policy documents have guided Guizhou's efforts: the “Support for Production and Employment to Promote Targeted Poverty Alleviation,” the “Three-Year Action Plan for Tourism Development to Support Poverty Alleviation (2017-2019),” and the “Guidelines for Rural Tourism Development and Reform in Guizhou.” As shown in Figure 2, these documents emphasize the importance of developing tourism projects tailored to local conditions, leveraging tourism as an effective tool for poverty reduction in the region.



Figure 2 Sequence of Policy Announcements and Guidelines for Tourism-Driven Poverty Alleviation in Guizhou Province

Source: Author's compilation based on the Guizhou Provincial Government.

An analysis of the three key documents reveals that they share consistent poverty alleviation objectives, summarized as follows: First, Policy to Support Production and Employment for Targeted Poverty Alleviation. To align with the national goal of building a “moderately prosperous society free from poverty by 2020,” the Guizhou provincial government and relevant authorities introduced this policy as a strategic framework. It outlines approaches, action plans, and targeted strategies to combat poverty, emphasizing active participation from three key sectors: agriculture, manufacturing, and services. The policy aims to generate employment, increase income, and eliminate poverty throughout the province.

Second, Three-Year Poverty Alleviation Strategy through Tourism Development (2017-2019). In response to President Xi Jinping’s drive to reduce poverty, this guideline positions tourism as a strategic industry that could be integrated with poverty alleviation efforts. The strategy aims to stimulate economic transformation, promote local employment, generate income, and reduce poverty. Local governments are encouraged to tailor implementation strategies to market demand, enhance tourism attractions, and incorporate tourism-related businesses to maximize local benefits. The strategy set a concrete goal of lifting more than 100,000 people out of poverty through tourism development by 2019. By focusing on market-driven tourism initiatives, this plan highlights the tourism sector’s potential as a catalyst for economic growth.

Finally, Guidelines for Rural Development through Tourism Development and Reform in Guizhou Province. Building on the foundation of tourism-based poverty alleviation, this guideline was developed to enhance tourism quality in accordance with the principles of “beautiful rural

development” and “using tourism to alleviate poverty.” Its primary objective was to raise local incomes for more than 50,000 people through tourism initiatives by 2020. This guideline emphasizes improving tourism services, developing rural tourism products, and integrating local cultural and natural resources to create sustainable income streams.

Guizhou’s comprehensive strategy in implementing these policies and guidelines has led to diverse local initiatives tailored to each area’s unique resources, including natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and key tourist attractions. These efforts prioritize collaboration among the government, the private sector, and local communities to foster sustainable and inclusive poverty reduction. By leveraging tourism as a core component of its economic development, Guizhou has made significant strides in aligning poverty alleviation initiatives with local strengths, thereby ensuring both economic growth and cultural preservation.

Case Study Analysis: Xijiang 1000 Household Miao Village

The “Xijiang Model,” centered on the Xijiang 1000 Household Miao Village in Guizhou Province, illustrates how ethnic tourism can serve as a dual strategy for poverty alleviation and cultural preservation. Once economically marginalized, Xijiang has undergone a significant transformation since 2006, emerging as a nationally recognized exemplar of tourism-driven revitalization. Its achievements rest on a cohesive framework integrating government leadership, community participation, and private-sector collaboration. The government provided support through infrastructure investments, financial incentives, and a regulatory framework that prioritized sustainable tourism. Roads, utilities, and communication systems expanded accessibility, while subsidies encouraged entrepreneurship consistent with cultural preservation. Community participation ensured that villagers were active stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries. Residents engaged in hospitality, cultural performances, and handicraft production, supported by training programs that enhanced skills and preserved authenticity.

