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Semi-Acquaintance Society in Rural Community-Based Tourism: Case Study of Moon Village, China

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Abstract: Tourism development provides a unique context for studying *guanxi* in acquaintance society in rural areas in China. Taking the case of Moon village from the perspective of *guanxi*, this study conducted a qualitative study to analyze the structural characteristics of the semi-acquaintance society in the tourism context. A buffer *guanxi* circle develops when strangers immerse themselves into an acquaintance-based society through social interaction, where affection and reasoning define the boundary, *guanxi* and the interests on which the social consensus is based, as well as the elite and collective actions vitalizing the community. These findings on how the semi-acquaintance society contributes to *guanxi* imply a co-governance structure for informal relations in governance in community-based rural tourism.

Keywords: semi-acquaintance society; community-based rural tourism; *guanxi*; community governance; Moon village



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1. Introduction

Rural tourism, as a burgeoning branch of tourism, is in the ascendant in China. Inter-twining with rural revitalization [1], rural tourism has strengthened rural transformation in rural communities [2] since the 1980s. On the one hand, tourism activities reconstruct the relationship between the land and the people. Rural development has gradually shifted from agriculture to the service industry with the rise of rural tourism; it has an increasingly drastic impact on rural land-use [3] and accelerates the redistribution of the rural population and rural settlements [4]. Meanwhile, land-use for tourism development contributes to the spatial differentiation patterns of villages [1] and initiates a new form of ecology-production-living in China [5,6]. On the other hand, tourism reshapes interpersonal and social relationships. Murphy [7] claimed community participation to be the core aspect of sustainable tourism development to rural tourism. In the transformation of villages from simple residential communities to tourism communities inhabited by villagers and tourism operators, local participation redistributes power and empowers (or sometimes depowers) the host community [8]. With the prosperity of tourism development, stakeholders, especially non-local tourism operators, gradually take part in tourism development, bringing in economic and social benefits to community-based tourism. Accordingly, a new type of *guanxi* structure has emerged between residents and non-local tourism operators. *Guanxi*, which has been used in English-language tourism literature since the 2000s [9,10], refers to interpersonal relationship. In western mainstream literature, *guanxi* has become an important perspective from which to understand Chinese society [11]. As a unique Chinese term outlining social connections and relationships [12], it plays an important role in interpreting Chinese culture and social significance [13–17]. In the Chinese context, there are

two schools of thought on *guanxi*: the first emphasizes *guanxi* as an important maintenance tool for interpersonal communication, being more personal than impersonal [18], more a particularistic relationship than a universalistic relationship [19] and more affective value than monetary value [20]. The second regards *guanxi* as an ulterior rule to coordinate and redistribute benefits [21,22]. In this case, *guanxi* has a collective form [23], and it seeks to maintain social and economic order by relying on the power of social ties where there are mutual obligations, reciprocity and trust [24,25]. Based on these perspectives, researchers applied the *guanxi* structure in the study of Chinese rural tourism [26–29].

However, previous exploration of *guanxi* in tourism has been more focused on practical issues such as marketing [30,31], tourism policy implementation [32], tourism project management [33], the participation of residents [27,34–37] and asymmetric-exchange of resources [29]. They tapped into the pragmatic or instrumental utility of *guanxi* in the process of tourism development [16,38], but the fact that the practice of community relies on the logic of relationality [39], in which people being familiar with each other and their actions are embedded in a relational context [40], is relatively ignored. In the context of rural tourism development, due to the intervention of external tourism forces, the logic of the establishment of *guanxi* will change to a certain extent and follow a set of unique derivation routes.

Thus, this proposed study aims (i) to elaborate the characteristics of social relationships when non-local residents enter communities in the development of rural tourism; and (ii) to discuss the influence of *guanxi* in the formation of semi-acquaintance community. This paper selects Moon village (*Mingyue cun* in Chinese), a representative tourism village, as the research sample. Starting by reviewing *guanxi*, this paper analyzes the social characteristics of semi-acquaintance-structured societies in rural tourism communities with a new neighborhood morphology and suggests relevant strategies beneficial to the benign governance of rural tourism communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community-Based Rural Tourism Development

Community-based tourism [41], a sub-category of tourism development, has, by researchers [42–47], been considered a way to attract visitors, improve the life quality of local participants [48] and assist local communities in diversifying their economies [44,49–51]. From the perspective of participation, the main stakeholders, including tourists, residents, tour operators/entrepreneurs and local governmental officials [49,52,53], are one of the important factors in the sustainable development of community tourism. The above classification of tourism stakeholders has been recognized by the majority of scholars. Since “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” [54] can be defined as a stakeholder, those who have a legitimate interest in the organization [55] who actively enter or are introduced into the development of community tourism as new forces (*strangers*) can also be regarded as stakeholders. With the rise of the concept of sojourn, some talented young people who are not profit-oriented are involved in the development of community-based tourism in very specific ways. Some of them may be project operators introduced to the local community, while others may be attracted by local characteristics and stay to experience local life and eventually participate in tourism development as operators to show their talents. While, in this process, these new forces entered the community as strangers, with the strengthening of their relationships with the original residents (ORs), they gradually become one of the stakeholders. As for community-based rural tourism, identifying relevant community-level stakeholders [45,56] and analyzing their particularity and their relationship with ORs in tourism development is an important initial phase. There have been studies focused on participation, perceptions and attitudes of residents [28,51], tour operators/entrepreneurs [57], tourists [57,58] and government [8,28,59–61] in community-based rural tourism development. These studies provide us with great inspiration to study the relationship between tour operators

and ORs in community-based rural tourism combined with the particularity of the tour operators' identity.

2.2. Guanxi in Community-Based Rural Tourism

In terms of social relations, the ability of tour operators to provide a tourism service within customary landownership legislation depends on their negotiation with the community. Therefore, in the differences in resource endowments under top-down tourism development and the characteristics of Chinese relational society, the importance of *guanxi* in the development of community-based tourism is reflected. Similarly to the Western *being-in-the-world*, Eastern *guanxi* can also be used to explain interpersonal interactions in tourism development [62]. *Guanxi* can be used to sort out the connections between people in political, economic and cultural activities [16,17]. It can also be used to define the familiarity between people or the sense of belonging of an individual relative to the whole. In rural China, where family acts as a connecting bond, clan-kinship becomes an important tool for spreading networks [36,63]; thus, we live in a society where we know each other, which we call *Earthbound China* [64,65] or acquaintance society [26,66]. According to the radiating network and the different foundations of *guanxi*, Chinese *guanxi* ties can mainly be divided into the core kinship circle, the reciprocity-based intermediary circle and the acquaintance-based periphery circle in the business world [67]. Acquaintance-based relationships are economically driven and built on mere acquaintance in a sparse network abundant in structural holes [67] that can be recognized as opportunistic ties [68]. In the business world, the periphery *guanxi* circle of acquaintance-based society is applicable to a *stranger/outsider*-based *guanxi* circle [69]. Specifically, it is difficult to break down the relationship barrier and go directly to the kinship level or even the acquaintance level of the relationship circle. Nevertheless, relationship can be transformed from stranger to semi-acquaintance as a buffer and transition in the relationship-cultivating process. Thus, a buffer *guanxi* circle which can be defined as a transition zone between the peripheral *guanxi* circle and the intermediary *guanxi* circle during the process of strangers' integration into the acquaintance society, with obligations, expectations, social norms and especially embedded interests, can be introduced.

