

How to Bridge the Gap between Small Holders and Rural Tourism: The Study of Fengjian Village, Guangdong Province, China

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Abstract

Small holders are widely existing in the world, especially in Asia where are populous but limited land resources. Meanwhile, China is also a big Asian country with a large number of small-scale peasant economy, such as self-employed businesses. Based on the example of Fengjian Village in the suburb of Shunde, Foshan City, Guangdong Province, China, the research purpose of this paper is to reveal the difficulties encountered by rural tourism and the abilities of practitioners (local small holders) through field investigation, investigation and interview, compare the general conditions and existing problems of the case village and small holders, and propose solutions and solutions to solve the problems.

Keywords

Small Holders, Rural Tourism Economy, Fengjian Village

1. Introduction

Small-scale peasant operation in the general sense refers to a small-scale self-owned agricultural operation mode which is based on the land owned by the family and completely or mainly depends on the laborers themselves.

In Asia, over 450 million smallholder holders support the bulk of food supplies. Despite their small land size, they produce up to 80 per cent of the food consumed in the region (Sambhi, 2021). In Asia's poor countries, 2.5 billion people depend on the food and agriculture sector for their livelihoods, 1.5 billion of them smallholder holders who provide 80 per cent of Asia's food supply (Thapa & Gaiha, 2014).

Although smallholder holders in Asia provide such a large amount of food supply, land resources in Asia are relatively small compared with those in other

regions. As we can see from the table above (**Table 1**), land assets in Asia are among the smallest in the world, according to a study based on the World Agricultural Census 2000. The average area under cultivation in Asia is only about 1 hectare, compared with an average of 5.5 hectares in the total area of the 114 FAO member countries. And the average number of parcels per holding in Asia is 3.2, which is higher than both north and south America, 1.2, and Africa, 3.0. But the average area under cultivation per holding in north and central and south America is up to 117.8 and 74.4 hectares. Even in Africa, the average can achieve 11.5 hectares (*Cambodia, 2010*). At the same time, another disadvantage is that Asia's arable land resources are very dispersed.

China, as an agricultural power in Asia, has a huge population of small holders. According to the data of the third agricultural census officially given by the Chinese government, the number of small holders accounts for more than 98% of the main body of agricultural operations, the employees of small holders account for 90% of the agricultural employees, and the cultivated land area managed by small holders accounts for 70% of the total cultivated land area. At present, there are 230 million rural households in China, with an average operation scale of 7.8 mu per household, and 210 million farming households with arable land of less than 10 mu per capita, with three plots per mu per household and no more than 10 mu per household. This is typical of the situation of cultivated land resources in Asia mentioned above. The number of small holders is very large, but the land resources are very scarce and dispersed, so the average amount of cultivated land resources per household is very small (*Cheng, 2019*).

In the case village I had studied, the development of rural tourism economy has been the main mode of operation in the village in the past ten years. Meanwhile, the main mode of operation in the village is the small-holder individual operation mode mentioned above. Rural tourism is a form of rural economy developed by relying on natural resources, cultural resources, landscape resources, etc., with defined concepts, advantages, sustainability, high public participation, B&Bs and shops, it is a good starting point for the development of rural economy. However, the rural tourism industry has high requirements for practitioners, such as market judgment, capital financing and publicity (*Rosalina, Dupre, & Wang, 2021*). Small holder groups have inherent deficiencies such as weak

Table 1. Average size and fragmentation of agricultural holding during (1995-2005).

Countries by continent (Number of reporting countries is given in parenthesis)	Average area per holding (hectare)	Average number of parcels per holding
WORLD TOTAL (114)	5.5	3.5
AFRICA (25)	11.5	3.0
AMERICA, NORTH & CENTRAL (14)	117.8	1.2
AMERICA, SOUTH (8)	74.4	1.2
EUROPE (29)	12.4	5.9
ASIA (29)	1.0	3.2

(Data from World Programme of Census of Agriculture (WCA)).

asset accumulation ability, large and complex participants, low cohesion, low risk resistance ability and their own skills and knowledge level is not high and so on. It is difficult to effectively support the rural tourism industry's demand for high-quality, certain economic basis and relevant higher education groups, and it is difficult to provide means or policies such as publicity, planning and management. It can be said that rural tourism and small holders are a combination that is difficult to integrate and achieve long-term development.

