

Analysis of the Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Leisure Agriculture and Rural Tourism in Zhengzhou and the Countermeasures

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ABSTRACT: *The COVID-19 pandemic has brought immeasurable impacts on the tourism industry. The author participated in the investigation of the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on leisure agriculture and rural tourism industries in Zhengzhou organized by Zhengzhou Agricultural and Rural Work Committee. According to the statistical results, the prominent problems of leisure agriculture in Zhengzhou under the influence of the pandemic were demonstrated and analyzed, and the countermeasures and suggestions for the development of the industry in the post-pandemic era were proposed.*

KEYWORDS: *COVID-19 pandemic; leisure agriculture; rural tourism; rural revitalization*

Leisure agriculture and rural tourism industries are important components of rural industry. They are new industries and new formats that span primary, secondary and tertiary industries, integrate production, living and ecology, and connect industry, agriculture urban and rural areas [1]. Vigorously developing leisure agriculture and rural tourism will help revitalize the rural areas and increase peasants' income. In recent years, Zhengzhou has vigorously developed leisure agriculture and rural tourism, which has played an important role in implementing the rural revitalization strategy and serving the construction of Zhengzhou as a national central city with fruitful results. By the end of 2019, Zhengzhou has two national leisure agriculture and rural tourism demonstration counties, two leisure agriculture and rural tourism demonstration sites, one national top-10 boutique rural tourist route, one beautiful leisure village of China and one national top-10 farmstead. A total of 76 national leisure agriculture and rural tourism star-rated enterprises have been successfully established and 13 municipal agricultural science popularization research bases have been identified in Zhengzhou. In 2019, the city's leisure agriculture industry received 22.85 million people, with an operating revenue of 1.438 billion yuan. The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 dealt a severe blow to China's tertiary industry including cultural tourism, catering and accommodation

sectors. Leisure agriculture and rural tourism, as environmentally sensitive industries, were no exception. Leisure agriculture and rural tourism in Zhengzhou have been battered by the pandemic and are facing severe challenges.

I. Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on leisure agriculture and rural tourism in Zhengzhou

(I) Great loss of operating revenue during the epidemic prevention and control period

The pandemic has had a great impact on the segments of leisure agriculture, including park recreation, nature classes, featured rural homestays, sightseeing and fruit picking, ecological catering, etc. After the lockdown of Wuhan, Zhengzhou also announced the suspension of all kinds of cultural and tourism activities and the blockage of roads and villages. Scenic spots of leisure agriculture around the city were temporarily closed down and campaigns cancelled. The production and operation of 78 leisure agriculture enterprises in Zhengzhou during the epidemic prevention and control period were investigated. The statistical analysis results show that, as of March 2020, only 12 leisure agriculture enterprises in the city had resumed work in the field of agricultural production. Among them, Miss You Cooperative and Changming Cow Paradise have been in full swing, while the other 10 enterprises that resumed work have an operating rate of about 30%. However, the leisure farmsteads are completely out of business in the aspects of catering, accommodation, sightseeing and agricultural products sales.

Zhengzhou has few leisure agriculture and rural tourism management entities based on the expansion of agricultural production. At the same time, leisure agriculture and rural tourism management in the Central Plains region are greatly affected by climate, season, flowering period and other factors. Therefore, the pandemic impact on leisure agriculture and rural tourism in Zhengzhou was mainly concentrated in the production-oriented parks relying on the primary industry and the service-oriented parks focusing on the tertiary industry, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 List of Leisure Agriculture and Rural Tourism Operators in Zhengzhou

No.	Category	Agriculture-related leisure enterprises
1	Folk tourism	Taishan Village, Fanjiamen Village, Cherry Valley Community, etc.
2	Meetings and Training	Airport Agricultural Park, Hongyi International Manor, Fenge Farmstead, etc.
3	Production and sightseeing	Miss You Jujube Town, Changming Cow Paradise, etc.