Guanxi also provides a phenomenological interpretive perspective for rural community-based tourism management [11]. There are tourism studies which emphasize the instrumental nature of *guanxi* in the tourism context [11,32,33]. With its informal network of mutual trust [32,33], *guanxi* has been interpreted as a normative and regulative power [11] and a strategy [70] to create a harmonious environment in tourism development. All these studies collectively suggest that the *guanxi* practice presents a bridge in rural Chinese networks, in which an organizational structure is obviously missing [28]. The existence and extension of *guanxi* has blurred and expanded the boundaries of organizations. In community-based rural tourism development cases [28], *guanxi*, affection, reasoning and interest weave their way through the acquaintance-based society, which triggers institutional uncertainty. In order to strengthen *guanxi* ties and reduce the negative consequences of irresponsible decision making caused by uncertainty, village tourism committees and other organizations with unique local privileges have assumed the task of coordinating *guanxi* and interests.

In the existing literature, the discussion is more concerned with the governance of community-based rural tourism development from the perspective of *guanxi* and the interpretation of its instrumental nature. These tourism studies contribute to our understanding of institutional uncertainty and interest sharing in dynamic community-based rural tourism in Chinese acquaintance-based society. We find that more strangers enter the community with their own appeal and integrate into the community as a semi-acquaintance after a period of contact. With the expansion of their *guanxi* circle, there is a deep deconstruction of *guanxi* between the intermediary *guanxi* circle and the periphery *guanxi* circle. Informed by the existing research on *guanxi* network dynamics [67] and the localism of *Earthbound China*, we try to re-think the elasticity, plasticity and reciprocity of *guanxi* in community-

based rural tourism and the transformation of strangers to semi-acquaintances, which are seldom addressed. Thus, we try to introduce and explain the buffer *guanxi* circle of the semi-acquaintance society in rural community-based tourism (see Figure 1).

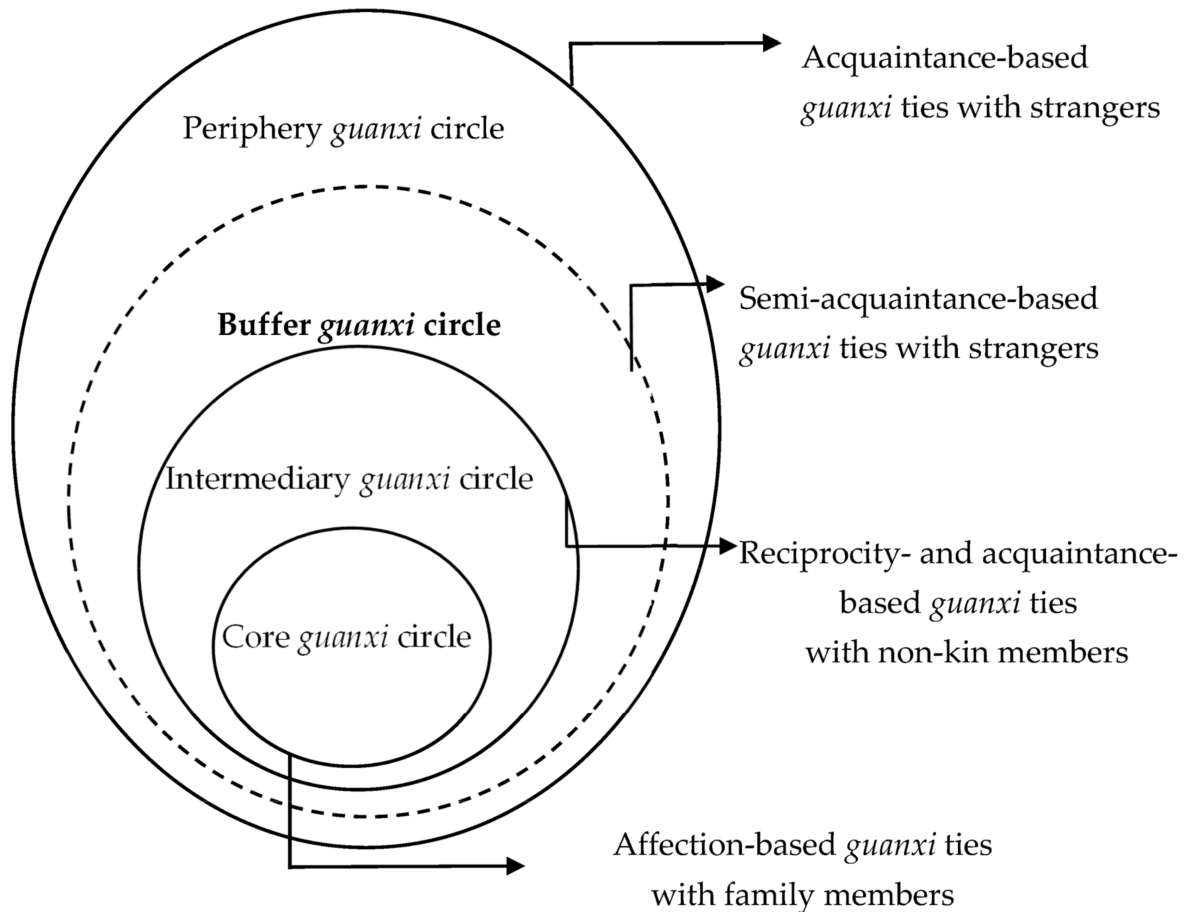


Figure 1. *Guanxi* circles with different members in community-based rural tourism.

