ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 175-182, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081125

Exploring Typologies and Behaviors among Informal Workers in China's Rural Tourism

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Abstract: *The rapid expansion of rural tourism in China has been accompanied by the pervasive yet understudied phenomenon of informal employment. While these workers are fundamental to service delivery and cultural experiences, their characteristics and operational logic remain poorly understood, posing challenges for sustainable sector management. This study investigates the typologies and behavioral patterns of these informal workers through field research in Shandong Province. Findings reveal a diverse workforce, classifiable by occupational activity into five types—micro-entrepreneurs, mobile service providers, seasonal hires, intermediary service providers, and cultural performers—and further distinguished by identity backgrounds such as local villagers and return-migrants. Each group exhibits distinct behavioral rationales, from the household-based, embedded operations of micro-entrepreneurs to the opportunistic, mobile strategies of street vendors. The research provides a critical framework for recognizing the heterogeneity of this workforce, underscoring the necessity for targeted policies to effectively integrate informal employment into sustainable rural tourism development.*

Keywords: *Informal Employment; China's Rural Tourism; Worker Typology; Behavioral Characteristics*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the strategic pursuit of rural revitalization has positioned rural tourism as a significant driver of socioeconomic transformation across the Chinese countryside. This sector not only contributes to regional economic balance and the broader goal of common prosperity but also responds to the escalating domestic demand for diverse leisure experiences and higher quality of life. Against this backdrop, a substantial segment of the rural tourism workforce participates through informal employment arrangements. These individuals provide essential services that collectively shape the tourist experience, making them integral to the sector's operation. Consequently, the conditions, behaviors, and overall stability of these informal workers are now understood to be directly linked to the sustainable development of rural tourism itself, and by extension, to the social cohesion of rural communities.

Despite their numerical significance and functional importance, a comprehensive understanding of this heterogeneous workforce remains underdeveloped. Existing academic and policy discussions have often treated them as a monolithic group, overlooking the distinct categories within this population and the varied behavioral logic that guides their activities. This knowledge gap presents a considerable challenge. Without a nuanced grasp of who these workers are, how they operate, and what drives their decisions, the formulation of effective management strategies and supportive policies becomes inherently difficult. Homogeneous regulatory approaches, blind to internal diversity, risk being simultaneously ineffective for some subgroups and overly restrictive for others, potentially stifling the very entrepreneurship and local participation that rural tourism aims to foster.

Our research seeks to address this gap by moving beyond a generalized view. We posit that the population of informal workers in rural tourism is not uniform but is composed of several distinct types, each characterized by a unique profile and set of behavioral patterns. Understanding this internal stratification is crucial for several reasons. From a theoretical perspective, it allows for a more sophisticated analysis of the informal economy within the specific context of post-reform rural China, contributing to broader debates on labor, development, and institutional adaptation. From a practical standpoint, it provides the necessary granularity for policymakers, community leaders, and business associations to design and implement more targeted interventions. These could range from tailored skill development programs and access to microfinance for specific groups to differentiated regulatory frameworks that ensure service quality and consumer protection without imposing undue burdens on the

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 175-182, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081125

most vulnerable operators.

To this end, this study is grounded in empirical fieldwork conducted across a selection of rural tourism destinations in Shandong Province, a region that showcases a diverse spectrum of rural tourism development models. The primary objectives of this paper are twofold: first, to develop a typology of informal workers in China's rural tourism sector, categorizing them based on key variables such as their primary livelihood strategy, level of engagement with the formal market, and use of local cultural and social assets. Second, we aim to delineate the characteristic behaviors associated with each type, examining aspects such as their service innovation, pricing strategies, customer interaction, and adaptation to seasonal fluctuations.

By providing a more differentiated and empirically grounded portrait of this vital yet often overlooked workforce, this research aims to inform a more intelligent and equitable governance approach. The ultimate goal is to contribute to a development pathway where the growth of rural tourism is not only economically vibrant but also socially inclusive and sustainable, fully recognizing the critical role played by its diverse informal participants.

