


## Article

# Exploring the Factors of Rural Tourism Recovery in the Post-COVID-19 Era Based on the Grounded Theory: A Case Study of Tianxi Village in Hunan Province, China

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**Abstract:** Effective recovery of rural tourism in the post-COVID-19 era could consolidate achievements in poverty alleviation and promote rural revitalization in China. In order to explore the factors influencing the rural tourism recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, this explorative–qualitative study chose Tianxi village in Hunan province of China as a typical case, as it has been officially selected as one of the key national villages for developing rural tourism. It was found that the process of rural tourism recovery in the post-COVID-19 era consists substantially of the development and evolutionary resilience in rural tourism. In the proposed theoretical model, the governance capability of local governments, robustness of rural social networks, activeness of rural talent, innovativeness of development mechanisms, and persistence of resilience cultivation are all essential factors throughout this process. Evolutionary resilience of rural tourism could enable destinations to manage unpredictable crises and even to seize novel development opportunities.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; rural tourism; evolutionary resilience; Tianxi village



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## 1. Introduction

Following the initial outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the market economy was comprehensively affected [1]. With the sensitivity and vulnerability of the tourism industry it is weak in defenses against such public crisis events, and has been hit more seriously than other industries. As is evident, the COVID-19 pandemic has harmed the tourism industry as never before; outbound tourism is down, the development of tourism enterprises all over the world has ceased, and tourism suffers from unprecedented shocks [2]. Although the COVID-19 pandemic seems to continuously cause dramatic impacts on the tourism industry, this industry has progressed from total shutdown to gradual recovery. Today, as global epidemic prevention and control is trending towards normalization the tourism environment remains complex and changeable [3]. Tourism departments of most countries actively seek innovative development strategies in a crisis situation [4]. Therefore, the majority of tourism practitioners are looking for a new way out as changes in consumer behavior and tourism environment continue.

Regarding tourism in China in the post-epidemic era, most scholars are aware that the pandemic has led to a tendency of tourists towards health, relaxation, and short-distance domestic travel [5]. Rural tourism could satisfy this demand with respect to product and distance, and thus needs more attention in the post-epidemic era [6]. Moreover, rural tourism plays an essential role in Chinese rural strategy, and its sustainable development is of great value for consolidating poverty alleviation achievements and promoting the rural revitalization strategy and the realization of multiple goals [7].

Although academics have paid attention to the significance of rural tourism recovery in the post-COVID-19 era and research outcomes have been determined, a review of the literature shows that: the scope of most studies on tourism recovery is worldwide or

nationwide and consequently fails to deal with specific micro-level issues. Unlike the short-term or local disturbances of other crisis events, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a global and perennial impact on the travel industry. Meanwhile, rural tourism destinations are complex systems in which human and nature participate together, and thus related studies could be carried out from the perspective of integration and comprehensiveness, considering the correlation among all elements. In other words, it is necessary to construct a robust rural tourism system for the post-COVID-19 era. The relevant literature on China often involves the rural tourism market economy [8,9]; however, these theories are not competent enough to support the rural tourism recovery in the post-epidemic era. Accordingly, the factors that influence the recovery of rural tourism in the post-COVID-19 era along with ways to establish robust development mechanisms for the tourism system against the background of a normal anti-epidemic situation became the focus of this research.

Based on the aforementioned analysis, the present research aims to explore the factors involved in the rural tourism recovery in the post-COVID-19 era by applying grounded theory, choosing Tianxi village in Hunan province as a typical case. The overall goal is to determine an influence factor model to promote the recovery and sustainable development of rural tourism in the post-COVID-19 era. Furthermore, such study could enrich the existing research on rural tourism from a new perspective and improve the understanding of tourism recovery. At the same time, it can guide the government and other stakeholders to develop rural tourism in the normal stage of fighting COVID-19 and further promote the rural revitalization strategy.

Applying grounded theory, this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the available literature about the impacts of public crisis events on tourism and tourism recovery; Section 3 includes a description of the chosen case study along with three-level coding. The open coding generated 23 codes and 15 categories, while the axial coding extracted five themes. The selective coding summarized the core categories, and the story lines were thus developed. A theoretical model of the evolutionary resilience of rural tourism is proposed in Section 4, further discussion is provided in Section 5, and the paper is concluded in Section 6.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Crises in Tourism

The strong dependence of tourism determines that it is a sensitive and fragile industry, and vulnerable to political, economic, and social crises and even environmental changes [10]. Natural disasters, economic crises, terrorist attacks, public health emergencies, etc., always pose a threat to the sustainable development of tourism [11]. Crises in tourism refer to unexpected events that affect travelers' confidence in a destination or disrupt the normal operation of the tourism industry. Tourism crises can be divided into external emergencies and internal crises [12]. External emergencies are generally crisis events caused by irresistible factors including natural, economic, or social events, e.g., SARS, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2008 global economic crisis, etc. Relevant research is focused on recovery and renewal during or after the period of crisis events. The internal crises involve the loss of tourism or negative effects on its operation and development caused by mistakes in the development, management, and operation of tourism subjects or unreasonable allocation and mismanagement of resources. In this process, the role of the media in internal tourism crises is notable [13].

