Chapter 6
Sustainable Tourism in Emerging Regional Destinations in China: Stakeholder Participation in Genhe

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Abstract Much of the attention in tourism related to China has been focusing on Chinese outbound tourists and their behaviour. What appears to be under investigated is the tourism industry within China, especially regional tourism development and its sustainability during industrial transition period. Based on preliminary research, this chapter presents a study which showcases regional areas pursuing sustainable tourism growth in recent years. Drawing largely from the data on the events and activities developed by an emerging natural tourism destination (Genhe, China) throughout a four-year span, the chapter provides a snapshot of how the region has evolved from a forestry industrial area to an innovative tourism destination. This chapter describes how the different stakeholders participate in achieving the region's development goals – environmental, social and economic sustainability. By analysing their tourism development initiatives, this chapter contributes to the understanding of tourism sustainability in Asia, particularly in the emerging regions. It also provides implications and recommendations for the future of the tourism development in the pursuit of sustainability in the regions that are not yet exploited.

Keywords Sustainable tourism · Chinese tourism · Regional tourism · Emerging destinations · Tourism stakeholders · Sustainability

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6.1   Introduction

Much of the attention in sustainable tourism has been focusing on Western societies. What appears to be under investigated is the tourism and its sustainability within developing nations where tourism has increasingly been used as a mean to boost or diversify the economy. Prior to COVID-19, one of the most-watched markets is China's inbound and outbound tourism markets (Ma, 2020). It is reported that over 6 billion domestic trips were made in China in 2019 and the expenses of domestic tourism reached 5.73 trillion Yuan (Ma, 2020). As the domestic travel booms, a number of regions in China have geared up to promote tourism under the "Beautiful China' umbrella, but with a different theme for each area. However, sustainability has not been the top priority for some developments, such as Xinyang tea tourism (Cheng et al., 2012).

Although a significant income discrepancy exists between inland and coastal regions, some effort has been made to improve regional economic development and lesson such inequalities. Many inland regions possess natural advantages but have experienced difficulties in developing them in a balanced and sustainable way. To support the development of these regions, national policies provided some directions in tourism development, such as poverty alleviation through tourism, industrial transition plans and sustainable development agendas. Regional destinations in this chapter refer to areas that are usually underdeveloped and peripheral, with common characteristics of geographical remoteness, lack of innovation, underdeveloped infrastructure, slow socio-economic development, and receive far fewer tourists than national tourism icons and popular touristic destinations (Lemky, 2006; Zhang & Murphy, 2009). This chapter provides an analysis of the development of such regions with the focus of Genhe as a natural tourism destination.

Genhe, a county-level city of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, is located at the Greater Khingan Range of the north-eastern China. The region has the highest forest coverage rate (87.36%) in China. The city administers the largest native coniferous forest in the frigid zone in China. The destination management organisation (DMO) of Genhe Holiday Tourism Co. Ltd. (Genhe HTCL) will be used as an example to showcase the development of sustainable tourism in an emerging regional destination of China during the industrial transition time. This chapter is based on a desk-based research, investigating the participation of different stakeholders in developing a regional rural tourism destination by reviewing existing activities undertaken by the DMO. The case will be analysed based on the Triple Bottom Line framework for sustainable tourism development (Stoddard et al., 2012). This framework emphasises the economic growth for a tourism organisation, as well as considers less quantifiable indicators that measure social and environmental impacts. Guided by the framework, the analysis and discussion will centre around the three pillars, i.e., profit, people and planet.

6.2   Sustainable Tourism in Regional China

Since China's economic reform in 1978, tourism has been uplifted and played an important role in its socio-cultural diversification and economic development (Sofield & Li, 2011). Tourism has been elevated and integrated into the transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy through implementing specific government policy and planning (Li et al., 2020; Sofield & Li, 2011). Analysing recent Five-Year Guidelines for National and Economic and Social Development of China, Li et al. (2020) found that tourism has been used as one of the means of balancing regional disparity between the interior west and coastal east. In addition, the development of tourism has been utilised to maintain national unification, and to build state image and soft power (Li et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). Like many countries in the world, tourism in China is now advocated as a way to diversify the economy in underdeveloped regional areas by providing alternative sources of employment and income in times of downturn in traditional industries such as forestry, mining and agriculture.