2. Basic Information of the Fengjian Village

Fengjian Village is located in Shunde District, Foshan City, Guangdong Province, at the north end of Xingtan Town (**Figure 1**).

The whole village covers an area of 5.24 square kilometers, with more than 5678 permanent residents and about 320 migrants. Fengjian Village is surrounded by water on all sides, with the river as the boundary, and the whole town is divided into a well shape. The central area of Fengjian Village is also run through the whole village by a river, so the characteristics of the water town are particularly prominent (**Figure 2**). Because of its abundant water resources, Fengjian Village has long been an important base for “mulberry base fish pond”, which can still be seen on both sides of the road at the entrance of the village. Mulberry-based fish pond is a traditional compound agricultural production mode which closely links sericulture and fish farming. The water net depression is dug deep into a pond, dug out the mud in the pond around the pile into a high base, on the basis of mulberry, pond fish, mulberry leaves used to raise silkworms, silkworm excrement used to feed fish, and the silt in the fish pond can be used to fertilize mulberry, through such recycling, has achieved wonderful economic benefits. The industry still exists in Fengjian Village. In addition to more innovative industries such as the mulberry base fish pond, Fengjian Village also has some more traditional agriculture, such as garden and orchard cultivation. This farmland is located in the middle of the village, belongs to the village production brigade land, Fengjian Village is the main arable land resources.



Figure 1. The geographical location of Fengjian Village.



Figure 2. Map of the Fengjian Village.

Fengjian Village also has certain cultural resources. The earliest origin of the village is from four families, four families with different surnames came to live here, and gradually developed into today's Fengjian Village. So now there are many ancient buildings left by the four great families in the village, such as clan ancestral halls, academies and so on (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Most of the elderly in the village went to school in the academy or ancestral temple when they were young, but later the government built a new school and the children went to the new school. At the same time, there is a royal golden laurel in the village, is the emperor last to Fengjian Village before the village out of a champion, about its origin is described as follows: Qing Tongzhi years, Li Changming, as Haiyang teaching instructions, decades of diligent work, the Guangxu Emperor Jia award, give Taiwan tribute Jinhua osmanthus a tree, this variety is osmanthus fine, golden color, fragrance. So it has become a relatively famous scenic spot in the village (Figure 5).

Fengjian Village, with its superior natural conditions and cultural environment, began to build a tourism village featuring rural natural scenery in 2012 under the government's planning. Many of the initial construction of the village were funded by the government, including boats for boating sightseeing (Figure 3), the opening of the whole river and the hiring of shops in the scenic spot. For example, the style of each store in the snack street is also planned by the government (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

Invited by the government and the village committee, some villagers choose to go back to the village to start their own businesses. There are snack streets, shops and B&Bs in Fengjian Village. They are basically small shops opened by local villagers who have rebuilt their houses. They are all small businesses, including



Figure 3. Boat tours.



Figure 4. Heritage building in the Fengjian Village.



Figure 5. The royal golden laurel.



Figure 6. Uniform style snack street.

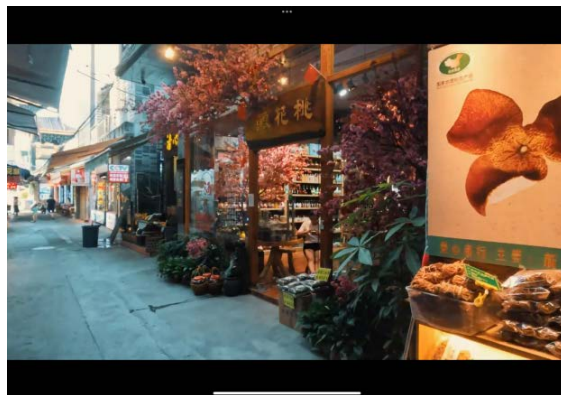


Figure 7. Uniform style snack street.

