

Article

The Influence Mechanism and Measurement of Tourists' Authenticity Perception on the Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism—A Study Based on the 10 Most Popular Rural Tourism Destinations in China

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Abstract: Short-distance rural tourism has become a major form of tourism in China in recent years, as problems caused by urbanization emerge and because of the strict restrictions on the flow of people during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study takes the ten most popular rural tourism destinations in China from 2011 to 2021 as the research object. First, the grounded theory is used to construct the impact model of tourists' authenticity perception on the sustainable development of rural tourism. The results show that tourists' perception of rural tourism authenticity includes four dimensions, namely, visual perception, embodied perception, using perception, and interactive perception. With local attachment as the intermediary, authentic perception has a positive effect on the sustainable development of rural tourism, including economic sustainability, ecological sustainability, and cultural sustainability. In the early stage of tourism development, tourists mainly focus on visual authenticity. As tourists are deeply involved in rural tourism, they will pay more attention to interactive authenticity. Then, based on AHP, the measurement index was constructed and a questionnaire survey was conducted among ten villages to verify the effectiveness and universality of the model.

Keywords: authenticity; rural tourism; sustainable development; model and measurement index



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Citation: Zheng, T.; Yu, J.; Cheng, Q.; Pan, H. The Influence Mechanism and Measurement of Tourists' Authenticity Perception on the Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism—A Study Based on the 10 Most Popular Rural Tourism Destinations in China. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 1454. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15021454>

Academic Editors: Kyle Maurice Woosnam, Marek Nowacki and Yash Chawla

Received: 24 November 2022

Revised: 30 December 2022

Accepted: 10 January 2023

Published: 12 January 2023



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1. Introduction

With urbanization and industrial restructuring, rural tourism emerged in the southeast coastal areas of China in the early 21st century to escape environmental pollution and fast-paced urban life [1,2], becoming a new industry to increase farmers' income and diversify leisure ways [3]. By 2022, China had more than 900 million urban residents, with an urbanization rate of 64 percent [4,5]. Country life is yearned for by more and more city dwellers. However, the Chinese government's land policy prohibits urban residents from buying land or houses in the countryside, so tourism has become the only way for urban residents to return to the countryside [6,7]. On the other hand, after the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, the movement of people across provinces in China has been strictly prohibited [8,9]. As a result, in the past three years, China's outbound tourism and inbound tourism have completely stagnated, and rural tourism in the province has become the main form of tourism [10].

Rural tourism is a type of tourism located in areas within a destination that are characterized by rural functions (such as traditional, locally based, authentic, remote, sparsely populated, and mainly agricultural areas) where the tourists can physically, socially, or psychologically immerse themselves in this specific destination. Furthermore, it could be argued that rural tourism aims to revitalize rural resources for local socio-economic benefits and environmental sustainability through active local community empowerment

and involvement. Rural tourism includes four main aspects, namely, location, sustainable development, community-based features, and experiences [11]. On the one hand, tourism has brought more benefits and opportunities to the residents of the heritage site and also brought new conditions for industrial development to the heritage site. However, these new factors often cause great changes to the heritage site, such as overcapacity of tourists, environmental pollution, excessive commercialization, interference with residents' daily life, and the entry of commercial investment, etc. It drastically changes the appearance of the original city and the atmosphere of the heritage site. Rural space is the carrier of tourism, and tourism contributes to rural development [12,13]. With the change in rural economic structure, farmers' livelihood style, ecological environment, and traditional culture have undergone corresponding changes [14,15]. While tourism brings economic benefits to the local area, problems such as environmental pollution and the commercialization of traditional culture are gradually emerging [16,17]. The core attraction of rural tourism is the authentic experience different from the city, including traditional dwellings, agricultural system, natural environment, customs, etc. [18]. The authenticity of the landscape has an important impact on the image of the tourist destination and is the basis for the sustainable development of rural tourism [19,20].

Protecting rural authenticity based on tourists' perceptions and coordinating the relationship between tourism and rural sustainable development is a meaningful research topic.

2. The Literature Review

2.1. Rural Tourism Sustainability

The theory of sustainable development was born in environmental science and management science [21]. It initially focused on population expansion, environmental pollution, and other issues, aiming at building a model of coordinated development between natural ecology and economy [22]. In 2015, UNESCO adopted the "Policy on Integrating the Vision of Sustainable Development into the Process of the World Heritage Convention", proposing a path for World Heritage to achieve sustainable development goals, including environmental sustainability, inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, and peace and security.

The sustainable development of rural tourism has always been the focus of foreign scholars. Gonsalves (1987) pointed out that the rational and sustainable development of rural tourism should be an inevitable trend in the future development of rural tourism and conducted research on the sustainable development of rural tourism from the perspective of rural culture and rural environmental protection [23]. Brohman (1996) believed that rurality is the core and unique selling point of rural tourism, and the key to the sustainable development of rural tourism is to maintain rurality, that is, small-scale operations, local ownership, community participation, and sustainable culture and environment [24]. Ryan (2002) explained the perspectives of fairness and justice, community participation in management and sharing rights, and sustainable development from the "new tourism" development perspective [25]. Liu (2006) pointed out that one of the reasons for the environmental degradation of rural communities in the development of rural tourism is that some rural areas pay too much attention to the economic benefits of rural tourism while ignoring the original carrying capacity of the countryside for excessive development [26]. Suzanne (2001) took rural tourism in Illinois, USA as an example and summarized the experience of sustainable development of rural tourism [27]. HwanSuk (2006) proposed 125 indicators for the sustainable development of rural tourism, involving multiple levels such as economy, politics, culture, ecology, and technology [28]. Amir (2015) discusses the resiliency of the rural communities in Malaysia with the help of sustainability planning in rural tourism. The findings of the research suggest that a sustainable tourism development in a rural area will contribute to an improved resiliency within the local community. Some strategies are needed to ensure the sustainable development of rural tourism and to sustain the local community resiliency [29]. Pjerotic (2017) analyzed the principles of sustainable economic development and priorities of sustainable tourism development in the EU. The framework

of indicators for connection of sustainable rural tourism with rural sustainability is given by providing empirical data for five new EU member states: Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary [30]. Fong (2017) pointed out that the essence of the sustainable development of rural tourism is localization, that is, the purpose of development is mainly to meet the needs of local community development, build local supply chains, encourage local handicraft production, ensure that the maximum income is retained locally, and ensure that development efforts are within the carrying capacity of the environment and society [31]. Lulcheva, I; Arseniou, S (2018) think that the local economy and population in lagging and rural areas can be helped with development and the promotion of rural hiking. The development and promotion of rural tourism in Bulgaria leads to a number of consequent positives and is particularly important for lagging and underdeveloped regions. In Bulgaria, the future sustainable development of rural tourism is related to: conservation and promotion of ecological resources and cultural heritage; planning and implementation of ad-hoc national and regional strategies for rural tourism development, improvement of existing infrastructure, and activation of activities to promote its dissemination [32]. Seneta (2022) outlines the key framework of the functioning of rural tourism in Ukraine in the context of sustainable development, proposing the main directions for the development of rural tourism for Ukraine [33].