Tourism industry attributes its rise to China's cultural and political heritage, and the value systems which have powerful influence in decision-making in tourism planning (Sofield & Li, 2011). Sofield and Li (2011) has explored macro-level tourism governance of China's evolving regime of planning for tourism and focused on the role of the state and its governance systems. The state government has highlighted the importance of product diversification and differentiation in achieving the sustainability of the tourism industry, and accordingly, the four key areas – rural tourism, *Hongse* (red) tourism, eco-tourism and cultural tourism the focus of development. Sofield and Li (2011) claim that the sustainable tourism development in China has shown to have had positive influences on transport, wildlife and natural heritage conservation and regional development. However, tourism resources and levels of development among different regions throughout the country are highly unbalanced. Furthermore, although efforts have been made to reduce the nation's ecological footprint, the environmental problems brought by the economic growth is still a critical issue faced by the country, which consequently affect the tourism industry (He et al., 2018, 2020).

Since the early 2000s, tourism has been emphasised by Chinese government to revitalise the development of the north-eastern industrial based provinces, as well as the development of West China (Li et al., 2020). Compared to the wealthy eastern and southern coastal regions of China, these places are regarded as underdeveloped and disadvantaged regions which suffer from labour leakage, lacking investment and infrastructure, lower educational level and vulnerable environmental situation. The development of the tourism industry has been used as an intervention by the government to raise living standards in the comparatively poorer provinces (Sofield & Li, 2011). Tourism is a tool to alleviate poverty in many inland regions (Zeng & Ryan, 2012). For instance, the policy on cessation of logging of natural forests allows eco-tourism to be adopted as one of the potential major sources of income by

forestry departments all over the country. Other revenue streams have also been explored, such as e-commerce development for agricultural products (Cui et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2020).

6.3   Tourism Sustainability from Stakeholders' Perspectives

Stakeholder is referred to as "any person or group with an interest in the procedural and/or a substantive aspect of the organisation's activity" (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p. 67). Literature in business management and public administration laid the foundations for studying the current concepts on stakeholders in tourism and the roles of stakeholders in tourism development (Byrd & Gustke, 2007). One of the earlier works in stakeholder theory is based on Freeman's model (1984). In his work in strategic management, Freeman emphasises the importance of stakeholders to the success of business organisations. His work has been further extended within the tourism studies focusing on the relationship and management of stakeholders within a destination (e.g. Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Waligo et al., 2013).

Sustainable tourism aims to achieve tourist satisfaction and long-term economic growth with minimised environmental and cultural damage to the region (Lane, 1994). When a destination adopts such philosophy, it tends to use a stakeholder approach to "conserve and preserve natural resources, protect local culture, satisfy demands of industry, provide improved living standards of residents" (Theobald, 2012, p. 231). Sustainable tourism addressed different issues and interests of a range of actors (e.g. industry, guests, communities). In a broader sense, tourism literatures have focused on four major stakeholders, including tourists, residents, business owners, and local governmental officials (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2007). Much research investigating the relationship between stakeholders and tourism has focused on the perceptions and attitudes of individual stakeholder groups in destination development (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Pizam et al., 2000). From a slightly different angle, Timur and Getz examined the network of inter-relationship of critical stakeholders (government, community, and tourism and hospitality industry) in their studying of sustainable urban tourism development (Timur & Getz, 2008).

The relationship among different stakeholders has been found inconsistent in empirical studies. Cheng and her colleagues highlight that consideration should be given to each stakeholder/group without one being given priority over others in their tea tourism investigation (Cheng et al., 2012). Interestingly, based on the empirical study in urban tourism by Timur and Getz (2008), it is found that local government and destination marketing or management organizations are perceived to hold the greatest legitimacy and power over others in destination development, but there is a lack of 'bridges' between the three clusters of industry, government, and community. In a similar but more specific context, Theobald found that the industry could be the dominant player in urban destinations whereas the local authorities might be dominant in rural and peripheral areas (Theobald, 2012). Therefore, power imbalances do exist in managing all types of destinations. This is consistent with

Mitchell's proposition on power legitimacy in the management environment (Mitchell et al., 1997).

In the tourism context, the DMO needs to appreciate all the stakeholders who have interests in the operation of the destination management, from planning, process, delivery to the outcomes of the tourism service (Sautter & Leisen, 1999). Different stakeholders may have different levels of interest in a DMO, as well as levels of power and influence on the decision-making process of the DMO. Because of the inevitable involvement of stakeholders, it is important to identify multiple tourism stakeholder groups and their participation.

There are various stakeholder models being proposed in tourism studies. In the study of film tourism, Sautter and Leisen (1999) provide a simplistic example for identifying stakeholders of tourism planning. The key stakeholders in their study include DMOs, the local community, tourists, tourism businesses and the film industry. However, these stakeholders are not homogenous entities and there are significant overlaps between them. For example, local community residents own local businesses, and local communities are involved in the management of the destination.