This participatory model strengthened local ownership and equitable benefit distribution. Private-sector collaboration introduced capital, market access, and branding expertise. Partnerships with travel agencies and digital platforms broadened tourist inflows, while diversified products—such as cultural festivals, artisan workshops, and eco-tours—expanded revenue streams. Economic and social outcomes have been significant. Average per capita income rose from 2,000 yuan in 2008 to 8,000 yuan in 2020. Over 1,500 jobs were created across tourism-related sectors, while guesthouse capacity expanded to 3,500 beds. Infrastructure improvements enhanced living standards, and Miao traditions such as dance, music, and crafts were revitalized as dynamic cultural assets.

At the same time, the model incorporated regulatory measures to mitigate the adverse effects of ethnic tourism. Zoning regulations structured the spatial distribution of tourism activities, while monitoring systems and licensing requirements sought to regulate visitor capacity, commercial expansion, and environmental standards. These measures were intended to mitigate risks identified in the literature, including cultural commodification, unequal income distribution, and ecological pressure. However, such safeguards did not eliminate tensions. The formalization and branding of Miao cultural practices for tourism markets inevitably reshaped modes of representation, raising ongoing debates about authenticity and community agency. The Xijiang Model, therefore, reflects not the absence of commodification but an attempt to manage its scale and impact administratively. Its experience highlights both the economic potential and the cultural trade-offs inherent in tourism-based poverty alleviation.

The Xijiang 1000 Household Miao Village exemplifies how provincial policies and local practices were aligned to create a tourism-centered local economy. Guizhou's policy frameworks—including poverty alleviation action plans and rural tourism guidelines—emphasized integrating cultural resources with development, fostering community participation, and encouraging public-private partnerships. In Xijiang, these directives translated into concrete institutional arrangements. For example, village households were encouraged to convert portions of their traditional wooden stilt houses into licensed homestays, supported by small subsidies and standardized safety requirements. Infrastructure upgrades—including paved access roads, centralized parking areas outside the core village zone, and improved water and electricity systems—were financed through provincial investment, enabling the village to accommodate rising visitor numbers. Community engagement was operationalized through organized training sessions in hospitality services, performance coordination, and silver-craft production. Residents participated in scheduled cultural performances, including Miao song-and-dance presentations held in the village square, which were collectively managed rather than individually negotiated. Craft cooperatives were formed to coordinate pricing and production of traditional embroidery and silver ornaments, reducing undercutting among households. These arrangements allowed residents to capture a share of tourism revenue while maintaining collective oversight of cultural representation. Private-sector collaboration further expanded market access. Partnerships with regional travel agencies integrated Xijiang into larger Guizhou tour circuits, while online booking platforms increased visibility and standardized pricing structures. Investment in ticketing systems and visitor management generated pooled revenue that was partially redistributed for village maintenance and cultural activities. Through this layered interaction between policy guidance, local organization, and market integration, Xijiang developed a structured tourism economy that combined income generation with managed cultural presentation.

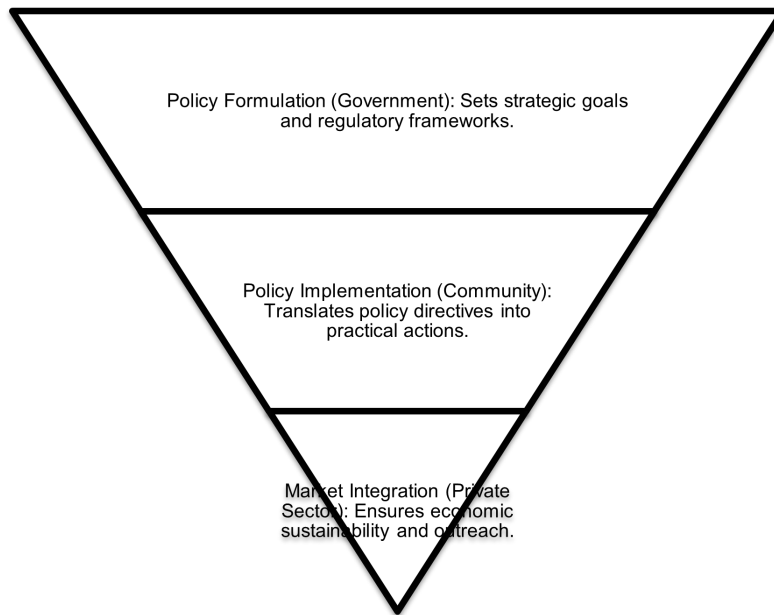


Figure 3 Three-tiered mechanism of the Xijiang model

Source: Author's compilation based on the Guizhou Provincial Government.