Note: Classified according to the leisure agriculture and rural tourism operations in Zhengzhou

1. Impact on folk tourism

In terms of folk tourism, Taishan Village, Fanjiamen Village and Cherry Valley Community are the representative business entities of leisure agriculture and rural tourism that operate all the year round, and the revenue during the Spring Festival holiday has a certain impact on their annual revenue. Before Zhengzhou's first-level public health response was initiated, the three business entities had relatively stable customer flow and revenues. Taishan Village had an average daily visitor flow of 5,000 and an average daily revenue of 200,000 yuan; Cherry Valley Community had an average daily visitor flow of 15,000 and an average daily revenue of 500,000 yuan. According to statistical analysis, the three business entities suffered serious losses in the first quarter, with Taishan Village losing about 30 million yuan, Fanjiamen Village losing about 5.2 million yuan and Cherry Valley Community losing about 45 million yuan.

2. Impact on meetings and training

In terms of meetings and training, the Airport Agricultural Park, Hongyi International Manor and Fengle Farmstead, as the representative entities, has a significant drop in operating revenue due to the impact of the pandemic. Among them, the Airport Agricultural Park lost about 20 million yuan, Hongyi International Manor lost about 5 million yuan, and Fengle Farmstead's operating revenue fell 50% in the first quarter. At the same time, the leisure agriculture projects involved in the three enterprises suffered unsalability of products due to inadequate employees, traffic blockade and difficulties in product picking and transportation.

3. Impact on production sightseeing

In terms of production sightseeing, Changming Cow Paradise, maintained the normal production of fresh milk during the pandemic period, but the production of sterilized fresh milk, yogurt and other dairy products was basically at a standstill. In addition, the sightseeing project stopped operation, resulting in a loss of about 800,000 yuan in the first quarter.

(II) Large sunk costs such as advertising

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, some leisure agriculture enterprises invested a lot in advertising and prepared sufficient materials for the New Year holiday according to the expected visitor flow. For example, Taishan Village invested 600,000 yuan in advertising and 1.1 million yuan in material preparation; Fanjiamen Village invested 300,000 yuan in advertising and 1.55 million yuan in , new project construction; Cherry Valley Community invested 1.5 million yuan in advertising and 5 million yuan in material preparation. Due to the outbreak of the pandemic, the attention of the public was shifted to the prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the influence of the publicity investment before the Spring Festival has basically disappeared. The publicity investment that failed to be converted into visitor flow has become the sunk costs of the enterprises.

(III) Difficulties in production resumption restricted the production of leisure agriculture

1. The problem of "difficult employment" is very prominent. Due to the strict requirements for migrant workers to return to Zheng for the prevention and control of the pandemic, relevant enterprises had insufficient labor for spring ploughing. In production-oriented parks such as Xianghewan and Shifangyuan Live Grape Farm suffered a serious shortage of labor because most of the skilled workers employed are farmers from other cities in the province. In addition, the difficulties in returning to work due to the epidemic prevention and control increased the economic and living pressure on employees in enterprises such as Wenhui Villa and Fujing Ecological Park, which made many employees leave their jobs and will also adversely affect the employment of enterprises in the post-pandemic era.

2. It is difficult to purchase agricultural materials. Due to the adoption of strict measures such as home quarantine and road closure in many places, agricultural materials, as a necessity for spring ploughing, have become a restriction for some enterprises to resume work. Songhuang Sports Town and Rose Manor once had difficulties in purchasing production materials and seeds, which brought adverse effects on spring ploughing.

(IV) Unclear agricultural product logistics channels

Under the strict control of the pandemic, the logistics channels for agricultural products are not smooth, and agricultural enterprises engaged in large-scale production have difficulties in selling agricultural products and their prices have dropped. For example, sprouts from Fengle Farm and succulent plants from Lvxing Ecological Park cannot be sold outside the province because it was unable to obtain product transportation licenses in time. In addition, some express delivery services have been shut down, the trading market has been closed down, and the number of distributors has dropped sharply. As a result, the risks of price decline and unsalability are increasing.