Research about the impact of public crisis events on tourism mainly involves crisis management and tourism crisis impact assessment. The research on tourism crisis management generally puts forward the following coping strategies regarding the process and characteristics of tourism crises: develop a contingency plan during the incubation period, pool resources during the crisis to reduce damage, and collect crisis feedback after the crisis is over. In particular, the position of information management in crisis management has proven to be crucial [14]. The assessment of tourism crisis impacts mainly includes

economic loss and damage to public image, and the relevant research method is usually quantitative analysis [15,16].

The COVID-19 pandemic belongs to the category of public health emergencies as a representative type of tourism crisis. It threatens both human health and the living environment. It is different from previous economic crises, terrorist attacks, earthquakes, and other seasonal short disasters; indeed, the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism system in both the temporal and the spatial dimensions is unprecedented. It is foreseeable that it will continue to pose risks to tourism destinations for a long time [17]. Thus, studying the impact of this public health crisis on tourism is conducive to the gradual recovery of tourism under the circumstances of epidemic prevention normalization.

## 2.2. Tourism Recovery

In the face of various challenges, how to cope with changes and maintain the vitality and development stability of the tourism system has become an important issue. Thus far, the research on tourism recovery has mainly applied the theory of “resilience” [18]. “Resilience” represents the ability of systems to respond to disturbances and the speed at which they return to their normal state. Holling [19] first combined resilience with ecology, and Adger [20] brought it from the natural realm into the social. Subsequently, resilience has been used to understand the adaptive and learning capacities of socio-economic management systems, and is increasingly coupled to the study of social ecosystem development. Scholars have extensively analyzed the cultivation of resilience in social ecosystems using adaptive cycle theory and Panarchy [21].

The tourism industry has strong resilience to bounce back to a well-balanced state. It is widely agreed that the resilience of tourism systems in the face of disasters and crises is of great research value. Studies about resilience usually focus on model construction, aiming to establish an extensible and adaptable elastic framework for crisis management [22,23]. In addition, tourism destination resilience measurement methods under environmental change have been widely explored [24].

In terms of research methods, restoration force models are mainly established by quantitative research to study how to restore the tourism system under the influence of natural and social disturbances. Less qualitative methods are used to focus on the influencing factors and mechanisms of tourism recovery. From the perspective of scientific issues, research into tourism ecological environment restoration and tourism destination image management occupies the majority of scholarly focus, and there are fewer studies on the overall recovery of destinations.

In the context of COVID-19, resilience correlation research may provide increased attention to the impact of the epidemic on tourists’ behavioral intentions and psychological stress [25,26]. There are few studies on resilience management methods and mechanisms from tourism itself. Therefore, there is a need to balance tourists and tourism subjects, local governments, and competent departments, which can represent an applied tool to promote the revival of tourism in crisis.

## 2.3. Evolution Resilience

Resilience is derived from the Latin word “resilire”, originally used to describe the stability of materials and their resistance to external shocks. With changeable situations and deepened understanding of evolutionary mechanisms, research on resilience has experienced development from engineering resilience to ecological resilience and further to evolutionary resilience.

Evolutionary resilience is a new view in which the theory of resilience has developed into a complex stage. It is defined as “the ability of a system to constantly adjust its socio-economic and institutional structure to adapt the external environment and maintain sustained growth” [27]. Evolutionary resilience is considered a dynamic process that emphasizes the possibility of creating new paths through continuous learning after damaged from external shocks. It states that recovery is not a system returning to its initial state;

rather, it reaches a stable state after change, adapts, and transforms, stimulated by complex conditions. This model can effectively explain and analyze the evolution and transformation of regions in a post-crisis period, and is suitable for the study of stability, adaptation, and development capability in the context of post-disaster recovery [28].

Evolutionary resilience as a concept is mainly used in regional governance and sustainable development. Relevant research includes the evolutionary mechanisms of system resilience, optimization of systems' internal elements, and improvement of resilience capability [29]. In general, resilient cities have been studied more than resilient villages.

At present, research on resilience focuses on the equilibrium theory of engineering resilience and ecological resilience. Most studies focus on the role of single resources in the region, ignoring the internal logic of resource association. However, rural systems have the function of developing production and life, and their vulnerability seems to be more obvious. Therefore, a reasonable mechanism could enhance governance capability and consolidate governance achievements. It is necessary to enrich and expand the context of resilience research and better explore the path of resilience governance in rural areas.