To sum up, in the sustainable development of rural tourism, the key points to be strengthened are core issues such as community participation, localization, and rural protection, which provide experience and reference for the sustainable development of rural tourism in China. In China, the sustainable development of rural tourism is also an important and persistent research topic. In recent years, the perspective and field of rural tourism research have been continuously enlarged, gradually surpassing the scope of tourism research, and have a closer relationship with social hotspots such as rural reform, new rural construction, land transfer, urban construction, and urban–rural integration.

Du (1999) paid attention to the sustainable development of rural tourism in China earlier and carried out the sustainable development of rural tourism from three aspects: ecological sustainability, social and cultural sustainability, and economic sustainability, discussed in [34]. Zou (2006) stated the key to the sustainable development of tourism is to maintain the continuation of rural culture [35]. Zhang (2009) proposed countermeasures for the sustainable development of rural tourism based on the concept of ecological harmony [36]. Hou (2008) analyzed the mechanism of sustainable development of China's rural tourism from the aspects of the institutional environment, stakeholders, development forms, and practical significance to farmers. They believe that it is necessary to cultivate farmers' knowledge and ability to participate in rural tourism, and a guarantee mechanism for farmers' participation in tourism development should be formed [37]. Zou (2006) believed that constructing the dynamic mechanism according to different types of rural tourism destinations and carrying out reasonable government regulation is the fundamental guarantee for the sustainable development of rural tourism [38]. Ma (2005) took Guizhou as an example and pointed out that the close combination of environmental tourism and cultural tourism is the basic requirement for the sustainable development of rural tourism in Guizhou [39]. Chen (2008) discussed the feasibility and necessity of land reform to promote rural tourism [40]. You (2014) believed that the essence of sustainable development of rural tourism is the comprehensive development of rural society from the perspective of rural ecological ethics [41]. Zhao (2018) believed that the measurement indicators of rural tourism sustainability can be established from four perspectives: culture, economy, ecology, and society. Improving the management level of rural tourism, optimizing the industrial structure, strengthening cultural protection, and coordinating the distribution of benefits are the paths to achieve sustainable development of rural tourism [42]. Lu (2019) believes that the sustainable development of the rural tourism economy needs to start from the perspective of authenticity. Several management strategies are proposed to promote the sustainable development of rural tourism [43]. Wu (2019) believed that the sustainable development of rural tourism can be analyzed from four aspects: development

conditions, local economy, social culture, and rural environment [44]. Ma (2019) believed that in the context of the “Internet+” era, in order to achieve sustainable development of rural tourism, it is necessary to promote the development of rural smart tourism and avoid product homogeneity [45]. Zhu (2020) believed that the internal mechanism for realizing the sustainable development of rural tourism is that under the influence of power and capital, different stakeholders build a reasonable tourism system through collective action to achieve economic and social coordination [46]. Ren (2021) believed that the effective use of rural surplus labor is of great significance to the sustainable development of rural tourism [47]. Meng (2021) believed that place attachment and satisfaction have a positive impact on tourist loyalty, thereby promoting the sustainable development of rural tourism [48]. Han (2021) believed that strengthening the interaction between tourism and other industries and achieving coordinated development between different industries is conducive to the sustainability of tourism [49]. Sun (2022) built a measurement system for the sustainable development of tourism in ecologically fragile areas. The research results show that villagers’ environmental awareness, tourism participation, and tourists’ satisfaction have a positive impact on the sustainable development of rural tourism. The richness of scenic spots and tourism income have a more significant impact on the sustainability of rural tourism [50].

At present, almost all researchers have a consensus on sustainable tourism that the ultimate goal of its development is not to pursue the permanent existence of tourist destinations but to seek a harmonious development between the participants and tourism elements over a long period of time; maintain the integrity of local resources, environment and, culture; and give local residents fair development opportunities.

2.2. Authenticity of Rural Tourism

Early studies hold that authenticity is an inherent attribute of tourism attraction and the most essential thing that tourists pursue. Most of the research on the authenticity of rural tourism is combined with the sustainable development of rural tourism, focusing on the tourism localization strategy or the tourism development model with the participation of aboriginal people. For example, Murphy (1985) introduced community participation in tourism research and managed tourism activities as a community activity. Its significance lies in that tourism based on the rural residents’ life and production mode has realized the transformation from stage authenticity to scene authenticity. On the one hand, the leading role of local residents can ensure the authenticity of tourism commodities; On the other hand, the acquisition of residents’ sense of identity and belonging and the stimulation of environmental protection will become the driving force to promote sustainable development of rural tourism [51]. Chung (2002) emphasized the importance of ecology to the sustainable development of rural tourism and the authenticity of the landscape [52].

Sharpley (2003) believed that the essence of sustainable development of rural tourism is to achieve localization, e.g., build a local product supply chain, encourage local traditional crafts, and maintain the bearing capacity of the environment and society [53]. Daugstad (2008) observed that even in the Alps, where natural scenery is dominant, participation in agricultural activities increases the attraction of tourist destinations to tourists [54]. Royo (2009), through empirical research on Spain, showed that tourists’ perception of the authenticity of tourist destinations is an important factor to promote the rate of revisiting [55].