the employees in the shops, who are all local villagers and know each other from door to door. So the shops, which are run by the villagers themselves, are the main source of funds for many families in Fengjian. For example, the owner of the first snack bar A I visited, is 43 years old and comes from the village. Her husband works in the downtown not far from the village, and her father and mother also help in the shop. Since it is a holiday, some children from the same village work in the shop in summer. The owner said that in 2015, someone from the village committee invited her to return to the village to start her own business. In 2016, she finally decided to return to the village and opened the current snack bar. The owner's mother went out to struggle after graduation from junior high school. Her knowledge level is not very high, so she has done all the business with any income. Finally, she returned to the village to open a snack bar. Another company that was also converted by local villagers to develop the tourism industry of small holders is homestay (B&B). In 2020, owner B was invited by the village committee to return to the village to engage in B&Bs and other industries, so she went back to the village and started to transform her house in the village. At the end of 2021, she officially opened a B&B, which is exactly the B&B where I lived when I came to Fengjian Village in August 2022. The owners has officially retired at the age of 67. After graduating from university, she has been doing business outside and has accumulated a little. The owner herself

mentioned that she wanted to stay in the village after retirement and make some contribution to the village. By the way, she opened a B&B in line with the development of tourism in Fengjian Village. However, the owner's wife had never known anything about B&Bs before, so she called on her sisters to study together how to decorate, how to operate, how to publicize, etc. In terms of publicity, she also found young people in the family who majored in this field, and so far they are also responsible for it. After opening at the end of 2021, the initial business situation was very dismal, because it coincided with the epidemic, the number of people decreased significantly, and because it was new, it was difficult to compete with other B&Bs in the village. Later, with the liberalization of the policy, the increase of passenger flow and the gradual recovery of the whole tourism industry, the business of the owner's wife gradually improved (**Figure 8**).

There is another way to run a smallholder tourism economy in the village, where villagers outsource their business to others or hire others to help them. At that time, I visited a shop C selling local specialties. The interviewee was a girl from other places who worked in the shop. The shop assistant said that shop C is a time-honored brand. After the government issued the plan in 2012, the owner of the shop—the villager who owns the land—decided to stay in the village to start a business, so it was officially opened in 2013. It has been ten years since then. At first, with the rapid development of tourism in Fengjian Village to create natural water scenery, Shop C's income is also very considerable. However, in recent years, apart from the impact of the epidemic, the overall water also shows a certain downward trend. After asking whether to open shop this new media mode of operation, the shop assistant told that there is open shop but the turnover is basically negligible.

3. Common Problems

1) The production conditions of small-scale peasant economy are simple and difficult to start at the early stage. Most villagers transform their own land to develop the tourism industry. They do not have a large amount of capital accumulation and strong economic foundation to support them. Only the successful operation of the operation depends on the government's investment in the initial stage of the operation, and only the help of the government or village committee and other organizations can be seen in the later stage of publicity. For example, in Fengjian Village, after the stabilization of most tourism industries in recent years, the government's financial subsidies and publicity efforts have declined, making it even more difficult to attract new villagers or self-employed people to the village to develop the tourism industry.

When I interviewed the owner of snack bar A, it was mentioned that the initial decoration cost, all kinds of publicity and other miscellaneous costs were borne and handled by the government, which they could not afford by themselves. The owners of the other two B&Bs also said that they had to rely on the government to subsidize their business in the beginning. B&b, however, failed to



Figure 8. Communicate with the owner of B&B.

catch up with the first batch of policy dividends due to its late opening. The owner said that in recent years, the subsidy policies of the government have almost been cancelled. Even if I apply for funds, the procedures and application procedures are extremely complicated, and the time needed is unknown. When the approval is granted, the effective period of the policy year has passed, and I need to apply again. As can be seen from the above information, due to the lack of funds in the initial stage and the lack of publicity and manpower, there was almost no publicity of the B&B, and the staff were almost all their own family members. The owner's parents provided the meals, and the younger members of the family helped figure out the B&B's special development direction and publicity strategy. In the first one to two years after its opening, B&B struggled to maintain basic operations and could hardly turn over funds. The owner said that although the most difficult period is over, the B&B is still in its infancy and conditions are still not up to the village's several B&Bs that were initially developed by the government.

2) The small peasant economy itself is not strong in capital accumulation capacity, industrial management scale is not large, so the ability to withstand natural and man-made disasters is very weak. Fengjian Village is an individual economy created by the villagers themselves. In the face of natural disasters such as the epidemic, there are few countermeasures to resist, and the losses are very heavy. Villagers said that the fluctuation of shop income is normal and acceptable in the peak season and off season. According to the interview (Figure 9), the income of many shops in the snack street during the epidemic has been sharply reduced compared to the normal level, making it impossible to make a profit at all. The most basic source of funds is almost zero, and those shops with no savings to maintain their business have to close down. The staff of Shop C also said that in the face of the bleak income level during the epidemic, the fund chain of the shop was almost immovable, and it was on the verge of bankruptcy and



Figure 9. Ask some questions about the shop C.

closing down several times, just like those shops that could not survive. Fortunately, the old shop itself had accumulated some funds and finally survived. In addition, many B&B owners also said that during the outbreak, all rooms were empty, and they chose to close down for a period of time.