### 3. Method

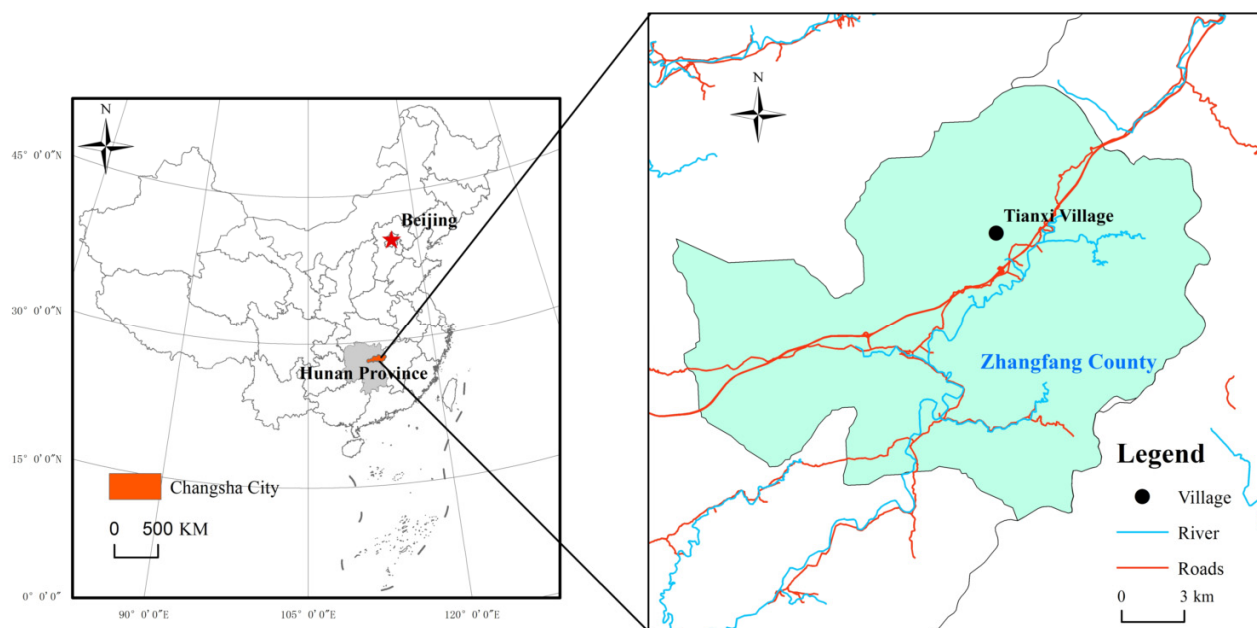
In order to explore rural tourism recovery in the post-COVID-19 era, an explorative qualitative approach was adopted. Grounded theory emphasizes the construction of the theory through a combination of induction and deduction to interpret complex phenomena. Accordingly, the grounded theory paradigm was adopted in this paper to carry out our research.

#### 3.1. Tianxi Village

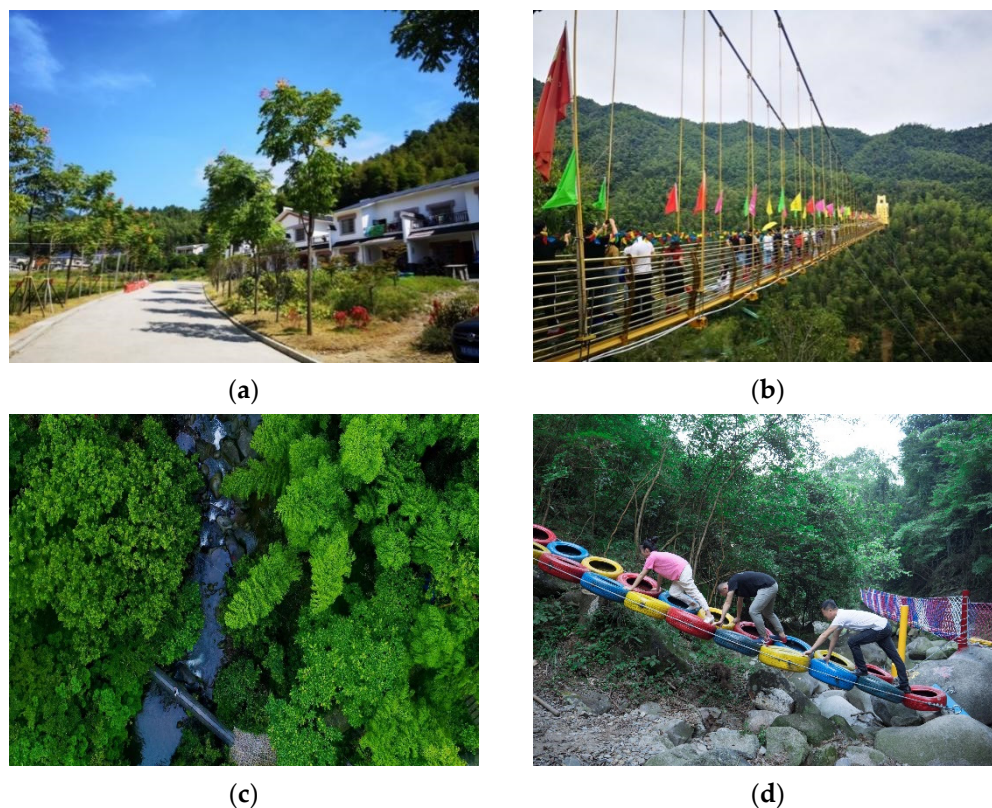
Hunan province is located in central China. It was the first area to propose targeted poverty alleviation and one of the main battlefields nationwide. Thirty-two tourism demonstration villages were included in 100 demonstration villages for poverty alleviation. This indicates that rural tourism is a major force for poverty alleviation in Hunan province. Changsha, the capital of Hunan province, is a megalopolis and an important central city on the middle reaches of the Yangtze River.