George (1995) argues that authenticity is opposed to commercialization, which causes the disappearance of the locality [56]. However, Cohen (1995) holds the opposite view, believing that authenticity is closely related to cultural commercialization, and commercialization is conducive to the protection of cultural authenticity to some extent [57,58]. Later, some scholars supported Cohen’s view from different perspectives such as handicrafts, myths and legends, and national culture through case studies [59]. Even the most primitive national life is in the process of change. The idea that traditional culture is transcendental, immutable, and closed will lead to its decline [60]. Therefore, some scholars believe that authenticity is a socially constructed concept, and the authenticity of culture will

change over time, as local culture integrates with other cultures [61]. Authenticity does not mean maintaining the original appearance statically, nor is it necessary to oppose tradition and modernity. Self-innovation of culture itself belongs to the component of authenticity. Tourists only pay attention to the authenticity of self-perception; whether the object is real is not important [62,63]. For example, Bruner (1994) explained the operators' creation of tourism authenticity through construction authenticity [64]. Urry (1990) argues that the mere tourist gaze can trigger cultural change, demonstrating the interplay between the tourism economy and tradition [65]. Wang (1999) summarized the research of many scholars and divided authenticity into objectivist authenticity, constructivism authenticity, existentialist authenticity, and postmodern authenticity [66].

Therefore, the core attraction of rural tourism is authenticity, which is the basis for the sustainable development of rural tourism. With the improvement of rural tourism quality, authenticity has changed from a single attraction to the whole rural environment. The tourists' pursuit of the authenticity of rural tourism has not only focused on the original appearance of buildings or fresh air, but also on the rural system with linkage and integrity. Previous studies only focused on the demonstration of the positive and negative effects of authenticity on the sustainability of rural tourism, but there was a lack of systematic evaluation index construction and quantitative research on the tourist perception dimension of rural tourism authenticity.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area

Ctrip, China's largest travel website, has selected the top 10 most popular rural tourist destinations in China from 2011 to 2021. These villages have different characteristics, including traditional architectural type, natural environment type, agricultural type, and comprehensive type. For example, Hongcun, ZhuangyuanCun, and XinghuaCun are famous for their long history and exquisite ancient buildings; Yucun and BeijiCun attract tourists because of their beautiful nature and strange climate; Danbazangzhai, Baihama, Yaozhai, and HaniCun represent the unique cultures of different ethnic groups in China. All of the above tourist destinations receive more than 500,000 tourists every year, and the tourism income exceeds 1 billion RMB. Therefore, the cases studied by them are typical and universal (Figure 1).

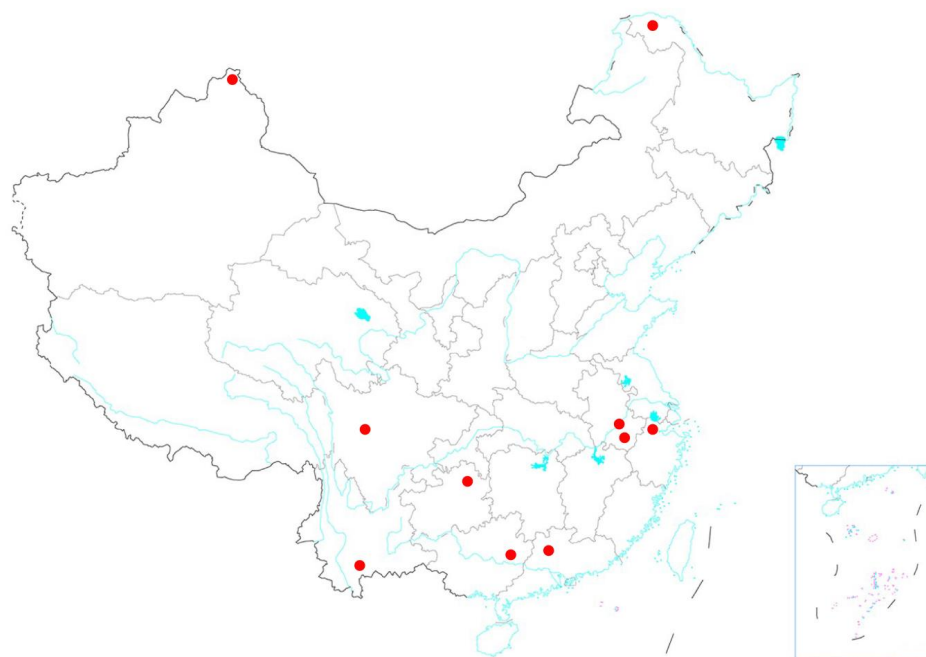


Figure 1. Location of the top 10 most popular rural tourism destinations in China from 2011 to 2021 (The red dots in the map indicate the geographic location of rural tourism destinations).

3.2. Research Methods

Based on the epistemology of objectivism, this study builds a model of the impact of tourists' perception of authenticity on the sustainable development of rural tourism, determines the measurement indicators of tourism sustainability, and finally, tests it through cases. Therefore, the specific research design is divided into three steps:

3.2.1. Theory Building Based on Grounded Theory

First, the grounded theory is used to analyze the data, the dimensions of rural tourism authenticity recognition from the perspective of tourists are summarized, and the impact model of authenticity perception on the sustainable development of rural tourism is built. Grounded theory is a research method that summarizes the theoretical system from the bottom up by constantly comparing and analyzing empirical data without any assumptions [67]. The researchers do not have any theoretical assumptions before starting the research, and through the systematic analysis of the original data, they look for the core concepts that reflect the essence of things from the data [68]. Then, by comparing and discovering the connection between these concepts, a more general category can be further summarized. On the basis of continuous classification and induction of different categories, finally, a theory is established. The process of data analysis includes three steps, which are open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This study adopts the routinized grounded theory of Strauss and Corbin to explore and identify the perceptual dimension of rural tourism authenticity [69].

3.2.2. Measuring Index Construction Based on Analytic Hierarchy Process

Then, the analytic hierarchy process is used to determine the index weights of each dimension of authenticity and form a measurement system of rural tourism sustainability. The AHP is to decompose the research problem into the overall goal, sub-goals, and evaluation criteria [70]. According to the affiliation relationship between factors, a multi-level structure is formed, and the priority weight of different elements in each layer to an element in the previous layer is calculated through the judgment matrix [71]. Finally, the weights of different schemes are calculated, and the one with the largest weight is the optimal scheme [72].