3. Research Method

Research investigating the social relationship of rural tourism communities with new neighborhood morphologies and the relationship governance of new communities is still in its infancy, and the identity of “other” maintained by the local inhabitants and constructed from the perspective of tourist gaze [57] has changed. It is thus imperative to analyze the nature of the rationale of semi-acquaintance-society formation in rural tourism development before quantitative analysis. In addition, in the *guanxi*-driven world of China, ‘self’ and ‘other’ are intrinsically interdependent [71–73], the establishment or development of *guanxi* between different groups is covert and sensitive, which is difficult to quantify. Therefore, it is better to interpret changes of *guanxi* in this new neighborhood morphology in rural tourism development through individual interviews. It is necessary to set the exploration of rural tourism community governance strategies into the social and cultural background of social relationship characteristics.

3.1. Case Overview and the Selection of Moon Village

Moon Village is located in Ganxi Town, Pujiang County, Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, China (see Figure 2), covering an area of 6.78 square kilometers, with 3470 mu of arable land, more than 10,000 mu of Lei Bamboo and more than 3000 mu of ecological tea garden. The whole village administers 15 administrative villages, 732 households and about 2218 villagers. In 2009, the per capita disposable income of rural residents was 4772 yuan. In September 2020, the per capita disposable income of rural residents increased to more

than 20,000 yuan. In 2014, Pujiang County government instructed Pujiang County Urban and Rural Construction Project Management and Investment Co., Ltd. (Jinhua China) (state-owned enterprise), Pujiang CPPCC (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), Moon village committee and villagers to form the “Mingyue International Ceramic Village Project Team”, which is responsible for rural construction, tourism development, farming, etc. Through land auction, Moon village introduces social capital for tourism development and rural construction and attracts young artists to dwell and create in the village. By May 2020, there were more than 40 cultural and creative projects, more than 10 cultural exhibition places, and 24 B&Bs. Moon village has been awarded the honorary of National Key Village for Rural Tourism by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, National Civilization Village by Central Civilization Office, China Rural Tourism Maker Demonstration Base by former National Tourism Administration, provincial ‘Four Goods’ Villages by Sichuan Provincial people’s Government, municipal ‘Three Goods’ Villages by Chengdu Municipal people’s Government, etc.

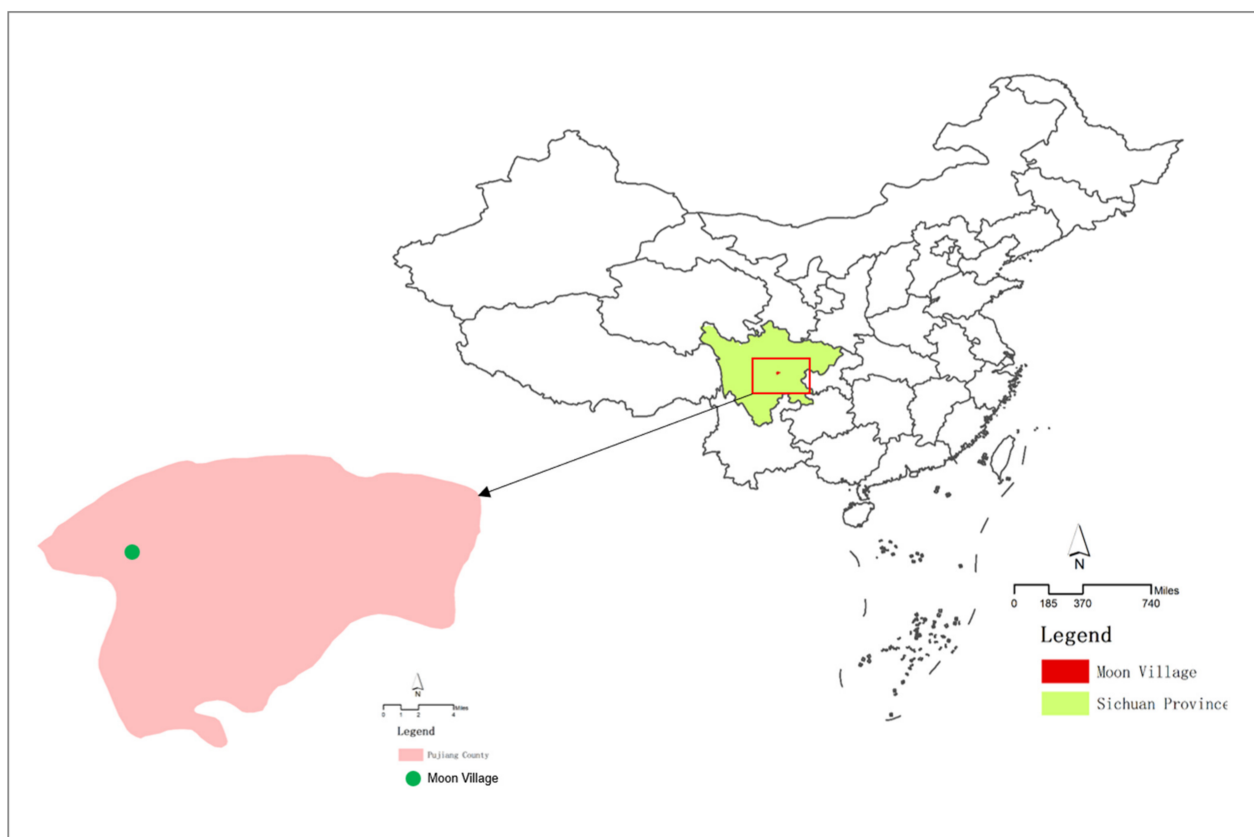


Figure 2. Case location.

The reason for this case selection lies in its representativeness. First, before the introduction of tourism, Moon village adopted the common two-tier social governance structure of “administrative village + villagers’ group”, which is in contrast to the social relations re-formed in the development of tourism. Second, after six years of tourism development, Moon village has evolved from an ordinary village to a poetic village built by farmers and artists (newcomers), and has evolved into a national rural tourism destination, which can support the purpose of this study. Even though it cannot be quantitatively evaluated, the correlation between rural tourism and the formation of new social relations can be better traced from the time span and internal mechanism of the village’s tourism development, which makes the study possible. Third, more than 40 cultural and creative projects have landed in Moon village; it is the place that more than 100 potters, artists and designers choose to stay. A proper governance mode has been formed between ORs and new villagers

through mutual assistance and integration. It is recognized for its tourism development and exploration of the community integration model, which increases the representation of Moon village as a case study object.

3.2. Data Collection and Processing

In the design of qualitative research, data were collected from multiple sources at different times to increase the credibility of this study. From October 2014 to February 2023 (see Table 1), the research group carried out 7 field investigations in Moon village. From 2014 to 2017, tourism development in Moon village was still in its infancy, non-structured interviews were mainly used to collect data. With the maturity of tourism development, the formation logic of the semi-acquaintance society was gradually formed according to its internal mechanism. Conducting semi-structured interviews is more conducive to obtaining information directly related to the research topic during the development period (2017–2023). In order to fit in with our research theme, as shown in Table 2, we choose 16 participants based on a snowballing approach (for reaching a sample with a similar background and context related to Moon village) as the entry point to analyze the construction of the semi-community relationship network. Other participants in the investigations provided us with new insights from different perspectives. More data was collected from the management manual from the website of Moon Village (<http://www.mingyuecun.cn/>, accessed on 1 March 2023) to supplement the original data.