Tianxi village is located in Zhangfang county, Changsha city, Hunan province, as shown in Figure 1. The village covers an area of 48 square kilometers, and contains 1410 households and a population of 5100. It is a typical mountain village, with a remote geographical location, weak infrastructure, and lagging industrial development. The main source of income is pure agricultural work. Thus, it was rated as Hunan province's most poverty-stricken village, with 723 poor households, the most notable proportion of poor population in Changsha city in 2014. However, Tianxi village is rich in tourism resources, as shown in Figure 2. It contains 500 acres of primeval Yew forest, a geological site with quaternary glacial stone nodules, and a range of cultural heritage sites. Through consultations led by rural elites, it was proposed to raise funds to develop rural tourism through a crowdfunding model. After rural tourism scenic spots opened in July 2017 the village has received more than 340,000 visitors, with ticket revenues of more than RMB 17 million and villagers' income of more than RMB 38 million. By 2017, the villagers were considered lifted out of poverty, and in 2020, Tianxi was awarded the titles of "key national rural tourism village" and "Demonstration village of culture and tourism poverty alleviation of Hunan province" in recognition of its characteristic rural development through tourism revitalization.





**Figure 1.** The geographical location of Tianxi village in Hunan province, China.



**Figure 2.** Selected photographs of Tianxi village: (a) Folk houses; (b) the glass bridge; (c) aerial view of attractions; (d) tourists in action (images from: [http://www.ddcpc.cn/fp/201909/t20190925\\_618540.shtml](http://www.ddcpc.cn/fp/201909/t20190925_618540.shtml) (accessed on 16 November 2021); <https://www.icswb.com/h/158/20200720/667562.html> (accessed on 16 November 2021)).

In 2020, with the initial occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tianxi village along with all other tourist destinations suspended all tourism activities in response to the country's epidemic prevention policy, requiring the temporary closure of tourist attractions. Tourism revenues fell by 90% and the village was at risk of falling back into poverty.

However, as the epidemic was brought under control, Tianxi village assessed the situation and formulated a series of tourism recovery policies. Rural tourism rapidly recovered, and tourism revenue and the number of visitors has gradually increased.

It was considered possible to achieve the purpose of this study through a single case analysis, as to the case selected for study in this paper reflects the common attributes of certain rural tourism recovery phenomena to the maximum extent. Driven by the national rural revitalization strategy, the development model of rural tourism in Tianxi village is the same as that of most rural tourism development, that is, a leisure rural tourism model which relies on rural intrinsic resources and establishes recreational facilities to develop a diversified leisure tourism space. In this case study, the core categories of influencing factors for rural tourism recovery in the post-epidemic era can be purified, and the research findings can be applied to the recovery and development of rural tourism in the post-COVID-19 era.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore related events involving tourism development in Tianxi village. Interview questions included questions on the basic situation of rural tourism in Tianxi village, tourism development before/during/after the COVID-19 pandemic, and recovery measures and rural tourism development planning under the situation of regular epidemic prevention and control. Our sample size was fifteen participants, including ordinary villagers, staff in the scenic zone, hospitality employees, managers of travel companies, staff of the village committee, municipal staff, and rural homestay employers. This diversity enabled us to tap into a wide range of perspectives and experiences relevant to rural tourism recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. The details of each participant and their respective characteristics are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics.

No.	Gender	Age	Organization and Position
A1	Male	46	Village committee staff
A2	Male	43	Municipal staff
A3	Female	35	Rural homestay operator
A4	Female	28	Scenic zone staff
A5	Male	37	Villager
A6	Female	51	Hospitality operator
A7	Male	48	Villager
A8	Male	46	Travel Company manager
A9	Female	31	Travel Company manager
A10	Female	43	Hospitality operator
A11	Female	56	Villager
A12	Male	37	Scenic zone staff
A13	Female	26	Scenic zone staff
A14	Female	62	Villager
A15	Female	29	Villager

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded with the assistance of Nvivo 12. The initial fifteen interviews were analyzed to construct the path of rural tourism recovery in the post-COVID-19 era framework until reaching saturation.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The research process used classic grounded theory, which is thought the best inductive approach. First, the collected data were coded, followed by open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Through data analysis, theoretical categories that could reflect the factors of the rural tourism recovery path of Tianxi village after the COVID-19 pandemic were extracted. Theoretical saturation was carried out based on these data and the rural tourism recovery path model was obtained.