(V) Consumption demands are to be activated in the post-pandemic era

The outbreak of the pandemic has brought some adverse mental effects to people, such as panic, anxiety, depression and other psychological problems. It is urgent to find a suitable way to relax after long-term quarantine at home for prevention and control of the pandemic. The unique natural scenery, good ecological environment and natural cultural and tourism endowment in rural areas will surely become the first choice for people's leisure and entertainment, and will also attract many tourists on vacation.

II. Problems exposed under the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the imbalance in the development of leisure agriculture and rural tourism in Zhengzhou. The development of leisure agriculture and rural tourism in Zhengzhou is facing problems such as capital shortage and poor sales. Generally speaking, due to the insufficient integration and

development of the primary, secondary and tertiary industries, the main business entities of leisure agriculture and rural tourism in Zhengzhou show a "dumbbell" type of industrial distribution pattern of "emphasis on primary and tertiary industries and less involved in secondary industry" [2]. The weak brand awareness of agricultural enterprises and insufficient deep processing of high-quality agricultural products have led to unsalability of primary agricultural products due to their inability to be transported outwards during the pandemic period. The closure of the parks has caused some experiential projects to be unable to operate and their revenue has been greatly reduced.

(I) Shortage of funds

Affected by the pandemic, some enterprises are unable to withdraw funds through operations, resulting in tight cash flow. At the same time, they have to pay fixed costs such as rents (land/house rent), water and electricity fees, salaries, and bank loans, resulting in difficulties in the fund turnover. For example, Taishan Village pays an average monthly salary of nearly 800,000 yuan. In addition, more than 20 enterprises, such as Airport Agricultural Park and Xintian City Farmer's Park, have even reported tight fund flow. The shortage of funds has become a key life-and-death issue for enterprises.

(II) Unclear information feedback channels and single sales channel

The epidemic situation has fully exposed that Zhengzhou's leisure agriculture and rural tourism operators have a single sales channel for agricultural products.

1. Single sales channel

The epidemic situation has fully exposed that Zhengzhou's leisure agriculture and rural tourism business entities rely too much on tourists' on-site picking in the sale of agricultural products. Strawberries, fruit tomatoes and other products produced by Hongyi International Manor, Youhewan Ecological Park and Airport Agricultural Park are basically sold to visitors to the park, resulting in unsalability or price drop of agricultural products that should have been sold well during the Spring Festival.

2. Unclear information feedback channels

During the pandemic period, the high-quality strawberries featuring "no fertilizer, no additive, no pollution" of Youhewan Ecological Park were sold through WeChat groups. Due to low attention, lots of strawberries were unsalable and few visitors picked them although the price was low. This shows that the channels of agricultural products "from the field to the dining table" of leisure agriculture business entities in Zhengzhou are not smooth enough and lack a platform to dock high-quality agricultural products and high-quality customers.

III. Countermeasures for the development of leisure agriculture and rural tourism in the post-pandemic era

(I) Highlight the government's leadership and deploy active measures

1. Solve the predicament of shortage of funds

It is suggested that the competent agricultural authorities of Zhengzhou city and counties in the jurisdiction should find out the real situation of the shortage of funds for leisure agriculture and rural tourism business entities, and implement measures such as tax relief and social insurance payment deferral in conjunction with the tax authorities; study and implement measures such as loan repayment deferral in conjunction with agricultural guarantee agencies and financial institutions; carry out land rent relief and other measures in conjunction with the treasury department. In addition, we should accelerate the implementation of the 2019 financial award and subsidy policy for star-rated demonstration enterprises in leisure agriculture and rural tourism, increase subsidies for leisure agriculture from municipal rural revitalization industry fund, and formulate and promulgate incentive policies for star-rated demonstration enterprises and agricultural science popularization research and study bases in 2020.