Upon examining various frameworks, Wheeler's work, although initially developed in a European context, is widely adopted in tourism research and is considered to resemble to the case at hand to a greater extent (Wheeler, 1992). Wheeler's stakeholder model is based on an empirical research and is illustrated in Fig. 6.1. She identified a number of stakeholders with which a tourism marketeer faces in the local government environment (Wheeler, 1992). It provides a comprehensive list of stakeholders and demonstrates the issues existing among them. For the purpose of
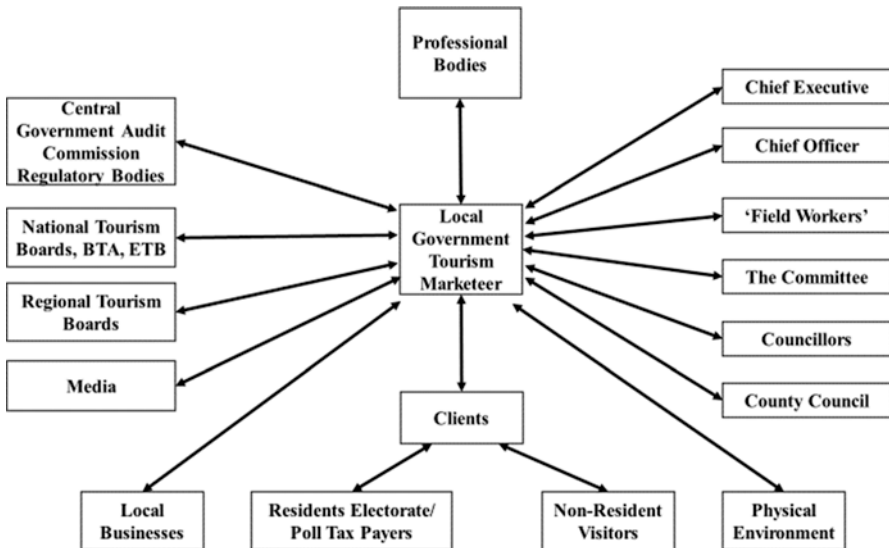

Fig. 6.1 The stakeholder concept in relation to the local government tourism marketeer (Wheeler, 1992, p. 228)

the following discussion, not all stakeholders are investigated in depth in our context. The focus here lies in the key stakeholders that cooperate closely in achieving each of the three pillars of sustainability tourism.

6.4 Destination Management Organisation (DMO) in Context

DMOs play a central role in sustainable tourism development as among their key roles is the management of relationships between stakeholders and the marketing and promotion of a destination. DMO in this case refers to Genhe Holiday Tourism Co. Ltd. (Genhe HTCL). Genhe HTCL is essentially a government invested entity with the headquarter located in Genhe. It was established with the strategic alliance of Inner Mongolia Forest Industry Refco Group Ltd. and six Forestry bureaus in Genhe, Jinhe, Alongshan, Mangui, Derbur and Mordoga. Genhe HTCL manages the north region of Greater Khingan Range in Inner Mongolia which includes multiple state-level tourism scenic attractions. These areas are also the key to the regional nature/ecotourism development. Currently Genhe HTCL operates with two major subsidiaries – Genhe Wetland Park and Genhe Tour Operator. The entity was formed with two main objectives: to preserve the natural environment and to gain economic benefit through promoting the nature/ecotourism in the region. Genhe Wetland Park presents the most intact and typical temperate wetland eco-system (Genhe-Government, 2020a). It is also known as the 'Qomolangma of China's Environmental Education' and the 'China's Cold Pole Wetland Natural Museum' thanks to its diverse collection of wetland vegetation, plantation and wildlife. The Wetland Park management is particularly responsible for conservation, environmental monitoring and protection of the biosphere within the region.

DMOs have a high interest and high power in influencing the development of a tourism destination because it represents a new opportunity. Different from DMOs in many Western tourism destinations, Genhe HTCL is essentially a profit-driven entity, yet is liable for conserving the region which they promote as a tourism product. Genhe HTCL has been involved in investing and developing a wide range of tourism products, such as RV self-driving camping site, conference centre, wildlife watching tour, white-water rafting, golf course, wild fruit picking, outdoor sports training, and science education walkway. Tours were organised in themes of Alpine Ski Orienteering (a well-known novel on which the story of movie The Taking of Tiger Mountain is based) in Greater Khingan Range, leisure and ethnic cultural experience, extreme cold challenges, etc.