2. Literature Review

The tourism industry, characterized by its high accessibility, strong mobility, low skill requirements, and relatively minimal employment discrimination, readily facilitates informal employment. In practice, a significant portion of tourism employment manifests in informal arrangements. Examples include mobile vendors selling tourist souvenirs, unlicensed rickshaw drivers, unregistered family homestays, unlicensed tour guides, and roadside food stalls. Scholars both in China and abroad have directed attention to the phenomenon of informal employment in tourism. Employing sociological, geographical, and economic perspectives, and utilizing diverse qualitative and quantitative methods such as interview analysis, case studies, modeling, and statistical analysis, researchers have investigated this phenomenon in various locales, including Pattaya in Thailand, Bali and Yogyakarta in Indonesia, as well as China's Xidi Ancient Village, Yantai, and Qingdao. Currently, a significant disparity exists between the stages of research on informal tourism employment in international versus Chinese academia. Internationally, concepts and theories of informal employment have been applied to study the tourism sector since the 1990s. In contrast, research within China on this topic remains unsystematic and is still in its nascent stages.

The prevailing academic understanding of informal tourism employment is primarily derived from research on the broader connotations of informal employment. Some scholars, drawing from the dual economic system perspective, define the nature of tourism-related sectors by positing that the tourism industry comprises both an informal sector and a formal sector. For instance, Su Jing and Lu Lin contend that, tourism formal sectors include legally established enterprises with business permits, registered with the government and paying taxes, such as travel agencies, hotels, and scenic spots, while informal sectors include family-run businesses that produce and sell their own goods and vendors scattered around tourist attractions [1]. Crick defines tourism informal employment as those tourism-related activity sectors operating outside the effective control of government departments [2]. Liang Zengxian further proposes that, tourism informal employment encompasses both workers in the tourism informal sector who provide services to tourists and those in non-standard employment within tourism formal sectors (tourism-related economic departments outside effective government regulation), such as temporary workers, seasonal workers, and non-contract workers [3].

As informal tourism employment has evolved in China, domestic scholars' understanding of it has also developed. For example, Guo Wei, Li Xinjian, and others characterize tourism informal employment by features such as "unregistered with the government, labor remuneration not subject to tax supervision, exclusion from the social security system, or where institutional regulations exist but enforcement is lacking, resulting in irregular and unstable labor relations where employment contracts can be terminated at any time." [4] Li Zhifei and Yu Zhen view tourism informal employment as an extension of "informal employment" into the tourism field—a form of labor employment existing outside independent legal entities within the tourism industry and its comprehensively related sectors, often providing goods and services to tourists outside the legal framework, constituting an indispensable part of tourism employment [5].

Within the context of rural tourism, several scholars have offered their insights. Ma Yuerou, using the Yuanyang Hani Rice Terraces as a case study, proposed that this type of employment also possesses a livelihood attribute characterized by the integration of agriculture and tourism [6]. It represents a form of

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 175-182, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081125

employment where rural laborers, leveraging local tourism resources, participate in business services in non-standardized ways, are not fully incorporated into formal regulatory systems, and can flexibly shift between farming and tourism services, highlighting its seasonal flexibility and dependence on agriculture, which distinguishes it from urban informal employment. Li Yin suggested that rural informal employment is often an endogenous informal economy based on ethics and culture, where the cultural system encodes the economic behavior of the actors [7].

Furthermore, Zhang Ruoyang argued that due to its unregistered and unqualified nature operating at the institutional margins, informal employment in rural tourism makes its workers susceptible to various forms of social exclusion [8]. Yuan Chao further refined this into a dual form, encompassing both employment within the informal sector (e.g., unlicensed guides, mobile vendors) and informal positions within formal tourism enterprises (e.g., temporary workers during peak seasons at scenic spots) [9]. Against the backdrop of targeted poverty alleviation and rural revitalization, Li Muchun added that this type of employment in the Chinese rural context also possesses "policy adaptability." [10] Some informal employment, such as the sale of intangible cultural heritage crafts, receives implicit policy tolerance due to its cultural heritage value, resulting in a characteristic of grey legality.

In summary, the current understanding of informal tourism employment within Chinese academia remains predominantly focused on urban contexts. It is primarily interpreted through dimensions such as whether it is subject to government supervision, included in the social security system, and the stability of labor relations. There is a notable lack of recognition and interpretation of informal employment situated specifically within the context of China's rural tourism.

