

Airbnb lands in rural China

The shared economy alleviates poverty by bringing tourists to remote, scenic communities

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Liao Weiwei is planning to quit his job at the Longji scenic spot.

The 31-year-old lives in Jinjiang village in the countryside surrounding the scenic city of Guilin in South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. He wants to quit his job as Airbnb has set its sights on development in Jinjiang, which is about 10 kilometers from Longji's celebrated rice terraces, since October 2017.

Many villagers have migrated to cities. Those who remain have continued to live with poverty.

Now, six rooms converted from two villagers' houses perched on a mountainside offer modern facilities for guests.

"They were poorly furnished and dimly lit," Liao said.

The rooms are fully booked now, although it is an offseason for tourism, he said.

Longji's tourism peaks from April to October.

"I believe tourism will take off in my village," Liao said.

"I'll be able to get in on the sector and spend more time with my family."

Jinjiang has a pristine environment and ethnic diversity.

It is located on the main road leading to Longji's rice terraces that lure hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.

Guilin tourism development commission official Yang Guodong said: "We'd see the road through the village packed with cars half of the year. But there was little we could do to get them to visit (Jinjiang), let alone stay overnight."

But Jinjiang's development potential inspired Airbnb and the local government to partner to increase its appeal as a destination via infrastructure construction, including roads, toilets and electricity.

The program is expected to help the village's more than 100 residents.

"Guilin has been actively exploring the integration of tourism with poverty alleviation," said Zheng Yi, vice-chairman of Guilin's Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

The city has reduced poverty through tourism and ethnic culture development, Zheng said.

About 25,000 people worked in tourism in Guilin's Longsheng county last year. Roughly 45 percent of those below the national poverty line benefited from the sector's growth.

Airbnb's cooperation with the local government offers to showcase home-sharing's role in tourism development and poverty alleviation, and can promote the mecha-



Airbnb partners with Jinjiang's local government to increase the tourist appeal of the village that boasts a pristine environment and ethnic diversity. As of October, the number of Airbnb village rooms nationwide had maintained 257 percent year-on-year growth.

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nism in other places, Zheng said.

Owners of renovated houses get a percentage from rentals. And all locals can earn money providing travel services. Remaining money is reinvested in upgrades.

"Boosting tourism development through the shared economy is an effective approach to rural revitalization," Airbnb China president Peng Tao said.

The company is working to use its global network, experience and tourism philosophy to respond to the Chinese government's call for rural development, Peng added.

Airbnb has sent experienced owners of homestays to provide face-to-face training for Jinjiang's farmers.

It has taught local young people

how to interact with guests and perform such standard services as cooking, making beds and cleaning.

A rural homestay management instruction manual has been delivered to local villagers to help them develop sustainable tourism.

Airbnb will continue to work with Guilin to tap local resources and promote tourism to reduce poverty, Peng said.

Around 1,400 county-level administrations nationwide had Airbnb homestays as of October, the company said.

Those homestays have so far received over 1 million guests and helped rural homeowners generate more than 260 million yuan (\$37.5 million) in revenue.

The number of Airbnb's village rooms had maintained 257 percent year-on-year growth as of October, while that of village hosts and guests had both doubled.

"This project brings people living in poverty into Airbnb's global network," said Xi Jianchao, a researcher from the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources.

"It changes poor people's production modes and lifestyles through education and training"

Head of the World Tourism Alliance Liu Shijun said the program lowers the threshold for tourism-business entry and offers job opportunities for local youth and women.

"It'll play a bigger role in rural

revitalization and poverty alleviation," Liu said.

Before the Airbnb program, Liao and his family had to rely on his salary, fruit orchards and the meager income from his restaurant in the village.

His household earned 60,000 to 80,000 yuan a year.

Liao said his future income will be at least as much as he earns now.

He plans to upgrade his 'agritainment' destination and remodel one of his houses the way Airbnb did with the first two houses developed as homestays.

"We'll also take advantage of our natural environment to grow quality passion fruit and gourds that visitors can pick themselves," he said.