3.2.3. Empirical Test Based on Questionnaire

Finally, 10 representative villages were investigated and analyzed as cases to test the effectiveness of the model and measurement indicators. In this study, the effectiveness of the measurement system in the practical application was tested by conducting a questionnaire survey in 10 rural tourism destinations. According to the indicators in the measurement system constructed above, the questions of the questionnaire are designed.

3.3. Data Source

3.3.1. Materials for Grounded Theory Analysis

Grounded theory is applied to the analysis and summarization of qualitative materials. Therefore, when building the mechanism of the impact of tourists' authenticity perception on the sustainable development of rural tourism, the materials include 50 travel notes, 200 online comments on rural tourist destinations, 50 recordings of interviews with tourists, and 18 government documents on rural tourism. The travel notes of 10 tourist destinations come from articles published by tourists on Mafengwo APP, RED (Xiaohongshu) APP, and Sina Microblog during 2020–2022. The online comments come from tourists' evaluations of 10 tourist destinations on the Fliggy, Ctrip, and Meituan apps from 2020 to 2022. From September to November 2021, 50 tourists from Yucun, Xinghuacun, and Hongcun were interviewed. The interviewees included 25 males and 25 females, aged 8–60. Government documents are derived from documents related to rural tourism and traditional villages issued by tourism bureaus and other units, such as *the National Traditional Village Evaluation Measures*, promulgated by the State Council of China in 2012.

3.3.2. Questionnaires

After constructing the model, it is necessary to verify the validity of the model and the measurement index. Therefore, 600 questionnaires were distributed as statistical data in the rural tourist destinations from May–July 2022, among which 528 were valid. The data come from the 10 rural tourism destinations studied in this paper, and 60 questionnaires were distributed in each case. The time for distributing questionnaires was from May to July 2022. The distribution method was a combination of online and rural tourist destinations, 300 copies each. For YuCun, XinghuaCun, and HongCun, questionnaires were distributed on the spot, the investigators were graduate students of the research group, and the respondents were tourists. Due to the remote location of other villages and the restrictions on movement during the COVID-19 period, through travel agencies and management agencies, online questionnaire surveys were conducted for tourists; the tool was WeChat. In order to ensure the quality of the questionnaire, two monitoring questions were set. In the end, 600 questionnaires were received, and 32 invalid questionnaires were eliminated, including 5 from Danba Tibetan Village, 7 from Yao Village, 3 from Xinghua Village, 14 from Beiji Village, and 3 from Tongzhai. The effective rate of the questionnaires was 95% (Table 1).

Table 1. Information of the respondents.

Attributes		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	300	50
	Female	300	50
Age	Under 18 years old	24	4
	18–35	115	19.2
	36–60	355	59.2
	Over 60 years old	106	17.7
Educational background	high school and below	353	58.8
	Undergraduate	207	34.5
	Postgraduate and above	40	6.7
Profession	Business manager	12	2
	Self-employed persons	89	14.8
	Ordinary employees of the enterprise	226	37.7
	Government staff	193	32.2
	Scientific and technical personnel	7	1.2
	Student	73	12.2

4. Results

4.1. The Impact Model of Tourists' Perception of Authenticity on the Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism

4.1.1. Opening Coding

The software Nvivo12.0 is used to analyze the sentences in the texts and extract the key concepts. The repeated contents are merged, the contents with little correlation with the research topic are removed, and 37 core concepts are finally determined.

Then, according to the meaning and internal relations, the concepts are preliminarily summarized to form 12 initial categories, which are rural architecture, agricultural system, geographical location, spatial layout, natural environment, etc. (Table 2).

4.1.2. Axial Coding

According to the attributes of the initial categories and their correlation, the cluster analysis is carried out, and five main categories are summarized, which are visual authenticity perception, embodied authenticity perception, using authenticity perception, interactive authenticity perception, and place attachment (Table 3).

Table 2. Examples of opening coding processes.

Data Type	Expression of Texts	Conceptualization	Primary Categorization
Online travel notes	Hongcun is a quiet village with a large number of ancient buildings. Tourists can walk aimlessly on the stone-paved path to experience the wisdom of ancient architects ^A	Ancient buildings with a long history	Rural architecture
Policy paper	When protecting ancient villages, we must consider the integrity of the spatial pattern and prohibit the construction of uncoordinated modern buildings ^B	The integrity and coordination of the village layout	Layout of space
Policy paper	Rural tourism development needs to protect the local vegetation and water sources and consider the environmental carrying capacity ^C	Protect vegetation and water sources	Natural environment
Record of interview	We work in the city. Because many traditional activities will be held in the countryside during the Mid Autumn Festival, which is conducive to children’s learning of traditional culture, we drive to travel ^D	Abundant festival activities	A festival celebration
Record of interview	This village has a history of 1000 years, 80% when the primary residents were aborigines. Restaurants are operated by local residents, you can taste the local characteristics of the food ^E	The proportion of indigenous people	Aborigines
Record of interview	The main crops in the village are tea and kiwifruit. Mountain streams irrigate the crops through canals. My family and I went to the fields to pick vegetables and fruits ^F	Crops, agricultural engineering	Agricultural system

Note: ^A, the material comes from the online travel notes of Hongcun, Anhui Province. ^B, the materials come from The Evaluation Indicators for Traditional Villages (2012) issued by the State Council of China. ^C, the materials come from The Rural Tourism Development Plan (2017) issued by the National Tourism Administration of China. ^D, the materials come from the record of interviews in Hanicun, Yunnan Province. ^E, the materials come from the record of interviews in xinghuacun, Anhui Province. ^F, the materials come from the record of interviews in Yucun, Zhejiang Province.

Table 3. The results of axial coding.

Main Category	Corresponding Category	Containing Concept	Connotation
Visual perception of authenticity	Rural architecture	Architectural history	The long history of the architecture proves that it has retained its original appearance.
		The scarcity of architecture	The scarce architecture is often more valuable.
		Scale of architecture	The bigger the architecture, the better preserved it is.
	Agricultural system	The proportion of ancient architecture	The greater the proportion of ancient architecture, the better the preservation.
		Degree of architectural damage	The low level of damage to the architecture proves that it was better protected.
		Type of architecture	The more types of ancient architecture, the better protection.
		Mode of agricultural production	Agricultural production activity is a component element of rural tourism authenticity.
		Crops and livestock	The food in farmers’ daily life is mainly the crops they grow and the livestock they raise.
		Agricultural engineering	Agricultural projects such as farmland and water conservancy belong to the elements of rural tourism authenticity.