3. Typologies of Informal Workers in China’s Rural Tourism

This study conducted field investigations in multiple rural tourism destinations in Jinan and Tai'an, Shandong Province, interviewing informal workers. Based on the interview data, the following typology of informal workers in rural tourism is proposed:

3.1 Typology Based on Occupational Activity

3.1.1 Micro-Entrepreneurs

This most common type involves individuals or families operating small-scale businesses using their own resources. While they may exhibit informal characteristics like incomplete registration or operating beyond licensed scope, they possess relatively fixed premises and service offerings. Examples include family homestays, agritainment (nongjiale), small rural restaurants, handicraft production and sales, local specialty product sales, and family farm experience activities. Operations are typically family-based, flexible but lacking standardization.

Family homestays and agritainment are typical. Many convert farmhouses into guest rooms for accommodation and meals, often operating informally due to lacking special industry permits or exceeding approved capacity. Small restaurants often focus on local specialties like home-style stir-fries or traditional snacks, usually operating from converted street-front houses, with a high proportion lacking full food service licenses. Handicraft artisans rely on traditional skills like paper-cutting, weaving, or batik, producing goods in household workshops and selling via stalls near scenic spots, direct sales to visitors, or private channels like WeChat, falling into informality due to lack of business registration. Local specialty sellers focus on agricultural products like dried goods, pickles, or fruits, selling retail or with simple packaging from flexible locations like village entrances or their own yards, requiring no complex procedures. Family farm experiences combine agriculture with tourism, offering activities like picking or planting, existing as private operations outside formal scenic area management.

These operations are typically small-scale, averaging fewer than three employees, often family members. Their operational logic relies on social networks and local embeddedness, with highly localized services. Decision-making is autonomous, allowing flexible pricing and on-demand services, often overlapping with living spaces, which reduces costs but increases regulatory risks due to lack of standardized management.

3.1.2 Mobile Service Providers

This type comprises individuals providing services in and around scenic spots without fixed premises or labor protection. Services are highly responsive to immediate tourist demand, characterized by flexibility and randomness. Informality manifests as lack of fixed operating permits and blurred service

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boundaries. Common examples include mobile food and souvenir vendors, pedicab/horse-cart drivers, unlicensed tour guides ("wild guides"), and temporary helpers at scenic spots or homestays.

Mobile vendors are most common, selling portable food or low-cost souvenirs, moving locations with tourist flow to evade supervision. Pedicab/horse-cart drivers offer short-distance transport, often without operating permits, with fluctuating prices. Unlicensed guides use local knowledge to offer tours without certification or formal agency ties. Temporary helpers provide daily-wage labor during peaks, like cleaning or event support, without long-term contracts.

Their service radius is small, income depends on daily visitor flow, and stability is low, significantly affected by regulatory intensity. Their operational logic ties service supply directly to tourist flow, following seasonal patterns. Survival depends on operating in grey areas, avoiding formal market entry barriers while using mobility to reduce regulatory pressure, sometimes forming covert referral chains.

3.1.3 Seasonal Hires

These are temporary workers employed by formal establishments during peak seasons without formal contracts or social security, serving as flexible labor for short-term shortages. Positions include servers, cleaners, security, and performers, often filled by migrant workers or locals, with marked seasonality and uncertainty.

Temporary hotel/homestay staff perform basic tasks, employed for 1-3 months during peaks, paid daily or monthly at lower rates than formal staff. Scenic spot temporary workers handle auxiliary roles, some participating in cultural performances, with no off-season costs for employers. Temporary travel agency assistants handle logistics, working on verbal agreements. Employment is highly time-bound, with peak employment rates 3-4 times higher, offering moderate but unsecured income, after which workers return to farming or unemployment. The logic is one of elastic supplementation for formal businesses, with employment driven solely by demand, creating a symbiotic informal contract where businesses save costs and workers gain short-term opportunity.

3.1.4 Intermediary Service Providers

These workers provide intermediary services or platform-sourced individual labor via the internet/information platforms without formal qualifications, earning through price differences or commissions. Examples include unlicensed transport, accommodation referrals, ticket reselling, and individuals offering photography or guiding services via social media.

Unlicensed transport uses private vehicles for tourist transport, unregistered and without invoices. Accommodation referrers earn commissions from operators for directing guests, without being registered agencies. Ticket agents resell tickets acquired through informal channels. Social media-based individual service providers operate without physical premises or tax registration. Income fluctuates with information reach and tourist trust. Their operational logic capitalizes on information asymmetry and access to local resources not covered by formal markets, meeting personalized needs with non-standardized services. While lacking after-sales guarantees, they occupy niche markets through flexible pricing and quick response.