According to the analytical process put forward by Berg [74]. We pored over the original material we had collected to generate code frame. Then, Nvivo 12.0 [32] and ROST CM6 were used to complete the data coding work. Changes in familiarity, social consensus and behavioral logic were extracted from all interview transcripts.

Table 1. Fieldwork schedule.

Investigation	Date	Participants	Objective	Main Question
1	1–7 October 2014	Management personnel, tourist	Immersive preliminary understanding of the Moon village	What do you think of Moon village? How do you think of its development prospects
2	1–3 May 2015	Tourist	Learn about Moon Village from visitors	What do you think of Moon village? What impresses you most?
3	10–25 July 2016	Tourist, (OR)	Focus on Tourists' and ORs' response to development tourism	Tourist: Have you paid any attention to the ORs besides traveling and relaxing? OR: How did you get involved in tourism development?
4	6–21 July 2017	New resident (NR), OR	Focus on their response to each other	NR: Why do you choose to stay? OR: What do you think of the newcomers?
5	1–16 September 2018	Management personnel, NR, OR	Learn about the relationship between the two from the perspective of management	How to get along with others?
6	14–18 July 2020	Management personnel, NR, OR	Focus on their response to each other	How to treat the relationship between each other?
7	24–27 February 2023	NR, OR	Focus on their response to their relationship	NR: How to integrate into the community of ORs? OR: What changes in traditional code of conduct have been brought about by the development of tourism?

Table 2. Profile of interviewees.

Label	Gender	Classification	Age	Education	Occupation	Note
A	Female	NR	39	Graduate student	A member of the project team	
B	Female	OR		Undergraduate	Tourism cooperative workers	
C	Male	OR	30		Village committee member	
D	Male	NR	55	Undergraduate	Cultural and creative worker	
E	Male	NR	40		Cultural and creative worker, country inn operator	
F	Female	NR	43		Cultural and creative worker, seller of tourist souvenirs	
G	Female	NR			Cultural and creative worker, restaurant operator	
H	Male	OR	23	College	Tour guide	Homecoming youth, rural tourism cooperative workers
I	Female	OR	26	Undergraduate	Design studio operator, seller of tourist souvenirs	Homecoming youth
J	Female	OR			Restaurant operator	Homecoming youth, rural tourism cooperative workers
K	Male	OR	45	Junior high school	Lei bamboo contractor	Member of Lei Bamboo Cooperative
L	Female	OR	66	Primary school	-	
M	Male	-	62	Graduate student	Sociological research specialist	
N	Female	-	45	Graduate student	Tourism management research expert	
O	Male	-		Graduate student	Rural construction research expert	
P	Female	-	39	Undergraduate	Administrator	

4. Results and Analysis

Based on the change of social relations and the characteristics of the semi-acquaintance society, the generation process of social relations in Moon village from an acquaintance society to a semi-acquaintance society is relatively clear. Figure 3 presents the findings on the rationale of semi-acquaintance-society formation in the tourism context. In an acquaintance society, there is a set of social operating norms presented by explicit features such as high familiarity, established behavioral logic and social consensus. The relationship has a certain stability in traditional society and is not easily broken. However, with the infiltration of new economic forces in the development of tourism and the inclusive and friendly nature of human relations, the boundary of the acquaintance society shows the characteristic of elasticity, which makes it open to new entrants. This provides an opportunity for the existence of a buffer *guanxi* circle. With the development of rural construction and tourism, new entrants work and live in Moon village. Social relationship between ORs and NRs has changed from strangers to semi-acquaintances. They attach more to affection and reasoning than to nostalgia, which generates new social norms and triggers familiarity shock. Under the interweaving of affection and reasoning and interest, ORs and NRs integrate into the new community through jointly supported organizations, resulting in collective action and a new social consensus and social norms. The embedding of interest into the community generates collective action, which promotes community harmony and reshapes behavioral logic. With the entry of strangers, the transformation of the old community into a new community is the beginning of change. With the new social consensus, social norms and collective actions deconstructing acquaintance society, the rationale of semi-acquaintance-

society formation in the tourism context is thus presented. In the following sections, the specific derivation of the generating logic in the tourism context is explored.