Table 3. Cont.

Main Category	Corresponding Category	Containing Concept	Connotation
Embodied perception of authenticity	Geographical position	History	Historic villages often have richer cultures.
		Location	Rural areas far away from cities can avoid the intrusion of modernization and commercialization.
	Spatial distribution	Integrity	Village space and road system are well preserved.
		Coordination	The spatial planning of villages is in harmony with topography and rivers.
	Natural environment	Mountain	As a natural environment, mountains become tourism resources.
		River	Clean water, as a natural environment, becomes a tourist resource.
Using perception of authenticity	Arts and crafts	Vegetation	Vegetation as a natural environment becomes a tourism resource.
		Air	Fresh air, as a natural environment, becomes a tourist resource.
	Local specialties	Heritability	Crafts are handmade by the method inherited by local residents, rather than batch production in factories.
		Practicality	Tourism commodities are practical in the daily life of local residents.
	Festival celebration	Raw material	Raw materials should be sourced locally.
		Production method	Made in the local traditional way.
Interactive perception of authenticity	Aborigines	Daily usage	Widely used in the daily life of local residents.
		The richness of activities	The more activities, the better protection of intangible culture.
	Customs and rules	Participation of residents	Local residents participate in festival activities rather than staged performances of actors.
		Blood kinship	The local residents are related by blood.
	Local dependence	Dialect	The local residents have a unified local language.
		Faith	Local residents share common values and beliefs.
Place attachment	Local identity	Collective memory	Residents have a common memory and become a link to each other.
		Proportion of population	The proportion of aborigines is high, and the number of foreign operators is small.
	Willingness to spread the culture	Recognition of customs and rules	Outside the law, the habits and rules spontaneously formed in rural society are widely accepted by residents.
		The functionality of customs and rules	The habits and rules of rural society constrain the daily life behavior of residents and become an effective supplement to the law to maintain order.

4.1.3. Selective Coding

According to the internal relationship among the five main categories, the core category of rural tourism sustainability is summarized. The results show that there is an interactive relationship between visual reality perception, embodied reality perception, using reality perception, interactive reality perception, and rural tourism sustainability, thus, establishing the impact model of tourists' reality perception on rural tourism sustainable development (Table 4).

Table 4. The results of selective coding.

Dependent Variable	Structure of Relations		Relationship Connotation
	Intermediary Variable	Independent Variable	
Tourism sustainability (Core category)	Place attachment	Visual authenticity perception	Architecture and agricultural systems serve as landscapes, and the authenticity that tourists perceive through vision creates an attachment to the countryside and affects the sustainability of tourism.
		Embodied authenticity perception	Location, layout, and environment as a physical space, tourists have an attachment to the countryside through the embodied perception of it, which affects the sustainability of tourism.
		Using authenticity perception	In the process of obtaining the use value of handicrafts and local specialties, tourists become attached to the countryside, which affects sustainable tourism.
		Interactive authenticity perception	In the process of participating in festival celebrations, communicating with aborigines, and abiding by local rules, tourists become attached to villages, which affects tourism sustainability.

4.1.4. Theoretical Interpretation

Rural tourism includes both physical and intangible landscapes, and authenticity is of great significance to tourists' experience. Tourists' perception of rural tourism authenticity includes four dimensions: visual perception, embodied perception, using perception, and interactive perception.

The tourism element of visual perception consists of architecture and agricultural system, the tourism element of embodied perception consists of geographical location, spatial layout, and natural environment, the tourism element of using perception consists of handicrafts and local specialties, and the tourism elements of interactive perception are composed of festival celebrations and indigenous people and customs.

With tourists' local attachment as the intermediary, landscape authenticity has a positive impact on the sustainable development of rural tourism. The sustainable development of rural tourism is embodied in three aspects: economic sustainability, ecological sustainability, and cultural sustainability. The higher the authenticity of the countryside perceived by tourists, the higher the rate of revisiting, and the stronger the willingness to consume, making rural tourism economically sustainable. Fresh air, green food, and a beautiful environment reflect the harmony between people and nature in rural areas, increase tourists' awareness of environmental protection, and make rural tourism ecologically sustainable. In the ancient village with a long history, the aborigines have inherited from generation to generation, have blood ties and collective memory, take farming as the main way of livelihood, and display handicrafts and festival celebrations as cultural symbols. Tourists have gained a sense of belonging, nostalgia, and identity in their interactions with local residents. Good evaluation and value dissemination of rural tourism is conducive to cultural inheritance, making rural tourism achieve cultural sustainability (Figure 2).

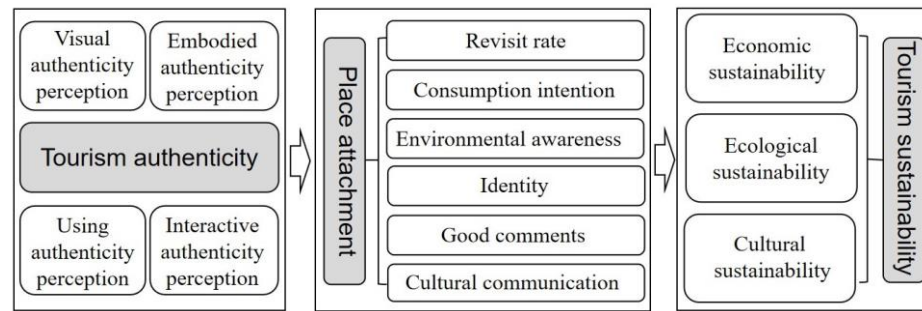


Figure 2. Model of the impact of tourists' perception of authenticity on the sustainable development of rural tourism.

4.1.5. Theoretical Saturation Test

Among the 318 texts analyzed, 2 samples were randomly selected in advance for the theoretical saturation test. According to the two criteria proposed by Corbin and Strauss: no new data, no new categories, and no new topics appear [73]. Using Nvivo12.0 to search the texts, no new categories are found, which proves that the coding has become saturated [74].