3.1.5 Cultural Performers

This type includes non-contracted or informal performers earning income through rural folk, intangible cultural heritage, or artistic activities. Examples include folk artists, lion/dragon dance troupes, and traditional craft demonstrators at scenic spots, temple fairs, or festivals, often working part-time or temporarily with unstable incomes.

Non-contracted folk artists perform in public spaces, earning through tips or sales without formal agreements. Folk event participants receive small subsidies or gifts, not managed as formal performers. Their services blend non-utilitarian and cultural aspects, with low income but high importance for cultural experience. The logic involves transforming local culture into consumable experiences, where value relies on authenticity, as tourists often perceive non-commercialized performers as more representative of local character. While enhancing experiential appeal, this faces risks of skill loss or over-commercialization due to lack of systematic preservation.

In summary, this typology clearly reveals the diverse forms of informal rural tourism employment, with significant differences in business models, income characteristics, and linkages to the tourism system. The categories are not mutually exclusive, as individuals may hold multiple roles simultaneously. This classification highlights the flexibility and diversity of informal employment, aiding in identifying the distinct interests and policy needs of different groups.

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3.2 Typology Based on Identity and Background

3.2.1 Local Villagers

As the main participants, local villagers' identity and resource advantages make them the backbone of informal rural tourism employment, with patterns closely related to traditional livelihoods. They can be divided into part-time and full-time categories.

Part-time workers, the most common type, maintain agricultural production while engaging in tourism services. For example, tea farmers focus on farming during harvest and sell products at other times, with tourism activities subordinate to agricultural rhythms. This agro-tourism model reduces reliance on farming alone while avoiding full marketization pressures, characterized by low investment and intensity, typically involving less than four hours daily and contributing 20%-30% of household income.

Full-time workers have completely transitioned from farming to tourism, common in mature destinations, converting houses into homestays or running restaurants. Their income heavily depends on tourism markets, but familiarity with local social networks provides advantages in resource access. They focus more on service quality and customer retention, achieving higher stability and income than part-timers.

3.2.2 Migrant Workers

These are laborers without local household registration, drawn by employment opportunities in rural tourism, providing supplementary human resources. Lacking local resources, they often occupy marginal positions, constrained by mobility costs and market demand. They can be categorized as seasonal migrants or long-term residents. Seasonal migrants move with peak tourist seasons, exhibiting " migratory bird" employment patterns, often from surrounding rural areas, engaging in vending, temporary labor, or odd jobs during peaks before returning home. Their employment is short-cycle and highly mobile.

Long-term residents settle due to stable tourism development, engaging in ongoing service work, becoming "new rural residents." They typically choose low-threshold businesses, sometimes forming small clusters through fellow-townsman networks. Their livelihoods are semi-stable, having established customer bases and cooperative relationships despite lacking local hukou, with tourism income lower than local full-time villagers but higher than in their places of origin.

3.2.3 Return-Migrant Entrepreneurs/Workers

This group includes individuals who previously worked or lived in cities and returned to their hometowns to engage in informal rural tourism employment, driven by policy incentives or family reasons. Their core advantage lies in combining local knowledge with external experience, often introducing external knowledge, skills, and management practices to innovate tourism products and services.

Return-migrant entrepreneurs often have urban work experience and achieve informal operation through innovative business models. Their management concepts are more market-oriented, with highly variable income levels. Return-migrant workers primarily work for others, contributing skills, earning skill-based premiums with higher stability and trust from local operators due to shared backgrounds. Their informality often manifests as operating in policy grey areas, breaking traditional models.

3.2.4 Specific Demographic Groups

Rural tourism informal employment provides space for diverse groups, demonstrating significant social inclusivity. This includes special groups formed due to physiological characteristics or skill levels, mainly women, the elderly, and low-skilled laborers, with distinct participation patterns and resource constraints.

Women often engage in informal sectors related to domestic services, utilizing perceived gender traits like patience and meticulousness to form competitive advantages. Their motivation combines income generation and family care, offering higher time flexibility despite lower income than male-dominated sectors.