3) Finally, smallholder economies often lack a core of leadership and management. The smallholder economy itself is composed of different smallholder holders, this kind of self-management mode, from management to planning and development, and so on, are decided by each farmer, and adjust by themselves. Therefore, each farmer will not intentionally pay attention to the development of other holders, and it is difficult to form cohesion. The shops in Fengjian village are small storefronts, without large-scale enterprises. When the problems are reported to the tourism bureau or the government and other higher organizations, they are usually scattered and say their own things, which is difficult to form a strong appeal. In addition, each small farmer has a different level of education, and their plans and intentions are different. In many cases, one small farmer may have a lot of ideas about how to develop better, but another small farmer may think that there is no need to make changes, just maintain the status quo. For example, in the snack bar A mentioned at the beginning, the owner of this restaurant lacks of theories or academic knowledge about tourism economy due to her education level. Therefore, when asked about her plans for the development of the restaurant or what suggestions she would like to make to the vil-

lage committee, she thinks that it is no problem to maintain the small, stable but not high income of the restaurant. In contrast, the owner of B, a well-educated B&B, mentioned that every once in a while the tourism bureau would come to ask them if they had any questions or suggestions for improvement. Every time, the owner would tell them something that could be done better and her own ideas. The owner said that no matter she or her family members who help to run the business, they always study the knowledge of tourism economy, individual economy and so on, study the problems they are facing at present and think about solutions.

In general, the problems and bottlenecks encountered by smallholder practitioners in participating in rural tourism are mainly reflected in the following aspects (**Figure 10**): low level of industrial management, lack of risk resistance, numerous and miscellaneous smallholder holders, different backgrounds and education levels, and lack of standardization and uniformity of the whole rural tourism practitioners. How to improve the quality and efficiency, improve cohesion and so on are the problems we need to face.

4. Solution

1) In the village level set up industry association, unified standard. The trade association refers to the social intermediary organization between the government and enterprises, between the commodity production industry and operators, and serves, consults, communicates, supervises, is fair, self-discipline and coordinates. Trade association is a kind of civil organization, it does not belong to the government management organization series, but the bridge and link between the government and the enterprise. After the industry association is formed, it can manage and plan different industries of the whole village as a whole:

a) What theme should the development of various industries developed by small holders in the village be close to as a whole, whether it be centered on natural scenery or human history? In my opinion, the current development direction of Fengjian Village is mainly to create the rural natural scenery, supplemented by the village's cultural and historical heritage, and the two should promote each other for development. Small holders in Fengjian village can first learn about the history of their own village, and at the same time, combine their own stories with the village to tell the story to tourists, so that tourists can not only enjoy the natural scenery of the village or shop to small holders, but also be attracted to visit the local ancient buildings. This way, smallholder holders and the tourism economy can be closely linked, making up for the mismatch between the two in other areas.

b) The overall decoration style of the village shops should also be close to the development theme set by the association, and remind the local villagers what to pay attention to and in what direction when transforming their houses. A lot of times there will be disputes between small holders and business operators because of renovation and so on, and industry associations can help mediate. For