4.2. Construction of AHP-Based Measurement System for Rural Tourism Sustainability

4.2.1. Measuring Indicators

This study uses grounded theory to summarize the impact mechanism of tourists' authenticity perception on the sustainable development of rural tourism and builds a measurement system. The measurement system consists of two parts: perception of rural tourism authenticity and sustainability of rural tourism, and each part has three levels.

In the first part, the perception of rural tourism authenticity is the target layer. The criterion layer includes 10 dimensions, such as architecture, geographical location, spatial layout, festival celebration, local specialties, indigenous people, customs and rules, and agricultural system. The scheme layer includes 32 specific indicators, such as architectural history, architectural scale, inheritance of handicrafts, recognition of ethnic rules, etc.

In the second part, rural tourism sustainability is the target layer. The criterion layer includes three dimensions, namely, economic sustainability, ecological sustainability, and cultural sustainability, which are measured by place attachment. The scheme layer includes 6 specific indicators, including revisit rate, consumption intention, environmental awareness, good evaluation, sense of belonging and cultural communication.

4.2.2. Indicator Empowerment

The analytic hierarchy process (AHP) is a multi-criteria decision-making method proposed by Satty (1990) and others [75]. In order to establish the measurement indicators of sustainable development of rural tourism, not only the authoritative opinions of experts but also the objective quantitative analysis is required to ensure the rationality of the indicator weight (Table 5).

In this paper, the software yaahp 11.3 is used for data processing.

(1) To design a questionnaire on the influence of authenticity on the sustainable development of rural tourism, experts are required to compare the importance of each measurement index. Expert scoring is divided into 1–9 levels according to Satty's method. C_{ij} indicates the importance of index i compared with index j . The numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 represent equally important, slightly important, relatively important, very important, and extremely important values. In order to overcome the subjectivity of AHP in indicator empowerment, 10 scholars, 5 government officials, 5 tourists, 5 local residents, and 5 scenic area managers were invited to the questionnaire link to score from the perspective of different participants in rural tourism and, finally, select the comprehensive results. The scholars came from different majors, such as tourism, architecture, ethnology, and history. The process of the questionnaire survey adopts the Delphi method. After four rounds of anonymous scoring, the weight of each index is obtained.

(2) We input the data obtained from the questionnaire into yaahp 11.3, checked the consistency of the judgment matrix, and calculated the weight of the criteria layer and the scheme layer [76].

(3) Individual indicators in the measurement system can reflect the attraction of authenticity of each type of landscape to tourists. To reflect tourists' overall perception of rural tourism authenticity, a comprehensive evaluation is required. In this study, the multi-objective linear weighted function method is used to conduct a comprehensive measurement of rural tourism authenticity and tourism sustainability [77]. The function expression is:

$$M = \sum_{i=1}^m \left(\sum_{j=1}^n I_j \times R_j \right) \times W_i \quad (1)$$

Table 5. Measurement indicators of the influence of tourists' authenticity perception on the sustainable development of rural tourism.

Target Layer	Criterion Layer	Weights	Scheme Layer	Weights		
Part 1. Measurement of Tourists' Authenticity Perception						
Measurement of the influence of tourists' authenticity perception on the sustainable development of rural tourism	Visual authenticity perception	0.25	Architectural history	0.03		
			The scarcity of architecture	0.01		
			Scale of architecture	0.04		
			The proportion of ancient architecture	0.03		
			Degree of architectural damage	0.02		
			Type of architecture	0.02		
			Mode of agricultural production	0.03		
			Crops and livestock	0.04		
			Agricultural engineering	0.03		
			History	0.03		
	Embodied authenticity perception	0.27	Location	0.04		
			Integrity	0.05		
			Coordination	0.05		
			Mountain	0.25		
			River	0.25		
			Vegetation	0.25		
			Air	0.25		
			Heritability	0.04		
	Using authenticity perception	0.19	Practicality	0.03		
			Raw materials are sourced locally	0.04		
			Made in a local traditional way	0.03		
			Used by local residents in their daily life	0.05		
			The richness of activities	0.05		
			Participation of residents	0.05		
			Blood kinship	0.02		
			Dialect	0.03		
Faith			0.03			
Collective memory			0.03			
Interactive authenticity perception	0.29	Proportion of population	0.03			
		Recognition of customs and rules	0.03			
		The functionality of customs and rules	0.03			
		Inheritance of customs and rules	0.02			
		Part 2. Measurement of Rural Tourism Sustainability				
		Economic sustainability	0.36	Revisit rate	0.18	
Ecological sustainability	0.2	Consumption intention	0.18			
		Environmental awareness	0.2			
Cultural sustainability	0.44	Good comments	0.14			
		Identity	0.14			
		Willingness to spread the culture	0.14			

4.3. Case Study

4.3.1. Questionnaire

In this study, the effectiveness of the measurement system in the practical application was tested by conducting a questionnaire survey in 10 rural tourism destinations. According to the indicators in the measurement system constructed above, the questions of the

questionnaire are designed, which are divided into three parts, with a total of 58 items (Table 6).

Table 6. Questionnaire.