### 3.3.1. Open and Axial Coding

By sorting and integrating the data they were conceptualized and categorized to form a theoretical basis in order to ensure that they reflected the factors and mechanisms of post-COVID-19 tourism recovery. There were 23 data codes extracted. These were then further integrated, classified according to their generic concept, and refined into fifteen categories.

On the basis of the initial categories, comparison and aggregation of logical correlations were further carried out and five main categories covering the open coding gradually emerged and were extracted. These were the governance capability of local government, robustness of rural social networks, activeness of rural talents, innovativeness of development mechanisms, and persistence of resilience cultivation, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Open and axial coding results.

Concept	Corresponding Category	Sub-Category	Main Category
Financial support for the key national tourism village	Government support for rural tourism	Financial support from local government	Governance capability of local government
Investment in infrastructure			
Fund for rural homestay renovation			
Grant land use right	Overall planning of government	Institutional support of local government	Robustness of rural social networks
Project examination and approval	Close relationships between villagers	Good social relationships between villagers	
Information, interest and emotional links among villagers	Rural labor force return	Sense of belonging in rural communities	
Leading townsmen back home to build hometown	Infrastructure construction by villagers for free		Activeness of rural talents
Cleaning up illegal buildings voluntarily by villagers	Village elites' pioneering work	Rural elites' pioneering and demonstration	
Cleaning trails voluntarily by villagers	Elites' return and demonstration		
Pioneering work in upgrading rural homestay facilities	Enhancing communication and inspiration among young talent	Sustainable talent cultivation	Innovativeness of development mechanisms
Business elites' leading to return home and develop tourism	Building a prospective talent team		
Hold round-table meetings of young talent	Party building and governance informatization	Innovative party building and governance model	
Dedication, dreams, and financial foundation	Development of new rural tourism models	Innovative tourism development model	Persistence of resilience cultivation
On-the-job training for professionals	Stimulating and releasing the vitality of tourism consumption		
Party building and micro-grid	Environmental protection	Ecological and environmental protection and improvement	
Tourism and education	Living resources conservation	Conservation of biological diversity	Persistence of resilience cultivation
Tourism and health	Developing promising professional farmers	Improving employment skills of the labor force	
Tourism and culture			
Discount for tourists			
Orchid village			
Picking up garbage and building beautiful Tianxi (no littering; reducing/reusing/recycling program)			
Sending stone frogs back to nature			
Taking live courses/training on a regular basis			

### 3.3.2. Selective Coding

Twenty-three concepts and five main category elements were further refined and summarized, and the core category "Construction of evolution resilience of rural tourism" was finally extracted.

On the basis of the aforementioned analysis, the following storyline was revealed, and described. The rural tourism system of Tianxi village was in a stable stage before it was hit by the crisis, then stagnated due to the occurrence of COVID-19. In the face of the complexity of this crisis, multiple subjects described the main advantages and self-organization ability that enabled the village to respond actively. As a central subject, the local government carried out overall management and system maintenance, creating

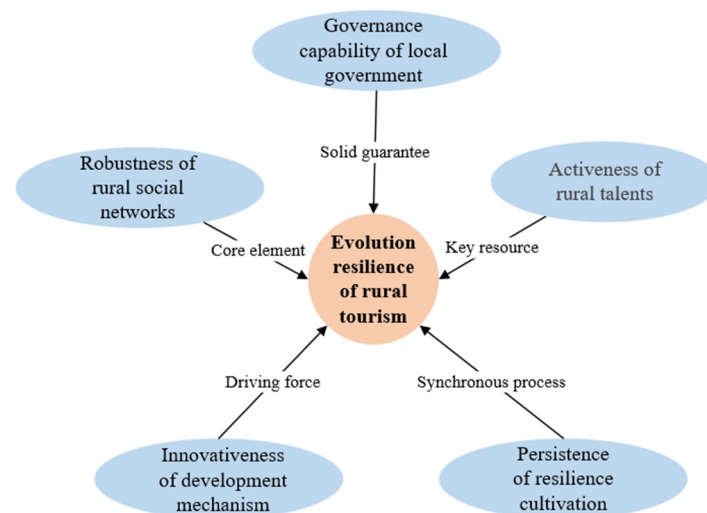
a reassuring environment for both the local tourism market and villagers. The interest community formed by the construction of good social relations pushed every villager to participate in the reconstruction process of the rural tourism system. Rural elites played an effective leading role in this situation. The uncertainty and long recovery process provided tourism subjects with sufficient chances to learn and adapt. Through independent learning and training, they attempted to create an innovative governance and tourism development mode. A long-term adaptive and resilient tourism system was established to confront the intrusion and improve the village's adaptability to external changes.

Based on twelve news reports and network data, a theoretical saturation test was carried out. No new concepts appeared after concept mining. We consider that category mining was saturated in theory as nothing was able to supplement the existing categories

#### 4. Findings

The rural tourism recovery in Tianxi village in the post-COVID-19 era is essentially the construction process of evolutionary resilience. Rural tourism development in Tianxi village stagnated due to the impact of COVID-19. The previous tourism development model cannot adapt to such a crisis, and needs to be changed. Therefore, each subject must take the initiative to learn, seeking the possibility of creating a new development path and striving for adaptation and transformation of the system's structure and function.