These three pillars interact as a structured mechanism: provincial policies establish regulatory and financial frameworks, village institutions adapt implementation to local conditions, and external enterprises expand market access. In practice, “partners” included regional tour operators, online booking platforms, and county-level tourism bureaus that coordinated ticketing, visitor flow management, and marketing. Feedback mechanisms operated through village meetings, pricing coordination committees, and adjustments to performance schedules in response to visitor demand and resident concerns. For example, limits were placed on guesthouse expansion within the core residential zone, and performance formats were periodically revised to address concerns about over-commercialization. The measurable outcomes were significant. Between 2008 and 2020, reported per capita income increased from approximately 2,000 to 8,000 yuan, guesthouse capacity expanded to around 3,500 beds, and over 1,500 tourism-related jobs were created. While these figures are primarily derived from official sources and reflect the income effects of large-scale public investment, they nonetheless indicate substantial economic transformation at the village level. At the same time, the increased visibility of Miao festivals and craft production contributed to a renewed public emphasis on ethnic identity. However, debates persist regarding whether such revival reflects strengthened community agency or structured cultural performance for tourism markets.

The Xijiang Model thus represents a coordinated policy ecosystem characterized by state guidance, organized village participation, and market integration. Its experience suggests that structured governance can generate economic gains, but also that outcomes depend heavily on administrative capacity, financial support, and regulatory oversight. These institutional conditions are central when considering the model's relevance for Chiang Rai, where governance structures and funding mechanisms differ significantly.

Lessons Learned for Chiang Rai Province

Chiang Rai, situated in Thailand's Golden Triangle in the north, is distinguished by its cultural diversity and natural landscapes, including mountain ranges, rivers, and fertile valleys that attract both domestic and international tourists. Combined with landmarks like Wat Rong Khun and the Black House Museum, these assets position Chiang Rai as a destination with significant tourism potential. Infrastructure investments in the airport, road systems, and public transport have further enhanced accessibility, strengthening its role in Thailand's tourism economy. Its ethnic communities—such as the Akha, Hmong, and Lisu—preserve distinct traditions, rituals, and crafts that enrich the province's cultural identity and provide a strong foundation for ethnic and eco-tourism, and strengthen the province's already substantial tourism potential.

Despite these strengths, the management of ethnic tourism in Chiang Rai remains comparatively fragmented, unlike the structured coordination observed in the Xijiang case. While cultural heritage and eco-tourism initiatives operate through homestays, craft demonstrations, and trekking programs, they are not embedded in a unified poverty alleviation framework. Cultural commodification in many highland communities has already taken place through long-standing performance tourism and externally organized tour circuits, with limited community control over pricing and representation. In addition, revenue distribution remains uneven, as external tour operators and urban-based businesses often capture a significant share of profits. Lessons from Xijiang do not suggest replication, but selective institutional adaptation. Specifically, Chiang Rai could strengthen: (1) coordinated provincial-level planning mechanisms, (2) formalized revenue-sharing arrangements within village tourism enterprises, and (3) clearer spatial planning guidelines for highland tourism zones. Diversifying rural income beyond tourism—through agro-processing or value-added agricultural production—would also reduce over-dependence on visitor flows.