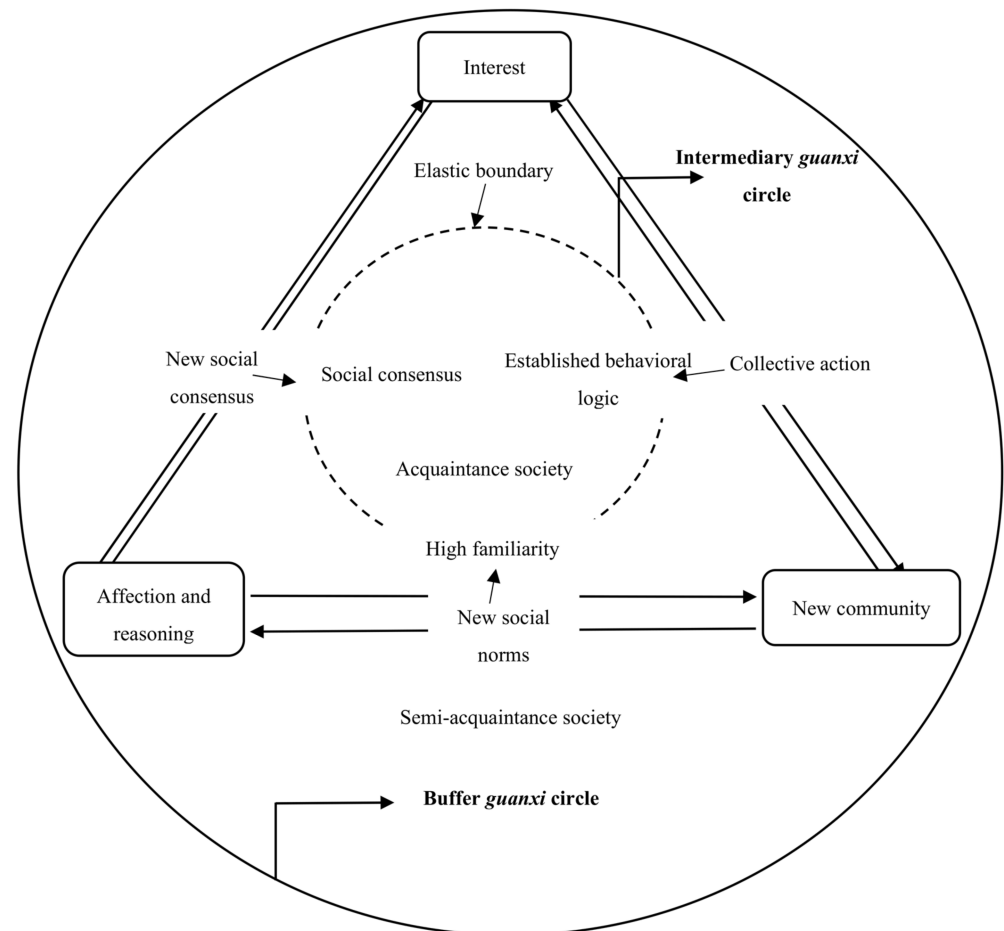


Figure 3. Rational of semi-acquaintance-society formation.

4.1. Embedding of Affection and Reasoning into Community Generates New Social Norms Triggering Familiarity Shock

Compared with nostalgia in the acquaintance society, affection and reasoning in the semi-acquaintance society is emotionally detached, but still has rich connotations. From the perspective of Chinese character construction, it can be divided into affection and reasoning. For affection, it not only refers to the feelings and disposition of human nature, but also refers to affection and friendship in human relationships. Reasoning refers to the norms accepted by the society. With the development of rural tourism, the semi-acquaintance society of Moon village presents a social phenomenon of coexistence of kinship, acquaintance connection and commercial relationship. On the one hand, ORs maintain the social relationship in the acquaintance society based on kinship and genetic connection. On the other hand, there is also a commercial relationship characterized by cooperation and reciprocity between ORs and NRs in rural construction and tourism development organizations. Affection and reasoning are embedded in the organizational mechanism of Moon village.

The dual embeddedness theory of social economics [75] can be introduced to better explain the formation of social norms under the integration of affection and reasoning in communities. Embeddedness refers to the constraint of behavior, including structural embeddedness and relational embeddedness [76]. Structural embeddedness involves the construction of network relations, which are characterized by connectivity and centrality [77]; thus, counterparts' behavior is regulated by rules or reasoning in the organization. Relational embeddedness is the mutual adaptation, interdependence and trust established

between counterparts in relationship maintenance, which depends on the quality of the network [78]; thus, counterparts' behavior is constrained by relational interaction or affection. In terms of relational embeddedness, the ORs of Moon village are familiar with each other based on long-term contact, and their social communication is constrained and extended by affection. In the aspect of structural embeddedness, the emotion and disposition included in affection are derived from human nature and emphasize moral goodness as a criterion. The content of affection goes beyond the scope of acquaintance and becomes an informal code of conduct followed by residents. In addition, the village committee, project team, cooperatives and social organizations of Moon village play an important role in the economic activities of tourism development. In a word, affection and reasoning is embedded in the community to interweave new social norms, which jointly constrain ORs and NRs' social relations in rural construction and tourism development.

We became acquainted with project team member *A* during the survey, and we expressed our willingness to visit Moon village. *A* informed us that the rural tourism cooperative provides reception services and we can contact her acquaintance *B* for details. After gradually establishing contact with *B*, a business contact, *B* introduced us to her acquaintance *H*, who provides tour guide service. Through local resident *H*, we learned about the operation details of the cooperative and became acquainted with young entrepreneur *I*. Under *H*'s recommendation, we also received room and board service at fair prices from *J*, who is the owner of a B&B. Just as *J* said, *"only when H trusts me can he introduce guests to my B&B. I will live up to his trust and guarantee to provide you with comfortable accommodation and decent food"*. For questions that *J* could not answer on her own, *J* contacted her cousin *K* for verification. Finally, *K* indicated that, *"I don't want to say more, but I can answer the question for J's face"*. For more sensitive issues, *K* emphasized that *"neighbors meet regularly or frequently, even though we are not acquaintances (with the NRs), we're under the same new roof (community) now, the community is in a phase of change, guanxi is more complicated, it's best not to talk about others behind their backs"*. NRs also attach great importance to emotional connection with ORs and the new community. Just as when *G* was asked that *"with so much money invested in renovating and decorating the yard, are you worried that the ORs might want to suspend the lease and take back the house before the contract ends"*. *G* said that *"Moon village has a good atmosphere based on affection and reasoning, everyone is emotional, moral, we have built a new community of interests for tourism development and daily life. Besides, when the lease contract was signed, representatives of the village tourism committee were present to vouch for it"*.

If the contact between *J* and her cousin *K* is based on kinship, then customer referral from *A* to *B* and from *H* to *J* can be considered to be established by acquaintance connections or non-competitive businesses and maintained by market rules under the network adjustment of affection and reasoning. The contractual relationship between *G* and her lessor under the guarantee of the village tourism committee can be regarded as a commercial relationship in the community-based tourism. In the new community, the reconstructed pattern of *guanxi* between ORs, ORs and NRs is a set of new social norms based on face, affection and reasoning, which started from the acquaintance society and was then maintained in the semi-acquaintance society. It is jointly generated by affection and reasoning and the force of organizational constraints in the new community. Just as when *H* teased *J* that *"those customers are introduced by me, no tourist trap please"*. *J* seriously answered *"I live by conscience and act rationally, customers introduced by acquaintance will be naturally entertained well. But on the other hand, even if it is not introduced by acquaintances, I will entertain them attentively. After all, we live in a community, and business is about integrity. To earn money is a temporary transaction, a harmonious guanxi in new community is our long-term pursuit"*.

4.2. Connection between Affection and Reasoning and Interest Condenses Social Consensus Promotes Community Harmony

With the continuous advancement of rural construction and tourism development, Moon village, which is originally home to ORs, has also become a place for NRs and a destination for city tourists. Rural tourism, as the embedding of market economic power

into rural society, imposes urgent requirements for Moon village to build consensus in rural society. The reason lies in the fact that the economic base determines the superstructure; that is, the objective difference between ORs and NRs in the economic base of Moon village leads to the diversification of their ideology on rural construction and tourism development. In fact, even if ORs and NRs have similar economic bases or interest demands and tourism awareness, they may have different views and social propositions due to their different attitudes towards rural construction and tourism development. Therefore, affection and reasoning and the interest identification of ORs and NRs in their respective ideologies comprise the driving force for them to find a proper place in tourism development and make concerted efforts to co-exist and prosper in rural construction so as to forge a new social consensus.