Respondent Information
Your gender.
Your age.
Your profession.
Your academic qualifications.
Measurement Items of Rural Landscape Authenticity Perception
In rural tourism, I think the older the building, the higher the authenticity
In rural tourism, I think architecture is scarce and represents authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the larger the size of traditional buildings, the higher the authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that the larger proportion of ancient buildings in residential buildings and the smaller proportion of modern buildings proves that the authenticity is high
In rural tourism, I think the low level of damage to traditional buildings proves high authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the variety of traditional buildings proves the high authenticity
In rural tourism, I think traditional production methods represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think crops, livestock represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think agricultural engineering, such as waterwheels, canals, etc. represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that the village is far from the city and will be less intrusive by modernity, proving high authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the more complete the layout of the village, the higher the authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the harmony between the elements in the village represents authenticity
In rural tourism, I think mountains represent the authenticity of the natural environment
In rural tourism, I think streams and springs represent the authenticity of the natural environment
In rural tourism, I think forests and vegetation represent the authenticity of the natural environment
In rural tourism, I think fresh air represents the authenticity of the natural environment
In rural tourism, I think handicrafts represent authenticity if they are made by artisans and inherit techniques
In rural tourism, I think that if handicrafts can be used as a symbol of local characteristic culture, it represents authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that food ingredients are locally sourced and prepared using traditional methods, representing authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that characteristic commodities come from the needs of life, are practical and represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that food, clothing, medicinal materials, etc. have local characteristics and represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that the residents are aboriginal, and the residents are related by blood, which represents authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the dialect of the inhabitants represents authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the beliefs of the residents represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the collective memory and common experiences of residents represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the large proportion of aboriginal people in the total population represents authenticity
In rural tourism, I think the more variety of festivals, the more authentic
In rural tourism, I think festivals with residents' participation, rather than staged crew and actors, represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that the social rules formed among the residents, and the widespread agreement on the rules, represent authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that the residents' enforcement of social rules represents authenticity
In rural tourism, I think that the intergenerational inheritance of social rules by residents represents authenticity
Measurement Items of Rural Tourism Sustainability
The rural region means a lot to me.
I am very attached to the rural region.
I have a lot of fond memories about the rural region.
The rural region is very special to me.
I identify strongly with the rural region.
I feel the rural region is a part of me.
I get more satisfaction out of living in the rural region than any other place.
No other place can compare to the rural region.
I would not substitute any other area for the activities I do in the rural region.
Doing my activities in the rural region is more important to me than doing them in any other place.
The rural region is the best place for the activities I like to do.
When I spend time in the natural environment in the rural region, I feel a deep feeling of oneness with the natural environment.
I would feel less attached to the rural region if the native plants and animals that live here disappeared.
I learn a lot about myself when spending time in the natural environment in the rural region.
I am very attached to the natural environment in the rural region.
When I spend time in the natural environment in the rural region, I feel at peace with myself.
My relationships with family in the rural region are very special to me.
I would like to travel to the countryside often.
Compared with other scenic spots, I am more willing to spend in rural tourism destinations.
During rural tourism, my awareness of environmental protection has increased.
In rural tourism, I gained a sense of identity with the local residents.
I am willing to practice the values of Advocacy and Time Village Society in my daily life and work.
I have good things to say about rural tourism destinations.

The first part is demographic information, a total of four questions, including gender, age, occupation, education.

The second part is the measurement of rural tourism authenticity perception. The questions correspond to the scheme layer of the measurement system, with a total of 32 questions. The questionnaire adopts the Likert 5-point scale, each topic has five options: strongly agree, agree, not necessarily, disagree and strongly disagree. The total score is set to 100 points. According to the weight of each index obtained by the analytic hierarchy process, a score is assigned to each question. Visual perception corresponds to 9 items with a score of 25, embodied perception corresponds to 8 items with a score of 27, using perception corresponds to 5 items with a score of 19, and interactive perception corresponds to 10 items with a score of 29.

The third part of the questionnaire is the measurement of the sustainability of rural tourism, which is reflected by the degree of attachment of tourists to the village. It contains 23 items and the score is set to 100 points. The indicator revisit rate, and consumption willingness reflects economic sustainability, with a score of 36. Environmental awareness reflects ecological sustainability, with a score of 20. Good evaluation, sense of belonging, and cultural transmission reflect cultural sustainability, with a score of 44 [78].

4.3.2. Data Analysis

AMOS24.0 was used to analyze the questionnaire, and the reliability test was measured by Cronbach's α coefficient. The internal consistency reliability of rural tourism sustainability, visual authenticity perception, embodied authenticity perception, using authenticity perception, and interactive authenticity perception is 0.942, 0.875, 0.916, 0.904, and 0.833 respectively, indicating that the reliability of the scale is high.

Since the scale of this study is based on grounded theory and previous research after several rounds of revisions, content validity is guaranteed.

If the structure of factor analysis is close to the theoretical variable structure, the scale is considered to have good construct validity [79]. The confirmatory factor analysis of the questionnaire is carried out through AMOS24.0. The model fitting χ^2/df is 2.121, and the NFI, CFI, TLI, GFI, and IFI are 0.904, 0.945, 0.932, 0.911, and 0.937, respectively, and all indicators are greater than 0.9. The RMSEA is 0.041, less than 0.05. It shows that the model fit is good and has good construct validity.

4.3.3. Measurement Result

There is a positive correlation between authenticity and place attachment, and tourists will give priority to villages with high authenticity when traveling. Compared with other types of landscapes, rural landscapes can evoke a stronger sense of nostalgia and belonging in tourists. For the 10 most popular rural tourism destinations in China from 2011 to 2021, the authenticity perception scores of tourists are all above 75, indicating that these villages are well protected. For example, Yucun in Zhejiang Province is popular with tourists because of its bamboo forest and tea. In 2021, the number of tourists was 900,000 (Figure 3).

Authenticity is positively correlated with rural tourism sustainability. For ten rural tourism destinations, the sustainability scores are all higher than 80. As tourists prefer well-protected villages, it brings sufficient funds for tourism development. In the process of tourism experience, it will stimulate tourists' willingness for ecological protection and cultural inheritance. For example, in the ten villages studied in this paper, the per capita income of local residents reached RMB 50,000, exceeding the per capita income in China. The money invested by the government in environmental protection accounts for 5% of the total fiscal expenditure every year, and the money used for cultural relics restoration, handicraft inheritance, and education accounts for 20% of the total fiscal expenditure.

Tourist concerns about authenticity will change as the tourism industry evolves. A study ten years ago showed that Chinese tourists pay more attention to visually perceived landscapes, such as architecture and beautiful nature, during rural tourism. The travel time is one day. This is because, in the early stage of rural tourism development, tourists tend

to have a shallow visual experience. However, when China's rural tourism is mature and the demand for tourists increases, tourists are more willing to live in the countryside for a period of time and participate in the daily life of farmers in addition to the visual landscape.