The establishment of Genhe HTCL is different from most Western DMOs which are essentially non-profit organisations. Its unique position in the development of this regional tourism could be traced back to some historical and regulatory events. The development of the Greater Khingan Range in the past 60 years is a showcase of responding to China's move to modernisation as a priority over environmental

considerations (Sofield & Li, 2011). From 1952 to 2015, the Greater Khingan Range forestry of Inner Mongolia was primarily used for commercial logging. It provided 200 million cubic meters of timbers and contributed 20 billion Yuan to the country's economy. However, the commercial logging of natural forests officially stopped since April 2015 following the call by President Xi under the campaign 'Green water and green mountains are golden and silver mountains'. Tourism has since come into play in the forestry-run reserves, and gradually replaced logging as the main source of income in the region.

6.5 Research Method

A desk-based research was used for this exploratory study. Secondary textual data related to the development of sustainable tourism in the region was used to accommodate this research. Data used for this analysis comprised of activities and events (documented as memorabilia) undertaken by the DMO – Genhe HTCL at a four-year span from 2016 to 2019. Informal conversations with staff at Genghe HTCL were also used as data to support the analysis of this study. This particular time-frame was selected due to the ban on commercial logging imposed in 2015 when tourism started to be accentuated in the policymaking of the area. It also excludes the potential impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the domestic tourism market. Desk-based research has been used previously by Heitmann (2010) when exploring stakeholders and mapping out their interrelationships in her study of film tourism for sustainable planning and development.

The first step was the use of content analysis to identify major stakeholder groups that the Genhe HTCL engages, by adapting to Western stakeholder's theories and frameworks (Freeman, 1984; Wheeler, 1992). Operationally, the data documents were collected directly in its original Chinese language format. The two bilingual authors translated the data into English for analysis. The translationed data were reviewed separately, and the discrepancies were discussed to ensure the quality of the data. At the second stage, the activities and events were categorized according to the stakeholders they involved. The three pillars of sustainability were then added to the analysis as the third dimension. As an illustration, Table 6.1 provides a snapshot of the analysis.

The analysis reveals that many stakeholders have participated in these activities differently, even though they belong to the same stakeholder group, such as community and decision-makers (as categorised in Western literature). Particularly, the role of the state government and its tourism governance system are worth further research. In the next section, we will discuss the key stakeholders and their participation in achieving the environmental, social, and economic sustainability in the region, as well as the relationships between different stakeholders and the DMO – Genhe HTCL.

Table 6.1 Illustration of data analysis

Year	Activity examples	Sustainability pillar	GOV	BUS	COM	NGOs	Media
2016	Genhe Wetland Park organising wetland themed seminars at the Genhe No. 2 Primary School	Social Environmental			X		
2016	Global Environmental Facility (GEF) regional conference, fieldtrip, experts/consultants visiting Wetland Park	Environmental	X			X	
2017	National Youth Chinese Wrestling Summer Camp	Social			X		
2017	Capital Normal University (Beijing) fieldtrip to Genhe Wetland Park	Environmental				X	
2018	BMW Customer Test Drive experience event at Genhe Wetland Park	Economic		X			
2018	Genhe Forestry Bureau organising voluntary tree planting activity	Social Environmental	X		X		
2019	Hunan TV network filming the reality show 'Our Masters' at Genhe Wetland Park	Economic					X
2019	'Pole of Cold' branding series activities: Snow and Ice Festival	Economic Social	X	X	X		

Note: *GOV* Government, *BUS* Business, *COM* Community, NGOs Non-government organisations