The theory of reasoned action [79,80] can better explain the specific mechanism of rebuilding the social consensus and maintaining rural harmony based on affection and reasoning, interest in tourism development of Moon village. According to reasoned action theory, actors' behaviors are driven by their behavioral intention, which is determined by subjective norms and attitude. First of all, ORs are willing to participate in tourism development in Moon village. Whether it is renting homestead to NRs or providing tourism services in person, all these behaviors are rooted in the old tradition of hospitality, which truly reflects the confidence of ORs in their natural and cultural environment and expresses their will to share lives with NRs and tourists. In addition, the interactions with ORs based on affection and reasoning are also an important reason for NRs to take root in the community. E, a cultural and creative worker, believed that it was the affection of the local people in Moon village that detains him.

"In 2014, the first time I came to Moon village, I saw a weather-beaten washstand placed on the threshold of a villager's house, and its engraved traces deeply attracted me. I insisted on buying it, and the aunt (a local resident) insisted on giving it to me as a gift. When I left, she had put the washstand which is her dowry from 40 years ago in my trunk, the aunt gave it to me (a stranger) just because I said I like it. It was that special encounter that strengthened my affection for this place. Therefore, I came back here to rent and plan for the transformation of a village house into a studio and engaged in cultural and creative work in 2015. I think those who choose to stay here can also feel the kindness, comfort and acceptance of this place just like me. It was also because of the comfort interaction based on affection that retains them".

NRs entered Moon village with capital and technology and introduced cultural and creative patterns such as B&Bs, tie-dye art and pottery. They passed on the concept of tourism development by giving lectures in the Moon village forum and night school, established connection with ORs and condensed the social consensus. They achieved community harmony with native residents by sharing the rural living environment and tourism benefits. F, a cultural and creative worker, recalled that she went to Moon village *"to find a quiet place to rediscover myself. It would be nice to find a place with friendly smiles, warmth and kindness. Moon village meets my imagination. I get warmth and goodwill at the same time, my B&B becomes my way of spreading kindness and warmth, I also share the warmth and kindness I received with local villagers in the Moon village forum"*.

Local government also has clear economic, social, cultural and other comprehensive purposes in the construction of Moon village. They hope to improve the comfort of residents by better preserving the living environment such as forest trays, tea gardens and bamboo forests, repairing local buildings, building infrastructure and improving public services. Administrator P showed us a supplier publicity document of the planning and design of the international pottery village project of Moon village. It confirms the government's interest in the development of Moon village. It clearly explains the planning and construction goal of Moon village, which is to *"create a new mode of interaction between cultural creative industry and rural tourism with distinctive characteristics, find a new direction for shared development by protecting cultural inheritance, increasing income and constructing rural areas"*. In order to create a harmonious community environment, the government considers the possibility of

social interaction and social connection between ORs and NRs when designing projects and introducing NRs.

At the same time, according to reasoned action theory, the participation of native residents in tourism development is also mixed with their economic purpose of improving the economic income of individuals and families, and the appeal of no longer being engaged in original agricultural production but also staying in the native land by participating in tourism management. As local resident *I* and *H* mentioned in their reasons for returning home to start a business. *“With contributing to our hometown and taking care of parents at home, it’s a good thing to kill two birds with one stone”*. In their presentation, making contributions to their hometown is the interest they pursue while taking care of their parents at home is practicing their filial duties within the bounds of affection and reasoning. It can be concluded that affection, which is restricted by interest, is the source of the new social consensus; interests constitute one of the goals pursued by local and NRs. Thus, interest, affection and reasoning paved their way to constitute a new social consensus in the buffer *guanxi* circle.

4.3. Embedding of Interest into Community Generates Collective Action Reshaping Behavioral Logic

The rural community is a relationship structure formed by participants in pursuit of economic, political or social security goals. In the semi-acquaintance society, ORs and NRs differ in ideology, income level, cultural background and other aspects; collective action should be formed to jointly promote rural development. There are three conditions for collective action: interest orientation, leadership and organizational constraints [81]. Development of rural tourism in Moon village has created conditions for collective action. First, interest relation between ORs and NRs in Moon village provided cooperation motivation for collective action. Second, rural elites represented by creative outsiders deeply participate in the project team of Moon village; rural tourism cooperatives and other organizations play an important leading role in rural construction and tourism development. Then, the development of rural tourism changed the organizational structure of community. After realizing the importance of organizing the dispersed residents to form a joint force to promote tourism development, Moon village has formed a village committee, a project group, a rural tourism cooperative and other social organizations. As introduced by professional manager *B* of a rural tourism cooperative:

“In March 2015, we raised a total of 900,000 yuan to establish a rural tourism cooperative, of which 300,000 yuan was raised by community members, 300,000 yuan was contributed by government financial allocation, and 300,000 yuan was contributed by village collective. In addition to the government, village collectives, community members participate in profit sharing. Rural tourism cooperative itself does not compete with residents for profits, and its main work is to serve residents and rural tourism development. For example, rural tourism cooperative may ask NRs for job vacancies, guide ORs to participate in tourism development, and standardize the management order of new and ORs, etc.”. It can be seen that in community-based tourism development, there are new organizations established to adapt to the development, and there is also a clear profit distribution mechanism with organizational constraints.

The interview with local resident *L* confirmed *B*’s statement: *“The cooperative hires Shuang Li, who is an outsider, as its president. She has no shares or basic salary and only gets 20 percent of the profits as dividends. She teaches young people in the village how to provide tour guide services, organizes us to study in Moon village forum and night school. Last month, she even acted as a go-between to arrange some out-of-town tour groups to visit the Moon Kiln, during which the cooperative charges entrance and service fees, and the villagers earn money by providing lunch”*. Tourism-oriented rural community is also benefit oriented. It can be seen that participants pursue interest on the basis of cooperation, forming a symbiotic relationship. Shuang Li can also be seen as a representative of the rural elite, which refers to those who contribute and help the villagers, bring benefits to the community and show strong leadership in guiding the villagers to engage in tourism practice. *A* is the interviewee of the research

team over the past six years. From 2014 to 2019, at the invitation of Pujiang Urban and Rural Construction Development Co., Ltd., she became a member of Moon village's project team. She is representative of the experienced elite, for she used to be a project manager of a large-scale cultural and tourism state-owned enterprise in Chengdu. In the new community, she can achieve a balance with residents through balancing interests, and jointly promote the development of community-based tourism in semi-acquaintance society.