According to the analysis in Section 3, the proposed theoretical model is shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** The theoretical model of evolutionary resilience of rural tourism.

##### 4.1. Governance Capability of Local Government

In the process of building evolutionary resilience, the government plays an important role in the implementation of policies, macro-environmental controlling, and guidance of the recovery of the tourism industry. The government plays a policy-leading role in rural poverty alleviation, and needs to achieve resilience governance for the continuous consolidation of achievements. Rural governance needs to fully coordinate the local government, markets, the public, and other forces [30]. In order to form an interconnected and complementary governance network and build an organic system enabling diversification and coordination, the integration capability of government is most important. Effective governance integrates resources based on policies and changes in the macro-level environment.

Government behavioral discipline can provide a good social environment for rural tourism development. First, it can ease the contradictions inherent in the human-land relationship and across industries in rural tourism. Second, the government's policy and financial support for rural tourism construction can promote the upgrading and renewal of



rural tourism. Third, a healthy and legal environment provides an open and well-suited development environment for rural tourism recovery.

The construction of evolutionary resilience in Tianxi village benefits from the establishment of dynamic monitoring and mutual aid mechanisms for preventing poverty and dealing with returning to poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, Tianxi village strengthened the initiative and targeted epidemic prevention and control by implementing quarantine policies and improving linkage mechanisms. On the other hand, with the change in the economic environment, the government optimized the management instruments and provided continuous policy and financial support as needed. As a municipal staff member stated,

*“We are the key national rural tourism village. The government could provide some continuous funding, policy support to invest in infrastructure construction, especially after the epidemic.”(A2)*

In order to dispel the psychological burden and anxiety of tourists with respect to the transmission of the virus at tourist destinations, the local government responded to the national epidemic prevention measures and formulated rural epidemic prevention mechanisms. The village set up a group for epidemic prevention and control, and online and offline data management methods were effectively combined and used. Basic epidemic prevention and control measures were implemented, such as temperature measurement, mask distribution, and epidemic prevention knowledge publicity. As a village committee staff member stated,

*“Both our party branch and young people have been involved in prevention and control. One is to follow the requirements to do our prevention and control, including temperature testing and mask disinfection, and the other is to prepare for the resumption of production.”(A1)*

In addition, the government implements the continuation and optimization of existing policies for the rural tourism development. They continued to invest in infrastructure construction and the development fund of key rural tourism villages, and provided assistance to impoverished families who became temporarily unemployed due to COVID-19, and to villagers who were at risk of returning to poverty.

#### 4.2. Robustness of Rural Social Networks

A rural social network refers to the interpersonal relationships established by individuals or groups in a specific way in rural social systems [31]. In contrast to the proposition of the “tragedy of the commons” argument, Dr Ostrom’s [32] proposed common pool theory states that collective activities based on trust can adjust and correct these behavioral patterns. The development of mechanisms of reciprocity, trust, and reputation can promote stakeholders to realize self-correction and adjust of organization behavior [33].

In the initial development of Tianxi village, a large proportion of the rural labor force left and the original rural relationship structure was dissociated. Different from other development models of rural tourism, Tianxi village invested in tourism projects through crowdfunding, generating a strong sense of belonging to the community. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic villagers spontaneously participated in the maintenance of tourism infrastructure, and such public activities effectively maintained the relationship network of the entire rural society. Villagers were able to obtain corresponding benefits from the rural social relationship network and became more and more dependent on this network, making the current rural society highly interrelated. As a villager stated,

*“After the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, the tourism development in my hometown was suspended. With the feelings of my hometown in mind, we discussed how to contribute to the rural development and open up a new road of tourism development.”(A7)*

Rural tourism is more prone to conflict of interest because of the diversity of stakeholders. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new type of rural neighborhood. This

new type of relationship is first manifested in the information relationship shared by neighbors on epidemic prevention policy, health, and daily life. Second, the interest relationship has been built on the basis of timely purchase and fair allocation of medical resources and daily living necessities. The neighborhood communication based on the information and interest relationship gradually developed emotional links. With the increased isolation period, these emotional links have gradually accumulated. This is manifested in social needs in terms of sharing and communicating during the isolation period and fighting the epidemic together [34]. As a villager stated,

*“Isolation at home may reduce our physical contact, but the communication between neighbors is more frequent than before. Some information will be shared, such as policies of open scenic spot. I think we are a team.”(A11)*

The rural tourism system has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the formation of a good social relationship network and their perception of the crisis the villagers promoted the formation of a community of interests for the recovery, contributing to the implementation of relevant post-COVID-19 policies and the realization of a joint recovery intention. Villagers voluntarily maintained and cleaned tourism infrastructure during the epidemic, and prepared to resume work and production at any time. As a villager stated,

*“The tourism income of our village has almost disappeared due to the impact of epidemic. We are all very anxious. We all think that it is important to restore tourism in the village and want to put forth our own strength and efforts.”(A15)*

#### 4.3. Activeness of Rural Talents

In the construction of rural evolution resilience, rural talent is the key resources for rural development and revitalization. To realize rural revitalization, talent revitalization needs to be realized first. Rural brain drain is a noteworthy fact in China. In recent years, with the development of urbanization in China more and more college students from rural areas are staying in cities. The young and strong labor force in villages come to cities to work for higher wages. People left living in the countryside are the elderly and school-age children with low working ability, which leads to the loss of rural elites and the stagnation of rural culture [35]. Under these circumstances, rural tourism leads to the villagers being willing to stay in their hometowns or return there to work. Encouraging talent to devote time and effort to rural tourism and creating a strong team of rural talent can promote a virtuous cycle in rural land, capital, and talents.