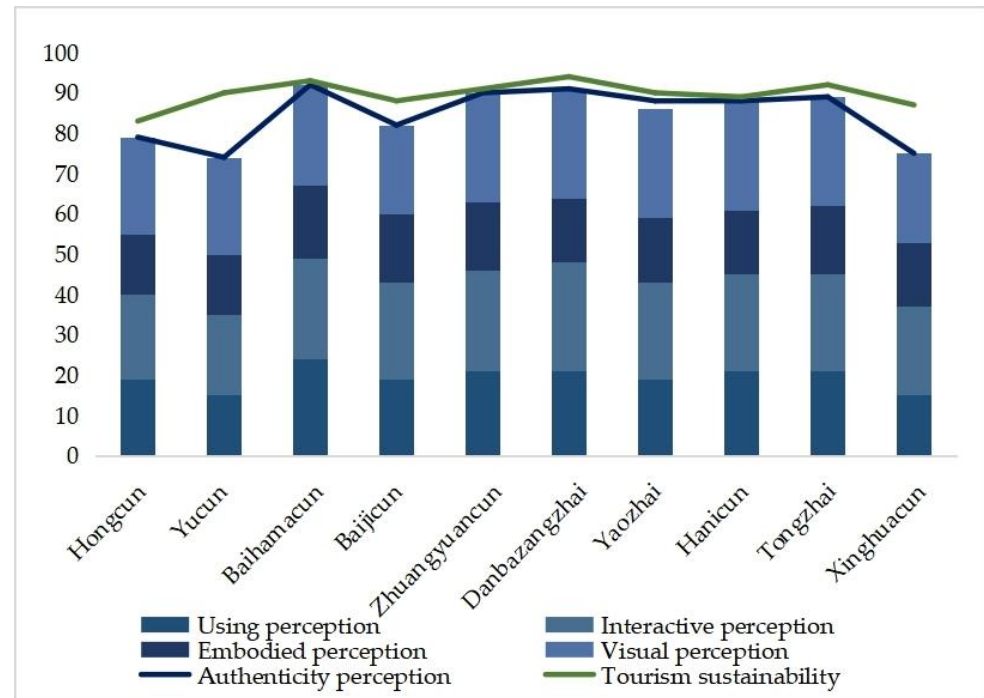


Figure 3. Tourists' authenticity perception and tourism sustainability scores of the 10 most popular rural tourism destinations in China from 2011 to 2021.

5. Conclusions

With the increase in China's urbanization rate and the government's strict restrictions on cross-regional personnel flow during the COVID-19 epidemic, rural tourism has become the most important form of travel in China. This study takes the ten most popular rural tourism destinations in China from 2011 to 2021 as the object. First, it summarizes the perception dimensions of tourists on the authenticity of the rural landscape in the tourism process and the impact model of authenticity on the sustainable development of rural tourism through the grounded theory. Then, based on AHP, the measurement index of the influence of authenticity perception on tourism sustainable development is constructed. Finally, the validity and universality of the model and measurement system in practical applications are tested by distributing questionnaires in rural tourist destinations. Through the above comprehensive analysis, we have drawn the following research conclusions:

(1) The core attraction of rural landscape is authenticity. With the improvement of the quality of rural tourism and the deepening of tourists' participation in rural tourism, tourists' perception of authenticity has changed from a single attraction to a whole rural system with linkage.

(2) Tourists' perception of the authenticity of the rural landscape in the process of tourism includes four dimensions, which are visual authenticity perception, embodied authenticity perception, using authenticity perception, and interactive authenticity perception. Tourism elements of visual perception are composed of architecture and agricultural systems; tourism elements of embodied perception are composed of geographical location, spatial layout, and natural environment; tourism elements of using perception are composed of handicrafts and local specialties; tourism elements of interactive perception are composed of festivals, indigenous people, customs and rules. Therefore, in the process of tourism development, tourist destinations should pay attention to the maintenance of landscape authenticity in these four dimensions at the same time.

(3) With tourists' place attachment as an intermediary, landscape authenticity has a positive impact on the sustainable development of rural tourism. The survey of the 10 most popular rural tourism destinations in China from 2011 to 2021 shows that tourists have a high perception of authenticity. Authenticity perception will affect tourists' consumption, environmental protection awareness, and cultural identity during tourism, thereby affecting the economic sustainability, ecological sustainability, and cultural sustainability of tourist destinations. Therefore, in order to realize the sustainable development of rural tourism, it is necessary not only to pay attention to management factors such as service quality and satisfaction, but also to protect the authenticity of the landscape and strengthen tourists' place attachment.

(4) Tourists' attention to authenticity will change with the development of tourism. In the early stage of tourism development, tourists focus on the authenticity of visual landscape presentation. However, with the maturity of tourism development and the depth of tourists' involvement in rural tourism, tourists will pay more attention to the authenticity of interaction. Therefore, rural tourism destinations should protect the local traditional lifestyle and non-material culture, safeguard the interests of aborigines, and ensure that aborigines account for the majority of the population in tourism destinations.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The innovations of this study are mainly in two aspects: First, based on the perspective of tourists, four dimensions of rural tourism authenticity perception are proposed, which enriches the theory of tourism authenticity. Second, the influence model and quantitative evaluation index of authenticity perception on the sustainable development of rural tourism are constructed, which has application value in the actual development of the tourism industry.

7. Limitations

Since grounded theory analysis will be affected by the researcher's subjectivity and the comprehensiveness of the materials, the dimensions of rural tourism authenticity perception and place attachment summarized in this study have certain limitations, especially the limitations of the axis coding is more obvious. In the part of theoretical testing, the design of the measurement system and questionnaire relies on the initial category constructed by grounded theory, so the items of the questionnaire are still subjective. Although the design of the items of the questionnaire, in addition to relying mainly on the categories constructed by grounded theory, also refer to other scholars' measurement indicators of place attachment, the current questionnaire still has limitations, which require further improvement in future research.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T.Z. and J.Y.; methodology, T.Z.; software, T.Z.; validation, T.Z., J.Y. and Q.C.; formal analysis, T.Z.; investigation, T.Z. and H.P.; resources, T.Z.; data curation, T.Z.; writing—original draft preparation, T.Z.; writing—review and editing, Q.C.; visualization, T.Z.; supervision, Q.C. and J.Y.; project administration, Q.C.; funding acquisition, H.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by China's National Social Science Foundation (grant number 18BGL142) and the Pre-research Foundation of Zhejiang University of Technology (grant number SKY-ZX-20200151).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data are contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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