1. Tourism Potential of Chiang Rai and Contextual Parallels with Guizhou

The integration of Chiang Rai's cultural and ecological assets into a systematic poverty alleviation strategy remains limited. In Guizhou, tourism expansion was embedded within the Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign, supported by dedicated fiscal transfers and vertically

coordinated implementation. In contrast, Chiang Rai operates within Thailand's administrative structure in which the central government appoints provincial governors in Bangkok, and tourism policy responsibilities are dispersed across multiple ministries and local administrative organizations. This produces overlapping mandates and weaker policy coherence at the provincial level.

Both Guizhou and Chiang Rai feature ethnic communities with distinctive traditions and crafts that attract cultural tourists. However, while Guizhou formalized village-level zoning by concentrating commercial activities outside core residential clusters and regulating guesthouse density, Chiang Rai lacks consistent enforcement of comparable spatial planning in many highland areas. Eco-tourism expansion in Chiang Rai often occurs through incremental private initiatives rather than integrated land-use planning, increasing pressure on environmentally sensitive mountain zones.

As peripheral regions with histories of economic marginalization, both provinces have turned to tourism as a diversification strategy. Nevertheless, Guizhou's model depended on substantial public investment and centralized administrative capacity, whereas Chiang Rai's tourism sector operates primarily through market-driven expansion and decentralized local initiatives. "Decentralized policies" in this context refer not to strong provincial autonomy but to fragmented implementation across local administrative organizations, tourism authorities, and central agencies without unified strategic coordination. Therefore, "learning from Guizhou" should not imply institutional transplantation. Rather, it involves identifying transferable governance mechanisms—such as clearer revenue redistribution models, formalized cooperative structures, and structured visitor management—while recognizing that Thailand's fiscal capacity, administrative culture, and political structure differ significantly from those of the PRC.

2. Policy Adaptation in Chiang Rai

The Xijiang case demonstrates that tourism-based poverty alleviation can function effectively when embedded within a coordinated administrative and fiscal framework. However, the divergence between Guizhou and Chiang Rai is best explained not by cultural differences or tourism strategy alone, but by differences in governance structure, administrative capacity, and fiscal organization.

Chiang Rai's highland areas are ecologically fragile due to steep slopes, shallow soils, seasonal monsoon runoff, and proximity to protected forest reserves. Rapid construction of guesthouses or road expansion in such terrain increases risks of landslides, water contamination, and biodiversity loss. Unlike Xijiang, where construction density and building style were centrally

regulated under provincial authority, land use in Chiang Rai often involves overlapping classifications—forest reserve land, community land, and informal settlements—complicating enforcement. While zoning regulations are theoretically feasible, effective enforcement requires administrative continuity and coordination between the Department of National Parks, local administrative organizations (TAOs), and provincial offices. In practice, regulatory oversight in mountainous border areas can be inconsistent due to resource constraints and political sensitivity surrounding land tenure. Therefore, environmental zoning in Chiang Rai must be accompanied by improved cadastral clarity, transparent land-use mapping, and strengthened monitoring capacity—conditions that are administratively demanding.

Community-based tourism is frequently presented as empowering; however, in many highland communities in Thailand, cultural commodification through staged performances and ethnic village tourism has existed for decades. Tourism income has already reshaped local economies, and some households are heavily dependent on visitor flows. Encouraging further tourism expansion without economic diversification risks deepening vulnerability to external shocks, such as pandemics or geopolitical instability. Unlike Guizhou, where tourism was integrated into a broader poverty alleviation strategy backed by state subsidies and infrastructure guarantees, Chiang Rai villages often rely on private tour operators and seasonal market fluctuations. Therefore, policy should not merely expand community tourism, but instead promote mixed livelihood models that combine agriculture, handicraft production, and small-scale processing industries. Community cooperatives may enhance bargaining power, but they must address internal inequality, as better-connected households often capture a disproportionate share of tourism revenues. Without transparent governance at the village level, participation risks reproducing hierarchy rather than reducing it.