The elderly participate in low-intensity informal employment based on local knowledge, with income serving a supplementary role. Their participation not only supplements household income but also makes them living vessels of cultural heritage, valued for their perceived authenticity.

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Low-skilled laborers, lacking specialized skills, concentrate in physical informal sectors, with low income levels limited by age and physical capacity. This diverse group has narrow employment options and the weakest resilience to market fluctuations.

In summary, this typology reveals the diverse origins and livelihood logics of informal rural tourism workers. The local embeddedness of villagers, the mobility of migrant workers, the experience integration of return migrants, and the resource constraints of specific groups collectively form a rich informal employment ecosystem. This classification provides a basis for precisely targeted support policies and optimized resource allocation.

4. Behavioral Characteristics of Different Types of Informal Rural Tourism Workers

This chapter analyzes the behavioral characteristics of each type of informal worker, based on the first classification framework established in Chapter 3.

4.1 Behavioral Characteristics of Micro-Entrepreneurs

As the primary form of informal employment, Micro-Entrepreneurs exhibit a behavioral system characterized by household integration, where business operations, services, and employment are deeply fused within the family unit.

Procurement demonstrates strong local embeddedness. Homestays source daily necessities from local markets, while restaurants prioritize vegetables and poultry from fellow villagers or even their own farms, reducing costs and reinforcing rustic marketing appeal. Production is characterized by "domesticated production," where family kitchens serve both daily meals and tourist dining, and handicrafts are produced in living rooms or courtyards, blurring the lines between household chores, sideline production, and demonstrative craft for tourists. Pricing follows an empirical, floating principle without systematic cost accounting, primarily referencing nearby competitors and flexibly adjusting for different customer types (e.g., discounts for students, markups for foreign tourists). Marketing relies on network diffusion, with core clientele coming from word-of-mouth referrals. Some younger operators use basic social media tools like WeChat Moments or Douyin for promotion but lack professional operation and consistent updates. Financial management remains at a basic cash-in/cash-out level, often using paper ledgers or simple mobile apps, without accounting for costs like depreciation or family labor.

Services focus on creating localized experiences through emotional host-guest interaction, eschewing standardized procedures for a familial warmth. Hosts might chat about local customs; guided tours of farmlands incorporate personal narratives rather than formal commentary. Activity arrangements are highly flexible, often adjusted based on guest preferences. Quality control relies on a "face" mechanism, linking guest satisfaction directly to personal reputation rather than institutional standards. Hiring occurs only during peak seasons and is strictly confined totheir networks (neighbors, relatives) for temporary help with tasks like cleaning. Recruitment is verbal, work assignments lack clear division of labor, and payment is typically daily cash, rarely via WeChat transfer, with no formal attendance or performance records.

4.2 Behavioral Characteristics of Mobile Service Providers

This group's behavioral system is defined by immediacy and service-on-the-go, featuring simplified operations, singular services.

Focused entirely on instant transactions, their procurement-sales cycle is very short. Vendors make small, frequent purchases (e.g., early morning wholesale trips) to minimize spoilage risk, sometimes stocking only half a day's supply in summer. Production is minimal or absent. Pricing is situational and fluid, adjusted in real-time based on foot traffic and customer interest, with no fixed price list. Marketing relies on on-the-spot sensory appeals like calls, samples, or displays, with no long-term customer retention. Financial management is reduced to daily cash counting of profit, without record-keeping.

Services involve one-time delivery without follow-up interaction. Unlicensed guides offer fragmented commentary focused on sensational tidbits rather than systematic history, adjusting length based on payment. Transport services meet basic point-to-point needs, though some drivers might offer unsolicited advice (e.g., on cheap eateries) based on kickback agreements. Temporary helpers adhere strictly to prescribed employer directives with no independent decision-making autonomy, resulting in virtually non-existent employment behavior within this category. Most operate individually or as

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husband-wife teams. Help from relatives during extreme peaks is unpaid, involving only meals.

4.3 Behavioral Characteristics of Seasonal Hires

Acting as a flexible supplement for formal businesses, this group's behavior is characterized by passive compliance, involving singular service tasks with no autonomous operations or hiring. Workers strictly follow employer-set standards but often receive minimal training (e.g., one-hour demonstration for room cleaning). Temporary security guards patrol assigned routes without enforcement power, merely reporting issues. Performers mimic fixed routines mechanically, often lacking professional engagement (e.g., avoiding eye contact with tourists). Workers are entirely passive in the employment relationship. Job information spreads through networks verbally, with no formal recruitment process. Task assignments are oral and can change arbitrarily. Payment is typically monthly cash or WeChat transfer without payslips, and overtime is uncompensated.