According to the guidance and requirements of the local government, Tianxi village implemented the talent policy according to local conditions. For example, they held formal/informal meetings with young talent, gathered outstanding young people who have worked and started businesses outside to know the current situation of tourism development in their hometown, and actively listened to suggestions on tourism recovery and development in the post-epidemic era. They encouraged talented people to return to their hometown and participate in construction. As a villager stated,

*“The occurrence of the epidemic has stopped the national tourism development, including our village. In the round-table meetings, I proposed that we could consider the future development of tourism from the perspective of health, and many people agreed with me.”(A15)*

An elite team was built based on three requirements: dedication, dream, and financial foundation. The village would take full advantage of the wealth, knowledge, experience, and other resources of rural elites, as hopefully they could play a leading and exemplary role in the process of restoring and developing rural tourism.

Through the bottom-up restoration of governance, the shortcomings of unidirectional efforts of government were overcome and effective communication channels were built between the government and villagers, especially the active rural talent, enabling the

various measures/policies of the government for post-epidemic recovery and development to be fully and efficiently disseminated. As a villager stated,

*“I used to be the founder of several enterprises. I heard that the development of tourism in my hometown had stagnated after the outbreak of the epidemic. With my feelings for my hometown, I went back to the village to join in tourism restoration. We discussed and planned how to better develop rural tourism under the circumstances of the epidemic.”(A7)*

#### 4.4. Innovativeness of Development Mechanisms

Modernization of rural governance is the institutional guarantee of economic and social development. To continuously improve the modernization level of rural governance, the innovation mechanism needs to be promoted.

In the process of overcoming disturbance due to external crisis, an innovative development mechanism is the driving force of rural system recovery and sustainable development. Tianxi village has implemented epidemic prevention and control policies to avoid close contact of human beings. At the same time, the party-building governance mode was innovative, and big data party-building governance was carried out in the form of party building and micro-grid implementation, which reduced interpersonal contact and facilitated communication of information and regulations among villagers in order to improve the efficiency of rural governance. As a municipal staff member stated,

*“We created a social governance form of “party building & micro grid”. This approach is an innovative way to bring villagers’ management from offline to online in the situation of COVID-19.”(A2)*

The occurrence of the epidemic has had a profound impact on people’s consumption characteristics [36], travel patterns, and consumption habits, and has especially further awakened people’s health awareness and strengthened their healthy consumption concepts. Rural tourism operators face a survival crisis if they cannot understand market changes and carry out corresponding timely product upgrades and updates [37].

Even if the epidemic is eased, people’s consumption psychology and behavior continues to be continuously affected. It is necessary to adjust the market and develop a series of new modes of tourism. As a village committee staff member stated,

*“Through COVID-19, we realized that the market of health tourism and research tourism can be tapped, because the epidemic has made more people pay more attention to their own health, so we have also done the construction of traditional Chinese medicine health care center and research base.”(A1)*

#### 4.5. Persistence of Resilience Cultivation

Due to the complex and changeable external environment, the construction of resilience mechanisms is a long-term process. The establishment of a sustainable resilience mechanisms can help rural tourism become more resilient in the face of crises and improve its ability to resist risks. Sustainable rural development needs sustainable resilience mechanisms [38].

The COVID-19 outbreak has raised awareness of protecting the natural environment as well as personal health. Tianxi village has taken measures in the protection of the ecological environment and biodiversity. For example, “Beautiful China, Pick up Tianxi” activity, “orchid town garden” landscaping construction, vegetable basket plan, etc. These activities pay attention to ecological livability for the purpose of building a beautiful countryside and achieving complementarity between the environment and human beings. In addition to the natural ecological environment, Tianxi village has made great efforts in the labor force’s skill learning. COVID-19 has led to people having space to learn and adapt. Residents have constantly tried to accumulate experience through independent learning and training. As a hospitality operator states,

*“We went to Changsha to learn a live course for eight days and seven nights, teaching us the changes of tourist market after the epidemic, how to sell agricultural products in response to customer demand, and how to attract customers to our resorts via online media.”(A10)*

*“After learning these live streaming courses, we have an idea to broadcast the state of tourists when they visit scenic spots, so as to dispel some people’s fear of going out after the outbreak of the epidemic, so as to attract more tourists.”(A6)*

Sustainable cultivation in line with the environment and the development system can effectively improve organizational resilience in the context of the normalization of epidemic prevention and control.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical Contributions to the Coopetition Literature

Different tourism crises have different characteristics and disparate impacts on tourism. Scholars have concluded that natural disaster crises are regional, inevitable, and destructive to tourism infrastructure. Such crises damage the image of tourism destinations, cut off the supply and demand chain of local tourism enterprises, destroy the economic development elements of tourism destinations, and result in the loss of physical and human capital [39,40]. An economic crisis has the international and cyclical characteristics. It affects the consumer demand of tourists, tourism market supply, and enterprise operations [41]. Analysis of the characteristics and impact of a tourism crisis is the basis of effective crisis management.