In Xijiang, private investment operated within a framework shaped by strong state oversight and public ownership of key assets. In Chiang Rai, private operators—particularly external investors—often control transportation networks, marketing platforms, and high-end accommodation facilities. As a result, a substantial share of tourism revenue may be captured outside local communities. Public-private partnerships could enhance professionalism and market access, but contractual design becomes critical. Mechanisms such as mandatory local employment ratios, community development funds financed through tourism levies, or revenue-sharing agreements tied to licensing could mitigate revenue leakage. However, implementing such mechanisms requires regulatory clarity and political will, both of which vary across Thai provinces.

The most significant structural constraint lies in Thailand's administrative system. The Ministry of Interior appoints provincial governors, and policy authority over tourism is distributed

across multiple national agencies. Local administrative organizations possess limited fiscal autonomy and depend on centrally allocated budgets. This differs sharply from the PRC's vertically integrated administrative hierarchy, in which provincial and county officials operate within unified policy campaigns supported by performance evaluation mechanisms. In Thailand, bureaucratic turnover, inter-agency competition, and fragmented mandates can dilute policy coherence. Establishing a Tourism Collaboration Board may enhance dialogue, but unless it possesses formal decision-making authority or budgetary control, it risks functioning as an advisory body without implementation power. Sustainable reform would require institutional embedding within existing provincial planning frameworks, rather than the creation of parallel structures.

Finally, tourism reform in Chiang Rai must navigate entrenched interests, including tour operators, landowners, and local political networks. Unlike Xijiang, where strategic direction was enforced within a centralized governance system, Thai provincial reforms must operate within negotiated political environments. Therefore, adaptation of the Xijiang experience should be understood not as institutional transplantation, but as selective incorporation of mechanisms—such as clearer zoning principles, structured revenue-sharing models, and formalized monitoring—while acknowledging Thailand's administrative culture and fiscal limits.

Conclusion

The central question guiding this study has been whether the Xijiang Model of tourism-based poverty alleviation can be meaningfully transferred to Chiang Rai. The comparative analysis suggests that direct transplantation is not feasible. The effectiveness of the Xijiang Model was grounded in institutional conditions specific to the PRC: vertically integrated administrative authority, centralized fiscal mobilization, coordinated zoning enforcement, and performance-based bureaucratic oversight. These structural features enabled policy coherence, rapid infrastructure deployment, and regulatory compliance at scale.

By contrast, Chiang Rai operates within Thailand's administratively centralized yet functionally fragmented governance system. Provincial authorities possess limited fiscal autonomy, tourism policy responsibilities are distributed across multiple national agencies, and enforcement capacity in mountainous highland areas is uneven. These structural differences represent the primary constraint on transferring the model in its original form. The divergence between Guizhou and Chiang Rai is therefore less a matter of cultural variation and more a function of governance architecture and state capacity. However, selective adaptation remains possible. Mechanisms such as clearer spatial planning principles, structured revenue-sharing arrangements, formalized community cooperatives, and regulated public-private partnerships can be incorporated within

Thailand's institutional framework. However, their implementation will depend on inter-agency coordination, sustained budgetary commitment, and political willingness to regulate private-sector dominance in the tourism economy. Without institutional embedding, policy replication risks remaining rhetorical rather than operational.

The findings thus reposition ethnic tourism not as an inherently transformative tool, but as a governance-dependent strategy. Where administrative coherence, fiscal support, and enforcement capacity align, tourism can contribute to poverty reduction and cultural revitalization. Where governance remains fragmented, tourism expansion may generate uneven benefits, ecological pressure, and intensified commodification. In this sense, the comparison between Xijiang and Chiang Rai contributes to broader debates on sustainable tourism and regional development by demonstrating that development models cannot be separated from the political-administrative systems within which they operate. Institutional structure—not cultural asset endowment—emerges as the decisive variable shaping outcomes. Ethnic tourism's developmental trajectory is therefore contingent, not universal.

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