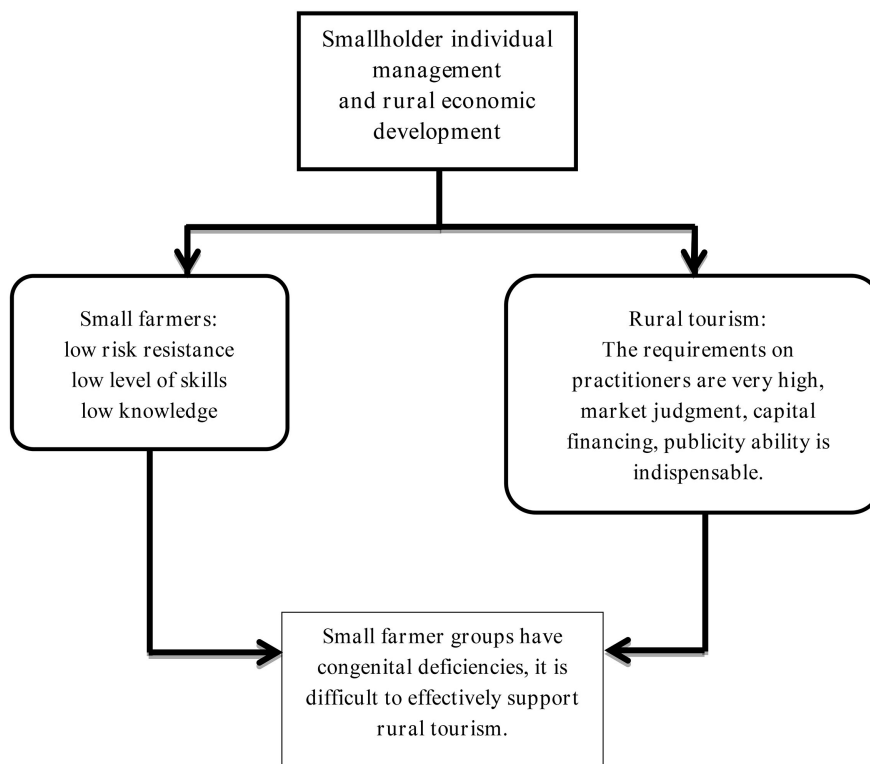


Figure 10. Showing the gap between smallholders and rural tourism.

example, the owner of B&B once mentioned that in nineteen, the village committee considered taking the cultivated land in the center of the village and transforming it into amusement facilities, so as to better build the tourism industry and attract foreign tourists. However, at that time, the contract with the production brigade had not expired, and the farmland was still under the management of the production brigade. At that time, some small farm operators had agreed with the decision, believing that their businesses could become better after the development of the farmland, but the small holders in the production brigade believed that the village committee and other small holders were trying to take over the land by force, and the compensation amount did not meet their psychological expectations. As a result, the two sides quarreled bitterly and had no choice but to put aside the development of farmland. I think this problem would be greatly reduced if a trade association were established. Because the conflict in the whole incident was mainly due to communication problems, the village committee members did not have a deep understanding of the small farming industry in the village itself, so they could not convey accurate goals when communicating with the production brigade. But the industry association, as an organization dedicated to serving small holders, can avoid this problem and accurately communicate the views of the small holders in the village, so that misunderstandings do not arise.

c) Whether it is a shop or a snack bar, the quality of products also needs to be controlled by the industry association. At the same time, the characteristics of

Fengjian village products need to be planned. For example, food is a very representative characteristic snack in Lingnan area.

The establishment of the industry association is not only to regulate the operation of small holders in Fengjian village, but also to solve the problem of small holders' dispersed operation. With leadership in place, smallholders are able to discuss and feedback on problems in their operations. For example, the owner of B&B has proposed improvement suggestions to the village committee and tourism bureau for several times, but has never received any response. After the establishment of the industry association, the owner of B&B can first put forward suggestions to the association, and then the association will ask other small holders if they have the same suggestions and ideas. Finally, the association will collect them and then report them to the village committee, tourism bureau or other government departments. This process will result in much better feedback than the small holders themselves.

2) It shall be organized by the government department or the tourism bureau or the village committee to increase the opportunities for small-farmer operators to go out for training and investigation and expand their horizons. You can visit successful case villages in Guangdong or Lingnan area for field Tours and visits. In this way, small farmer operators can make up for the uneven level of education, and make up the gap the day after tomorrow by going out for training and investigation, so as to better connect small holders in simple villages with rural economic development. For example, the owner of snack bar A may have new ideas about his shop planning after participating in the field trip, rather than maintaining the status quo. Meanwhile, he also has a deeper understanding and recognition of rural tourism. Therefore, increasing such activities can give a push to small-farmer operators, and encourage them to study and understand the rural tourism economy regardless of the level of education. Even if they still cannot come up with too many innovative ideas after thinking, they can actively cooperate with the arrangement of the village committee or industry association and have a desire for better development of the village.