6.6   Findings and Discussion

Focusing on the DMO, its stakeholders and their activities are analysed based on the Triple Bottom Line framework of sustainable tourism development (Stoddard et al., 2012). Guided by the framework, the analysis and discussion center around three pillars, i.e., environment (planet), social (people) and economic (profit) considerations of the Genhe HTCL. The participation of various stakeholders are explained with examples. The stakeholder groups are identified adapting Wheeler's model (Wheeler, 1992), illustrated in Fig. 6.2. This model does not imply any bilateral relationship or power which exists among them. The complexity of these relationships warrants a more comprehensively designed research requiring a variety of data sources, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter.
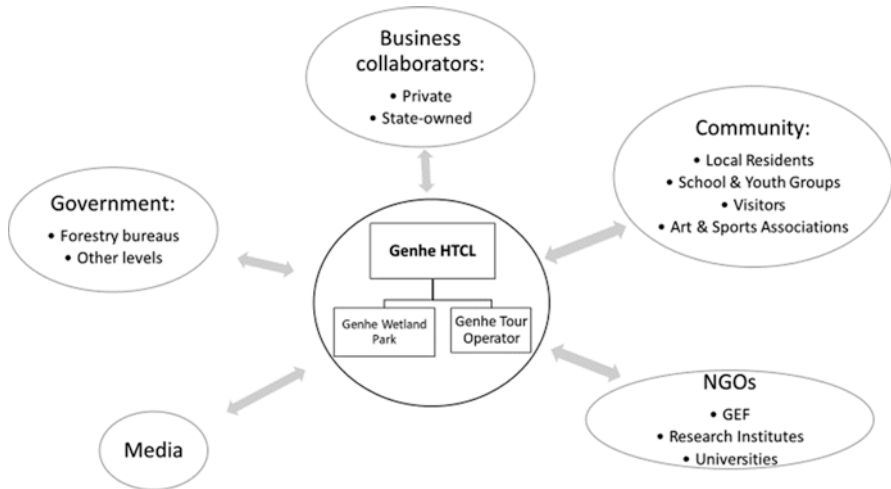
Fig. 6.2 Genhe HTCL stakeholder group model

6.6.1 Environmental Sustainability

Genhe HTCL has been focusing on further developing and conserving the natural environment as the core component of tourism in the region. Building on the wetland, Genhe HTCL initiated and invested in the development of the restricted camp site which offers three types of accommodation experiences– RVs, wooden sheds and tents. Unlike many other natural attractions suffering from over-crowding and over-commercialisation (Huang & Pearce, 2016), the development of Genhe wetland remains at a small scale with environmentally friendly operations. The site is built in a selected area with a design to minimize the impact and damage to the nature. Facilities such as tents and RVs were allocated sparsely in the wetland, adopting the concept of minimal ground contact and removable structure which allows recovery of the vegetation as facilities rotate over time. Fig. 6.3 illustrates an example of adopting such an environmentally friendly approach. The wooden sheds were constructed over removable supporting frames or panels using minimal ground space. In addition to that, within the Wetland park, a wildlife sanctuary is established to ensure breeding of wildlife from the Greater Kinghan Range.

As aforementioned, Genhe Wetland Park is mainly responsible for the environmental protection and conservation. For instance, the Park temporarily closes during the forest fire season in October. A uniqueness of the case is that the tourism operation of Wetland Park is managed by the Genhe HTCL (a commercial entity), but the Park is registered as a unit under the Genhe Forestry Bureau. Due to the top-down policy over the green development is implemented in the region, this triangle relationship among the three entities enables the activities and practices of the Park to be undertaken with collaborative effort from all parties. The Park has been developed and managed in an ecologically sustainable way which meets the national
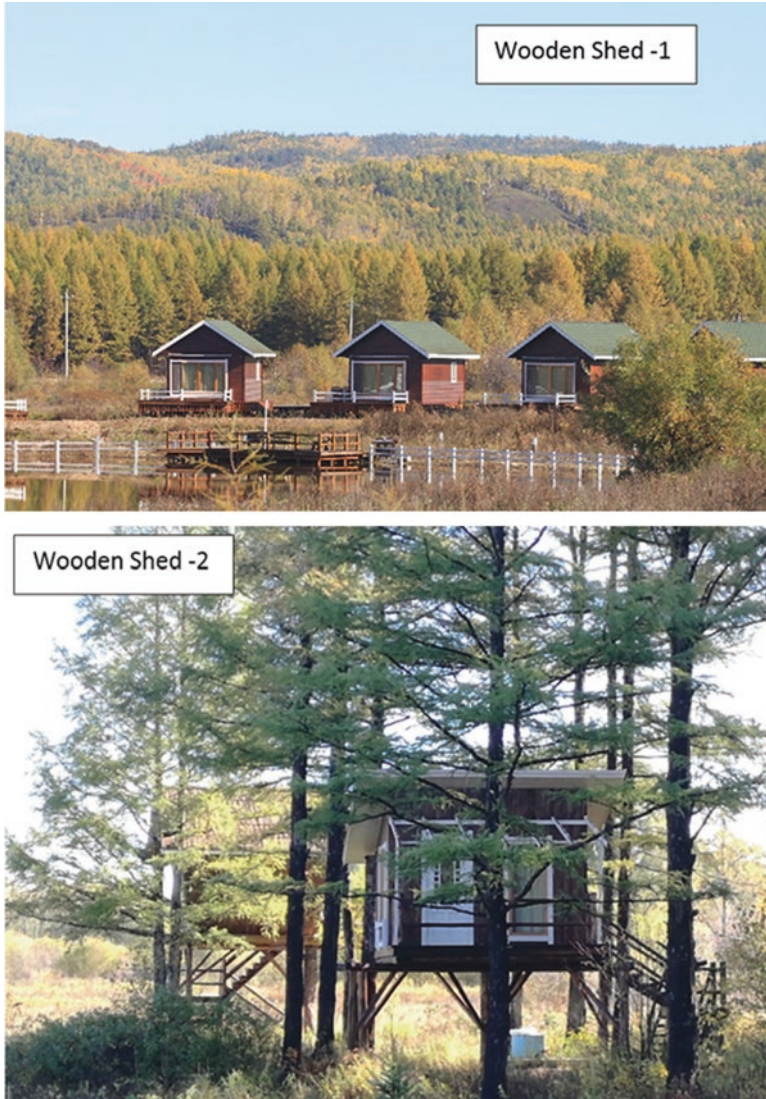
Fig. 6.3 Genhe Wetland camp site wooden sheds illustration (Photos taken by the authors)