A mentioned more than once that *"some people don't quite understand why I left my last job and doubt whether I can adjust to country life. I think they do not understand Moon village, ORs here are very simple, communication with NRs also goes on well for they are driven by their clear interest goals. Through cooperatives, village committees and other organizations, I get the opportunity to put the concept of building a home for peace and work into practice, which I will cherish and strive to do well"*. Therefore, A was affectionately called the village head by NRs and ORs, which also means that ORs recognize the outsiders, and a semi-acquaintance society is basically formed.

In introducing the organizations in the village, village committee member C mentioned: *"The venue for Moon village forum and night school are provided by village committee, main training content includes party building knowledge, industrial skills, management knowledge. Village committee, professional rural tourism cooperatives organize villagers and members to participate these training courses. The project team and rural tourism cooperative take the responsibility of inviting experts from public welfare organizations, universities and industries to give lectures."* When introducing the progress of village training, local resident I mentioned: *"The class atmosphere is very good, we can get a lot of information. The most impressive is to teach us how to transform the yard for tourism. I made a garden out of the yard, and the tourists said it is nice."* It can be seen that the community is making efforts to create a better atmosphere for every resident. What has been said also confirms the importance of opinion leaders and community-based activities in the formation of collective actions driven by interests.

Interviews with B, C, D, I and L show that, on the one hand, specialized rural tourism cooperatives are embedded in semi-acquaintance community and their management system is set up reasonably, which can help directly organize scattered ORs and NRs and mobilize them to form collective actions. On the other hand, the visible benefits of developing tourism provide a buffer *guanxi* circle for ORs and new NRs in which to communicate and overcome obstacles, which help break the estrangement of strangers and build the social community for a semi-acquaintance society in rural tourism development.

5. Discussion

Rural China is an acquaintance-based society [63], "the basic unit of Chinese rural society is the village" [63]. However, after the disintegration of people's commune, rural social changes triggered by institutional reform make the familiarity of interpersonal relations in administrative villages lower than that of the formal villager group. As some scholars have mentioned, when both non-kin and non-commercial relations arise in villages, especially when the tourist becomes NR, we should employ explicable terms to describe the new rural pattern [69]. Thus, the concept of the semi-acquaintance society emerged. As a transitional concept between the acquaintance society and stranger-based *guanxi* [69], the basic characteristics of a semi-acquaintance society can be teased out as the interview progressed. First, compared with the acquaintance society in which everybody is familiar with each other and have a high degree of intimacy, the semi-acquaintance society implies a yet-to-be-constructed interpersonal connection and a break-in stage. Secondly, local consensus is disintegrating, but people still follow a basic principle and there are no totally irreconcilable contradictions. Thirdly, the traditional code of conduct which is understood as a normative standard and social mechanism governing social reciprocity [63,67,69,82] and nostalgia still plays a role, but that role is undeniably waning for the interference of interest. This paper finds that the social network system of the tourism community in Moon village can be defined as a semi-acquaintance society, which has its own unique internal generating logic and presentation. Based on the derivation conditions of the semi-

acquaintance society, this paper finds that in the development of tourism, *guanxi* as a buffer circle in the Moon village tourism community presents the following characteristics in its formation.

5.1. From Familiar to Semi-Familiar

Chaxugeju is coined by Fei [63] to describe the relational schema in Chinese rural society which “is composed of distinctive networks spreading out from each individual’s personal connections”. The core concept of *guanxi* in *Chaxugeju* is described as “similar to the concentric circles formed when a stone is thrown into a lake” [63], “within the radius there are different degrees of greater and lesser affections and responsibilities” [83]. In this pattern, familiarity is regarded as an important aspect of understanding traditional Chinese rural society, which is an acquaintance-based society. Man grows up among an acquaintance-based society where people are familiar with each other because relationships are first formed among certain groups of people with a lineage attached to them [63]. Secondly, this kind of familiarity is produced in the process of long-term, multifaceted, regular contact. Then, it is generated in a specific space; that is, kinship interlinks with spatial relationships. Native place implies lineage groups with a certain geographical location [63], which also leads to a clear boundary between physical geography and the social life of the acquaintance society.

Historically, as an ordinary traditional village, residents of Moon village are familiar with each other because of their common life in the past. Even before the development of rural tourism, migrant workers with a firm foothold in urban cities moved their families to cities, leaving their homestead and losing their registered permanent residence in the country-side. However, Moon village is still an acquaintance society where population flows unilaterally from countryside to city. The development of tourism after 2014 has created conditions for the emergence of semi-acquaintances. First, the resident structure changed. In addition to ORs, more than 100 outsiders work and live in the village as tour operators or sojourners, becoming NRs of Moon village; they are geographically close to the buffer *guanxi* circle. Then, the way in which social relations are generated changed. Familiarity between ORs is generated from kinship, but social relationship between ORs and NRs are generated from social communication in the process of rural construction and tourism development, and it is maintained in mutual understanding and humility in the same geographical scope. Finally, in the process of building the new relationship network, the change from familiar to semi-familiar occurs slowly, which fully reflects the elasticity and inclusiveness of the acquaintance relationship circle. Thus, semi-acquaintance relationships find their existence possibility at the buffer *guanxi* circle via non-kin contact. Second, spatial relationships change. In rural areas, ORs rely on blood ties to form kinship; while, in a semi-acquaintance society, people establish business relationships by participating in rural construction and tourism management. Therefore, the physical geographical boundary that fosters familiarity within one another is still clear, but the boundary of social life is relatively blurred due to the intervention of NRs, thus resulting changes in spatial familiarity from another aspect. With the gradual integration of tourism development into the daily life of native rural residents, the boundary between physical geography and social life is crossed, if not completely over-lapping; thus, the buffer *guanxi* circle shows a trend of inward extension. Tourism development, in general, is a prerequisite for these changes.

5.2. From Old Social Consensus to New Social Consensus

Social consensus is a general agreement, a set of beliefs, values and norms shared by individuals living in a given geographic environment at a given time. As a basic tradition, social consensus presents three characteristics. The first is its locality; that is, local consensus, with blurred geographical boundaries, is followed by people within a certain range. The second is its voluntariness; residents in one region voluntarily comply and share

the dominant beliefs, values, or norms. Thirdly, it is the unconsciousness which is often framed by ethics and morality [84] that matters.

Before the development of tourism in Moon village, the majority of residents' daily communication took place in the circle of acquaintances. Local consensus in rural areas naturally plays a role in maintaining the norms of daily actions and builds a spiritual bond of close contact and mutual trust among residents. After the tourism development in 2014, although Moon village continued traditional agricultural production activities such as tea and Lei bamboo planting, the People's Government of Pujiang county clearly defined the development orientation of creating a cultural and creative tourism destination. After the strategic decision of synchronous rural construction and tourism development, Moon village has embarked on a special "tourism+" rural construction road. With the arrival of NRs and their participation in rural construction and tourism development, a semi-familiar social relationship is gradually established among NRs and ORs. Although the original local consensus in rural areas can adjust the original social communication of ORs, it cannot naturally be developed into a social consensus that abides by both ORs and NRs. As far as the semi-acquaintance society formed by the development of tourism in Moon village is concerned, there is also an obvious new consensus on actions taken to create a happy and beautiful new village and jointly promote tourism development. Honors like "national civilized village" and "provincial civilized village" acquired by Moon village are a good embodiment of social harmony under the regulation of the new social consensus.