The characteristics of the persistence, harmfulness, and strong transmission of COVID-19 have brought challenges to the crisis management of rural tourism. Based on these characteristics, this paper constructs a theoretical framework of evolution resilience. Differing from engineering resilience and ecological resilience, which emphasize the ability of systems to return to their original state, evolutionary resilience focuses on the perspective of “dynamic evolution”. Such recovery moves rural tourism towards a better state of continuous learning and transformation [42]. It can improve the adaptability and continuous learning ability of tourism destinations from the perspective of sustainable development, coordinate the contradiction between the demand for stable development of rural tourism and the uncertain interference of the COVID-19 crisis, and can enrich theoretical perspectives on tourism crises.

As we have now re-entered the normal anti-epidemic stage, the tourism development strategy has shifted to the recovery of tourism markets. Most scholars believe that due to the instability of the epidemic, the recovery of domestic and regional tourism should be the focus of attention at present, rather than international tourism [43]. For the tourism recovery of these spaces, tourism destination image marketing, ticket price reductions, and other marketing activities could be adopted to promote tourism consumption [44]. These viewpoints provide scientific judgment and guidance for the overall recovery of tourism.

COVID-19 has changed tourists’ travel behavior, contributing to their preference for rural tourism. Rural areas are large and sparsely populated with strong air circulation, which naturally blocks the spread of viruses; this can meet the needs of tourists to enjoy natural scenery while maintaining safe social distance. This paper focuses on rural tourism, a specific type of tourism, and fastens the internal mechanism and development attributes based on the complexity of the human–land relationship and the contradiction of multiple subjects. The study interprets the path of tourism recovery in five aspects: government capability, villagers’ relationships, talent reserves, innovation mechanisms, and resilience cultivation, which can provide theoretical support for solving micro-specific problems.

### 5.2. Practical Contributions

The present study has two practical implications. First, the study provides ideas and guidance for revitalization of the development of tourism rural tourism destinations. Here, based on a five factors dimensional model of rural tourism recovery, we provide strategic guidance for the overall development planning of tourism destinations. This is

beneficial in improving the recovery and adaptability of rural tourism systems and building resilient tourism destinations. Second, our findings promote the recovery and development of tourism market through case study research focused on the COVID-19 tourism crisis, which is currently the biggest impact on the travel market. The tourism recovery studied in this context can provide choices for the recovery of the wider tourism market.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of survey data, this study finds that the essence of the recovery and development of rural tourism lies in the construction of rural evolutionary resilience. Due to the complexity of the rural human–land relationship and multiple subjects, the rural tourism system is more susceptible to disturbance. The construction of rural evolutionary resilience emphasizes the possibility of resolving and resisting external shocks to the rural tourism system and further creating new development paths through continuous learning following damage to the system from such shocks.

Evolutionary resilience is proposed from a dynamic perspective rooted in evolutionary theory, which has practical significance. It is believed that there is no stable equilibrium state, and thus the factors of the system itself need to be strengthened to resist interference, derive new factors to adapt to changes, or reform the internal structure to create new stable states. All these can effectively explain evolution and transformation when considering the impact of COVID-19. It is of great significance for rural tourism development to improve its own adaptability and obtain sustainable development capability in the post-COVID-19 era.

In the process of building evolutionary resilience in rural tourism, Tianxi village implemented realistic and meaningful measures for rural tourism development. The governance capability of the local government provided strong support to promote tourism development, robust social networks are a core element, and active rural talent represents a key resource. Meanwhile, the persistent cultivation of resilience needs to be carried out synchronously; this innovative development mechanism could be the driving force to enhance the robustness of the local tourism system. Our research started with the investigation of Tianxi village, explored the rural tourism recovery path of Tianxi village in the post-epidemic era, and explained how this village progressed and achieved comprehensive improvement following this crisis. These research findings could contribute to the recovery and renewal of rural tourism in the period of crisis events or afterwards.

Although Tianxi village can reflect the recovery path of rural tourism in the post-epidemic era to the utmost, its lessons may be limited when applied to villages with special characteristics. In addition, this study only used qualitative research methods and did not evaluate and measure the specific factors involved in the construction of resilience using quantitative analysis tools. In consequence, we could not explain the extent of influence in each dimension or the relationship between dimensions, which will be addressed in our future research.

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**Data Availability Statement:** All data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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