standards. Engaging other government stakeholders, Genhe Forestry Bureau has organised training courses to upskill their employees on the aspects of enhancing capabilities of ecological protection, improving service quality to the public, and workplace health and safety.

Non-government organizations (NGOs) are another stakeholder group that participated extensively in the development of the tourism in the region. NGOs play a significant role in the initial Wetland Park planning stage by working closely with

the local forestry bureaus. For example, Global Environment Facility (GEF), an organization that helps tackle the planet's most pressing environmental problems, undertakes a project in the Great Khingan Range aimed at strengthening the management effectiveness of the protected wetland area, biodiversity and essential ecosystem services (GEF, 2020). During the five-year implementation of this GEF project, a range of exploratory and demonstrative projects were carried out around the themes of promoting biodiversity conservation, building capacity, improving protection and restoration technologies, enhancing publicity and education, and encouraging community co-management. The project has been reported as effectively improved the management capabilities of the forest management teams in this area, of which the environmental protection model has become replicable for other regions. Other NGOs such as public universities (e.g. Northeast Forestry University) and research institutes have acted as both collaborators and instructors, undertaking field investigations and providing monitoring and protection advice and guidance. This close collaboration could also be explained by the nature of the relationship between NGOs and the government bodies (here referring to Genhe Forestry Bureau), which is different from genuine NGOs in the Western context.

There appears to be very little initiatives involving communities of residents and visitors, particularly in the planning and development stage of the eco-tourism in the region. Although some tourist products were constructed for the use by this stakeholder group, Genhe HTCL has focused on educating the community on these initiatives as informational dissemination and encouraging participation than development.

6.6.2 Social Sustainability

The social dimension of sustainability represents the build of a wide range of social capital, which include improving trust, encouraging cooperation and collaboration, enhancing networks and supporting life-long learning (Stoddard et al., 2012). Some of the social sustainability indicators are "support for access and equity, pressure on services, pride and sense of belonging to the local area, support for cultural and artistic endeavours, regional showcase, and community health and safety issues" (Stoddard et al., 2012, p. 250). Different from environmental sustainability, Genhe HTCL involved the community more extensively in achieving social sustainability although mainly through participation. Genhe HTCL develops a variety of activities and events, yet the community has not been reported as providing input in the decision-making, such as consulting local residents or advocates in planning an activity. This aspect aligns with Xu and her colleagues' research on the evolving path of community participation in China which found that local residents lacked a channel to contribute to management and planning (Xu et al., 2019). Rather, in the case of Genhe, the communities are involved as participants who could potentially receive benefits from the sustainable development. Arguably, these actions build a closer relationship between the Genhe HTCL, local people and visitors.

One of the community groups is school children and youth groups. They are involved in the development of Genhe sustainable tourism as the beneficiaries. For instance, the staff from Genhe Wetland Park present public seminars and organise activities in a local primary school to educate students the knowledge on wetland. A few school Summer Camps catering to different hobbies such as sports and arts were organised in partnership with the Wetland Park so the students are plunged back into nature with these hobby-related activities. Largely attributed to its management of this natural environment, Genhe Wetland Park won the title of 'Hong Kong and Macau Youth Studying Base' in 2018. In an informal conversation, the director of Genhe Wetland Park points out that the Park priorities its contribution to the community through connecting with schools and engaging with them by raising awareness of wetland and enhancing their knowledge of the region. He states that,

> 'In the future, we will focus on building the Daxing'anling (i.e. Greater Khingan Range) nature educational projects for schools. We'll use the form of nature education to connect and integrate related resources surrounding the area.'