3) Establish cooperatives, huddle together for warmth, enhance competitiveness. Rural cooperatives, originated in the early 1950s, are agricultural socialist economic organizations in which the means of production (land, large farm tools and livestock) owned by holders are collectively owned in natural rural areas for the purpose of the transformation of socialist public ownership, and holders perform collective labor, each according to his ability, and distribute according to his work. The rural collective economic organization is different from the enterprise legal person, the social organization and the administrative organ, and has its unique political and legal nature. The most obvious help of cooperatives is to solve the problem of small holders' diversification. Cooperatives allow smallholder holders, who are otherwise dispersed, to work together to find a way forward. When individual small holders have business problems, they can turn to cooperatives for help; when natural and man-made disasters occur, coopera-

tives can coordinate solutions. Small holders in Fengjian Village, for example, have inevitably suffered a hit to their sales in the face of the pandemic. However, if cooperatives are established in the future, small holders will be able to seek help from cooperatives in such cases. In this way, small holders in cooperatives can help each other with capital or labor to tide over difficulties together, which can effectively prevent a large number of shops from closing down and small holders from going bankrupt collectively. Another function of cooperatives is to prevent vicious internal competition among small holders and improve the competitiveness of Fengjian Village in the competition with other villages. Small holders have weak production basis, uneven education level, dispersed management mode as an individual, and lack of sufficient collective consciousness. Therefore, small holders in the same industry are easy to form a competitive relationship in the middle and late stages of development, and there will be no win-win results in the competition. For example, the owner of B & B C mentioned that he could not compete with other B & B owners and was always in a passive position. The owners of other B&Bs are also wary of the new openings, fearing they will be snatched away. This is bad for small holders, both existing and those who want to join. If a cooperative is established to bring small holders in the same industry together and develop together, the existing small holders can develop in peace and new small holders can be competitive, because the final business income is the result of joint efforts. Even in peak tourist season, the cooperative's small holders can share the pressure of business when the traffic is high.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, Fengjian Village is a very typical small holders self-employed, the development of rural tourism economy village. The problems are also obvious and fit in with the problems of smallholder farming itself: low levels of education and skills, dispersion, low resilience and poor ability to store assets. In the face of each defect, comparing with the demand of tourism economy and the cases collected during the visit, I came up with the following three feasible solutions after analysis: the establishment of industry associations at the village level; increase the opportunities for training and investigation; form a cooperative (Figure 11).

According to my visit and analysis of Fengjian Village, it can be found that Fengjian Village is currently a typical tourism village with the management model of small farmers, and its problems are also the common difficulties faced by small farmer operators. Therefore, the analysis of Fengjian village is also applicable to similar villages. To put forward theoretically feasible solutions for Fengjian village is also to solve the problems of most small farmer operators. If Fengjian Village can implement these plans and achieve ideal results, it will be a successful case that can be imitated and copied for other villages and small farmer operators.

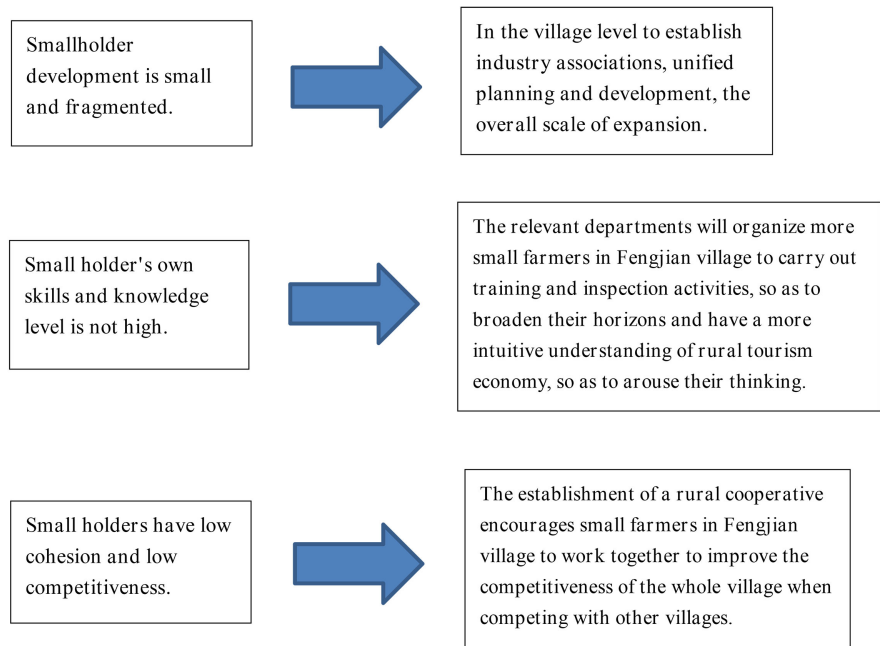


Figure 11. Showing three possible methods to solve the problems that are mentioned before.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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