5.3. From Primitive Agrestic Behavioral Logic to Interest-Based Behavioral Logic

Agrestic behavioral logic is a constant reminder of residents' occupant identity in a "unit" relationship [85,86]. It indicates that acquaintances need to be considerate to each other and pursue a reciprocal balance in long-term interaction. It tends to predominate in harmonious relationship-oriented situations, where being reasonable is the guiding principle. Nostalgia is primarily activated to maintain the relationship between residents, regardless of their objective preference. For those situated in acquaintance-based relationship, agrestic behavioral logic also encourages them to favor acquaintances over strangers, which undoubtedly results in discrimination. Thus, agrestic behavioral logic can be viewed as a resident's individual actions demanded by an acquaintance-based society where there is an emphasis on fostering or maintaining pleasant social relationships. Before the development of rural tourism, Moon village was the living space where ORs were born and died in. Familiarity breeds affection among the inhabitants, "face work" is conducted within their social network. Therefore, primitive agrestic behavioral logic is the original behavioral law of individual action.

However, it must be acknowledged that *guanxi* cultivation, as a kind of active participation, is necessarily multi-directional [69], with new participants joining and some old ones withdrawing. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that with the development of rural tourism, the agrestic behavioral logic of Moon village would obviously be changed for the entry of new participants and presents different characteristics. The harmonious integration can be achieved through a dynamic process of enhancing interest to foster collection actions in the new community. In addition, rural construction is a public welfare behavior, while tourism development is an economic behavior. As motivated by interest, the target range of nostalgia has gradually expanded to NRs, which provides an opportunity for collective actions in buffer *guanxi* circle. The difference between individual action and collective action which comes from that the latter has been formed based on cooperation, reciprocity and competition between NRs in a semi-acquaintance society, and between NRs and ORs in rural construction and tourism development. As a result of entrepreneurship, NRs have even become closer to some of their previously less friendly acquaintances in the tourism business. Ultimately, primitive agrestic behavioral logic changes into a behavior logic that generates collective action; the initial strangers break down the barrier and gradually set root in the buffer *guanxi* circle, acquaintance-based society evolved into a semi-acquaintance-based society.

6. Conclusions

The development of *guanxi* itself is in flux, it is affected by complex factors [12]. In particular, *guanxi* in a semi-acquaintance society presents a unique social and local nature, but it is also a topic rarely discussed in current rural tourism development. As shown in this study, there is a buffer *guanxi* circle between the intermediary *guanxi* circle and the periphery *guanxi* circle. Therefore, contextualized study of *guanxi* patterns in rural tourism in China is crucial to construct a true and overall representation of this phenomenon. To complete the research, this study for the first time attempts to outline the interaction between the two main types of participants in existing tourism research, namely, host–guest interaction, and the transformation of one of the participants’ identities from guest to host, as well as the relationship interaction during the *guanxi* transformation process. It fills in the blank of semi-acquaintance social *guanxi* research. By introducing the concept of semi-acquaintance and quoting a buffer *guanxi* circle, it builds a bridge between strangers and acquaintances.

In the Chinese rural context, it is necessary to respect the existence of affection and reasoning, interest appeal, and beneficial organizations. For the diversity of residents’ ideology, structural and interest appeal in semi-acquaintance community-based rural tourism influences the ideological basis of pluralistic co-governance. Therefore, we attach great importance to the traditional code of conduct, affection and reasoning in establishing the social norms for semi-acquaintance community-based rural tourism governance. In addition, community and residents’ interest appeal play an important role in addition to affection and reasoning. Meanwhile, forming a rational mechanism for labor division and coordinating organizational patterns is the key for semi-acquaintance community-based rural tourism to catalyze collective action. The practice of Moon village shows that strengthening organizational construction can play a positive role in coordinating *guanxi* [19,20] between ORs and NRs. Rural tourism cooperatives and other new rural business entities can undertake the organizational functions of integrating agriculture and tourism. The village committees and other self-governing organizations can be empowered with autonomy in accordance with reasonable interest demands.

In the informal normative level of the system, rural traditions such as equal consultation, openness and tolerance, hospitality and moral restraint, affection and reasoning, face work and the traditional code of conduct are embedded into the institutional arrangements and practice process of multi-governance in semi-acquaintance community-based rural tourism development. They constitute the dynamic elements of the buffer *guanxi* circle. Thus, the generating logic of social consensus, collective action and social norms of community-based rural tourism in semi-acquaintance society comes forth. Social consensus and norms and the collective action process is sorted out from the interweaving of interest, affection and reasoning in the community so as to ensure the coordinated development of rural construction and tourism development in the semi-acquaintance society.

In short, this paper finds a buffer *guanxi* circle when strangers try to enter acquaintance-based society for social interaction and describes the characteristics of *guanxi* in semi-acquaintance community-based rural tourism development. As sojourning becomes a new accepted tourism fashion, the tourism-based community development model of many tourist attractions in China, such as Lugu Lake and Dali Ancient City in Yunnan Province, shows similar characteristics to the Moon Village. As a new concept, the buffer *guanxi* circle can be extended to other applications of tourism community relations research. It also analyzes the rationale of semi-acquaintance-society formation and puts forward a semi-acquaintance governance strategy based on rural tourism development and rural construction, which provide management inspiration for the development of tourism community at the local level.

However, there are also several shortcomings. First, this paper only takes semi-acquaintance community-based rural tourism as the research object; it fails to answer what social relationship characteristics will be presented by communities in the long-term development of rural tourism. Second, when analyzing the social relationship characteristics of

semi-acquaintance community-based rural tourism, it only focuses on the ORs and NRs; corresponding strategies are put forward to form the co-governance for the two special types of stakeholders which do not account for the role of other stakeholders in their development. From the perspective of Chinese relations, the discussion of the formation of the semi-acquaintance community has certain regional limitations. Therefore, in future research, we can continue to explore the relationship generation logic and governance strategy of rural tourism communities from the logical starting point of what social relationship characteristics will be presented by communities in the long-term development of rural tourism, take more stakeholders into account and carry out a comparative study on community relations from different cultural backgrounds.

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