Consistent with literature in building social sustainability, the participation of such activities increases the environmental awareness and builds cultural capital for young people in the society (Shelley et al., 2019). Community participation is also seen in art, sports, literacy and festivals. The Genhe HTCL has co-organised photography competitions and tours targeting literacy and arts associations around the theme of the Wetland Park sceneries. These activities aim to provide a platform for the artists to showcase their work.

As the region is experiencing the transition from relying heavily on forestry logging to sustainable tourism, the history is an important component of its cultural capital. Genhe HTCL makes an effort in preserving local cultural heritage in order to improve the cultural value of this tourism destination. For example, the 'Logging Cessation Memorial' landmark was built in March 2015 as the commemoration of the officially ending forestry commercial logging. Its surrounding forestry settings have now become an iconic cultural attraction within the region. This cultural heritage asset is an important element of Genhe sustainable tourism product.

Looking at the internal stakeholder –L employees, Genhe HTC organises study tours for the employees to visit other peer institutions to learn the skills to improve the service standard and management. Trainings on tourism knowledge and service quality were also provided to the staff in between tourism peak seasons. In addition, Genhe HTCL staff participate in activities hosted by Forest Bureau (government stakeholder) such as 'Voluntary Tree Planting' project, and 'Forest Management Protection and Cultivation Knowledge Trivia'. This again highlights the intertwined relationship between Genhe HTCL and government stakeholders.

6.6.3   Economic Sustainability

Traditionally, financial performance is used as economic indicators in the tourism industry. It includes sales revenue, profit, return on investment (ROI), and heads in beds, etc. (Stoddard et al., 2012). Other scholars consider that financial leakage out of the community, employment rate and availability of local credit to local business should also be applied in measuring economic sustainability (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). It is unclear from the data we use that how much Genhe HTCL activities and events have contributed to the local economy because the measurable economic indicators remain unpublished, such as hotel beds, ROI and direct employment. However, various collaborations among stakeholders have revealed that the Genhe HTCL as a DMO has the goal of raising the awareness of the region, marketing the destination, managing the supply side of the industry, and subsequently aims to gain profit through its tour operation subsidiary.

Place branding significantly contributes to tourism sustainability, and it especially activates the under-utilised tourism capacity during off-peak seasons. Being the officially labelled "the Coldest City" in China, Genhe recorded a temperature of −58 °C on its coldest day. Taking advantage of this fact, Genhe HTCL registered the brand 'China Pole of Cold'(中国冷极)'. A growing number of events and regular activities were hosted locally under the brand. The place branding and its subsequent marketing campaigns are able to attract more visitors and boost the destination awareness and economy (Ooi & Pedersen, 2010). Creative events such as 'Coldest Festival', 'Outdoor Hotpot', and snow and ice themed 'Winter Marathon' are organised. These events increased the livelihood and excitement among the local residents. Other events co-sponsored with Genhe HTCL also achieve similar results during off peak seasons, such as Summer Forest Marathon in Genhe Wetland Park which attracts over one thousand participants from interstate and local residents.

Stakeholders including businesses and enterprises have collaborated with Genhe HTCL in promoting and improving the destination. China Unicom Telecommunications Company, in achieving its smart tourism goal, provides a 5G platform for the Park. Luxurious car brands including BMW X3 and Aston Martin carried out customer test drive experience programs in the Park area in 2018 and 2019, taking advantage of the spacious landscape. Undoubtfully the awareness of the destination has increased, however, the impact of such activities on the natural environment and wildlife remain questionable. Apart from the business collaborations, Genhe HTCL has participated in several tourism product exhibitions at both regional and national levels to promote the Wetland Park. Another stream of marketing collaboration is through the engagement with the stakeholder of media. China Central Television network Channel 1 (CCTV 1) and Hunan TV network filmed reality shows in the Wetland Park featuring its scenery landscape. Genhe HTCL was responsible for forest fire control and environmental monitoring during the filming process. This emphasises the roles that Genhe HTCL play in both environmental protection and destination promotion.

Although the direct benefit cannot be assessed based on the scope of this study, the impact is ultimately targeted at economic enhancement. Indirect indicators such as the visitor number and income generated from tourism in the region can be used to assess its effectiveness of economic sustainability. The visitor number has increased from 1.05 million in 2017 to 1.35 million in 2019 with a growth rate of more than 13%. As a result, tourism income has also increased steadily from 1.46 billion Yuan in 2017 to 1.64 billion Yuan in 2019 with a growth rate of about 6% each year (Genhe-Government, 2020b).