2. Build up confidence and promote consumption upgrade

In order to create a safe and comfortable consumption environment, it is necessary to further strengthen the supervision and law enforcement of the tourism market to boost consumption confidence [3]. It is suggested that Zhengzhou's agricultural authorities issue an initiative of "supporting Zhengzhou's agriculture-related enterprises and strengthening local service procurement" to the city's administrative institutions and enterprises, so as to build a solid customer base for leisure agriculture and rural tourism business entities. Zhengzhou's agricultural authorities, in conjunction with Zhengzhou Federation of Trade Unions, should study and implement measures to include business entities and related experience projects into the scope of "Trade Union Card" subsidy objects; launch the "Green City Huimin Card" together with culture and tourism authorities and the treasury department to covers Zhengzhou's leisure agriculture and rural tourism business entities and stimulates citizens' rural tourism consumption.

3. Improve the publicity and promotion effect and create brand effect

The concept of large-scale publicity should be established. It is suggested that Zhengzhou's agricultural authorities put equal emphasis on government's public welfare project promotion and targeted publicity on the market, establish a regular information release mechanism for leisure agriculture and rural tourism, and pay special attention to time nodes such as farm work nodes, farming seasons and festivals. For one thing, we should integrate the advantages of traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television. For another, we should actively make full use of WeChat public account, mini programs, Weibo, Tik Tok and other new media, timely release leisure agriculture theme activities and routes through multiple channels, and hold special agricultural festivals to lead more urban and rural residents to find their dreams in rural areas. In addition, we should further expand the consumption market of leisure agriculture and rural tourism inside and outside the province, create brand effects of enterprises, and make up for the loss of operating revenue during the epidemic prevention and control period.

4. Improve the intelligent level of the industry

The integration of agriculture and tourism is the development direction of rural tourism and leisure agriculture. It is a new means to realize the integration of primary, secondary and tertiary industries [4]. Therefore, Zhengzhou's agricultural authorities should speed up and strengthen the intelligent construction of leisure agriculture and rural tourism industries and break the information bottleneck among government departments, business entities and consumers with big data, Internet of Things, mobile Internet and other technical means to form a benign interactive situation of "channel co-construction, platform co-governance and information sharing".

(II) Encourage self-rescue of the industry and seize the post-pandemic market opportunities

Since the whole social economy has been severely hit by the pandemic, only if the industry actively helps itself and enterprises actively seek changes can the crisis be turned into an opportunity. In the post-pandemic era, leisure agriculture enterprises should give full play to the role of leisure agriculture association as a link, actively carry out investigation and analysis of urban residents' consumption intention in the agricultural leisure tourism market, accurately grasp the trend of consumption demands on the market, organize planning and production in advance, and accelerate the expansion of the consumption market. The popularity of the phenomenal influencer "Li Ziqi" at home and abroad shows that the public have urgent demand for high-quality service experience, and leisure agriculture and rural tourism still have bright prospects.

(III) Encourage and support entrepreneurship and innovation of enterprises, and continuously improve their risk resistance capacity

We should respect the principal status of market players, actively encourage social capital investment in the rural areas and rural sages to start their own businesses in their hometowns, expand various functions of agriculture and rural areas, and promote the in-depth integration and development of agriculture and culture, leisure agriculture and rural tourism industries, education, health care and other formats. In addition, business entities should be supported to release their potential for entrepreneurship and innovation. In view of the consumption differences between urban and rural residents and in combination with the characteristics of farming culture in the Central Plains, we should diversify the development of leisure agricultural products and agricultural popular science research courses, enrich the experience of leisure agriculture to meet the consumption needs of various classes and groups in urban and rural areas, and improve the business operation ability and risk resistance ability of enterprises.

Conclusion: The development of leisure agriculture is one of the important means to promote rural revitalization and the deep integration of primary, secondary and tertiary industries. People's demand to travel was severely suppressed during the pandemic period. In the post-pandemic era, this demand will inevitably lead to a retaliatory rebound. The desire to get close to nature and the demand for outdoor

sports experience will be further stimulated, and leisure agriculture and rural tourism are the best means to meet these needs. To this end, we should actively advocate a safe and healthy lifestyle and way of eating, especially to strengthen policy support and improve relevant systems. Agriculture-related enterprises should develop more standardized and scientific tourism projects, innovate business formats, improve experience functions, and continuously provide people with experiential and distinctive personalized eco-tourism products.

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