4.4 Behavioral Characteristics of Intermediary Service Providers

The core behavior of this type revolves around resource matching, with both operations and services centered on exploiting information asymmetry. Focus is on channel control. Unlicensed drivers join multiple online/offline groups to source customers, employing dynamic pricing that adds surcharges for conditions like night trips. Ticket agents establish secret partnerships with scenic spot staff to obtain tickets at a discount, reselling them to tourists and sharing commissions with intermediaries like hotel front desks. Services involve matchmaking and coordination. Accommodation brokers recommend informal lodgings based on budget, often collecting fees from landlords. Private photographers offer "evasive innovation," using knowledge of unofficial entry points for photoshoots, bundling guiding and photography services. Most operate individually. Larger ticket agents might temporarily hire 1-2 decoys to pose as tourists hawking tickets, paying them a daily wage plus commission.

4.5 Behavioral Characteristics of Cultural Performers

This group's behavioral system centers on the reproduction and performance of local cultural symbols, marked by service orientation and adaptive simplification. Performers show high situational adaptability and improvisation, adjusting content and duration based on audience demographics and real-time interaction/tipping. For instance, storytellers might incorporate modern humor for younger crowds. Traditional rituals undergo significant streamlining and adaptation for the tourist context. Visually striking core elements are retained while complex traditional procedures are simplified, and tourist participation/photography is encouraged, enhancing accessibility at the cost of cultural authenticity.

A passive market strategy is common. Income relies heavily on the on site tipping, QR code payments, or fixed fees per show from scenic areas, with no systematic marketing. Performers with stable venue partnerships typically earn a set fee per performance. They typically operate as individual practitioners or form temporary, small groups (usually comprising 3-5 individuals) based on shared locality or specific skillsets. Income is shared internally through informal negotiation, ensuring operational flexibility but highlighting the informality of their labor relations.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of understanding informal workers for fostering the healthy and sustainable development of China's rural tourism sector. As the industry expands rapidly under the impetus of rural revitalization, these workers form the backbone of service delivery and cultural presentation, yet their unregulated status presents both opportunities and significant challenges. A systematic examination of this heterogeneous group is not merely an academic exercise but a prerequisite for effective governance, equitable growth, and long-term sectoral resilience.

Our research, grounded in empirical fieldwork in Shandong Province, has sought to address this need by developing a comprehensive typology and analyzing corresponding behavioral patterns. We identified five distinct types based on occupational activity—Micro-Entrepreneurs, Mobile Service Providers, Seasonal Hires, Intermediary Service Providers, and Cultural Performers—and further categorized workers by their identity and background. This dual-layered classification reveals the remarkable diversity within this workforce, highlighting that informal employment is not a monolithic phenomenon but a complex ecosystem comprising individuals with vastly different operational logics, resource bases,

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 11: 175-182, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.081125

and vulnerabilities.

The analysis of behavioral characteristics further elucidates how each type navigates the informal landscape. From the household-integrated operations of Micro-Entrepreneurs to the opportunistic immediacy of Mobile Service Providers and the passive compliance of Seasonal Hires, these behaviors are rational adaptations to specific structural constraints and market niches. Recognizing this diversity is fundamental. Policymakers and planners must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches. Interventions designed to support the stable development of family-run homestays will be ill-suited for the highly mobile vendor, just as regulations aimed at ensuring service quality must be adapted to the unique contexts of cultural performers or platform-based intermediaries.

In conclusion, integrating the informal workforce into a sustainable development framework requires a nuanced, evidence-based strategy. This involves creating pathways for gradual formalization where beneficial, providing targeted support to enhance skills and product quality, and designing flexible regulatory mechanisms that protect consumer interests and worker rights without stifling the entrepreneurship and cultural authenticity that make rural tourism vibrant. By acknowledging and strategically engaging with the informal workforce, China can harness its full potential to build a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future for rural tourism.

Acknowledgements

This study is supported by National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 42101185).

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