Some activities were clearly developed to achieve both economic and social perspectives. In the transition time, the proliferation of tourism drives other sectors, as well as many other aspects in the society. For instance, many local artists, craftsmen and small businesses have gained economic benefit through entrepreneurship under the umbrella of local tourism initiatives such as local markets and souvenir shops. In the less developed northeast region of China, there are a large number of clusters of ethnic minorities. The diverse culture of the ethnic groups can become unique tourism resources if managed appropriately. In Genhe, the major indigenous group is the Ewenke ethnic tribe of Aoluguya which is recognised as 'the last hunting tribe and reindeer raiser of China'. Genhe HTCL creates ethnic cultural assets through building a 'Aoluguya Village' to preserve the indigenous culture as well as promoting the destination. The Village is now a major cultural attraction within the region. Local artists and craftsmen create artworks featuring indigenous themes and have them promoted/sold as souvenirs. Local businesses also produce reindeer products to profit from the expanded visitor market. Therefore, the development of tourism in the region enhances sustainability through the protected cultural heritage and increased environmental awareness and economic activities.

Based on this case in Genhe, it seems that tourism planning is mostly carried out in a top-down approach with imbalanced input from stakeholder groups, whereas non-government stakeholders contribute largely in the form of participation rather than development or decision-making. Collaborations exist between the tourism industry and other sectors, including forestry, sports, art and culture, education, media, research, wildlife protection, and commodities production. These interactions are an illustration of the coordinating power of centrally directed governance together with an effective market economy at work in China ((Sofield & Li, 2011). Our analysis uncovered the efforts in protecting ecosystems, indigenous environments, historical and cultural heritage.

6.7   Conclusion

This chapter provides a holistic view of how a regional tourism destination in China emerges and develops with the consideration of a variety of stakeholders. It uses the Triple-Bottom-Line framework for sustainable tourism development as a conceptual lens to evaluate the activities carried out in Genhe region. This case demonstrates the interventions by the government to use tourism as a major tool to raise

living standards and livelihood in the comparatively poorer north-eastern regions through investment in tourism infrastructure and participation of the stakeholders. Genhe HTCL, as a government-owned DMO, is essentially a profit-driven entity, yet it is liable for conserving the region's environment. The nature of its entity ensures that the tourism actions undertaken align with the national sustainable directions. The function of the local government in tourism development in Genhe can be explained based on the centralised political system and administration-driven development approach in China. The government at different levels plays very important roles in regional development, as found in the study of tea tourism in Xinyang (Cheng et al., 2012). Infrastructure improvement can only be implemented with the leadership of the government and is mainly invested by the government. Demonstrated in this case, the establishment, planning and operation of the Wetland Park are seen to be led by the government-owned DMO.

Although the key decisions including the industrial transition from forestry to tourism are largely made based on the input from the different levels of the government bodies, other non-government stakeholders are also involved in the development process through various forms and levels of participation. These include private businesses, state-owned enterprises, research institutes and universities, international NGOs, residents, DMO employees, youth groups and schools, art and sport associations, visitors, and media. The community's involvement is implicit in the tourism activities implemented by the DMO, though their role in the development of the destination is demonstrated through participation rather than planning and assessment. In this case, their participation in the activities such as social events, educational activities and collective workplace activities contributes to the social sustainability, and indirectly to the environmental sustainability.

Since the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 and the worldwide border restrictions, domestic tourism growth is predicted to be a new priority in China under the 'dual circulation' development pattern (i.e. centering on the domestic economy and aiming at integrating the domestic and global economies) (Zhu, 2020). Consequently, tourism in regional emerging destinations will have tremendous potential in becoming an economic driver for the less developed regions in China. Still at the early stage of the destination tourism development life cycle, the regional DMOs may consider more engagement with other stakeholders, especially communities, in the development phase to achieve sustainable goals in the long run. The chapter also suggests that the research on Chinese sustainable tourism needs to consider context-specific issues and history of the region as they may present distinct opportunities and challenges.

While this chapter provides an overview of how various stakeholders participate in a regional destination development, it would be interesting to undertake in-depth research in the future to study the members of communities in terms of their perspectives on the tourism planning in the region. The current study is based on an exploratory desk-based research using the memorabilia of local DMO to provide a snapshot of Genhe tourism in the industrial transition time with the pursuit of growing sustainably. Future research should incorporate the dynamics of the relationships among the stakeholder groups, and their motivations. This may be achieved

through a case study approach using a range of data sources such as interviews, observations and documents from different stakeholder groups. Such investigation will significantly contribute to the establishment of sustainable tourism in Asia.

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