

# *Assessing Rural Health Tourism Development in Ganshi'ao, Zhoushan*

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**Abstract:** By analyzing its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, this study employs a SWOT analysis framework to comprehensively assess the state of rural health tourism in Ganshi'ao, Zhoushan, and proposes targeted optimization measures to support its long-term development. To promote the sustainable growth of rural health tourism, this study emphasizes the importance of brand positioning, infrastructure enhancement, cultural resource integration, and smart tourism applications. The findings also provide policy recommendations for Zhoushan and similar regions, underscoring the need to integrate rural development strategies with health tourism to enhance market competitiveness and achieve sustainable economic growth.

## 1. Introduction

In the past several years, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted people's health, leading to an increasing demand for health and leisure tourism <sup>[1] [2]</sup>. With the rapid development of health tourism, an increasing number of studies have begun to focus on this field <sup>[3]</sup>. Rural tourism offers numerous opportunities to cater to post-pandemic travelers seeking physical and mental wellness activities or those looking for stress relief in a natural setting <sup>[4-6]</sup>. According to the UNWTO 2021, rural tourism encompasses any form of travel where a visitor's experience is linked to various rural elements, such as agriculture, nature-based activities, rural lifestyles and culture, fishing, and sightseeing <sup>[7]</sup>. In many developed and developing countries, rural tourism has been used as a tool for fostering economic development while preserving traditional cultures <sup>[8]</sup>.

From the perspective of Chinese policy, the nation has actively promoted rural revitalization in recent years, emphasizing the integrated development of the rural economy and health tourism. The "14th Five-Year Plan for Tourism Development" (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2021) explicitly calls for strengthening the rural economy, advancing the integration of various sectors-including health, environment, culture, and research-and enhancing the quality of rural tourism <sup>[9]</sup>. To meet increasing market demand, the "Guiding Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Rural Tourism" highlights the need to improve public services and infrastructure, develop regionally distinctive health tourism products, and optimize the structure of rural tourism offerings. Driven by both government policies and market demand, rural health tourism has emerged as a key avenue for transforming and upgrading the rural economy, improving residents' well-being, and promoting sustainable development.

Tourism is one of the largest industries in the world today, and island tourism has been significant growth in recent years <sup>[10]</sup>. Situated on the East China Sea coast, Zhoushan is a well-known island resort with abundant natural resources and distinctive island landscapes. The development of Zhoushan's tourism industry began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, spurred by China's reform and opening-up policies. Initially, Zhoushan primarily attracted domestic tourists seeking to experience its stunning island scenery and unique maritime culture.

With the rapid expansion of China's tourism industry, Zhoushan has gradually become a popular tourist destination, benefiting from its rich marine resources and unique cultural heritage <sup>[11]</sup>. However, resource advantages alone are insufficient to establish tourism as a sustainable economic pillar. Compared to the mainland, islands face challenges such as limited space, weak transportation connectivity, and restricted economies of scale, which constraint tourism development and necessitate transformation <sup>[12]</sup>. Against this backdrop, rural health tourism has emerged as a crucial direction for optimization and upgrading Zhoushan's tourism industry.

Ganshi'ao, a traditional fishing village in Zhoushan, is characterized by its prime geographical location and rich ecological resources, including unique village architecture, scenic mountain and sea views, and a high-quality island climate. Additionally, it boasts a distinctive cultural appeal, rooted in traditions such as the "Five Craftsmen Skills" and the "Courtesy and Filial Piety" culture. Furthermore, Ganshi'ao has a solid foundation for developing health tourism, offering experiences such as traditional marine diet therapy and rural handicrafts, making it highly promising for this industry.

The primary goal is to fulfill people's desire for a better life, according to the 2022 "Implementation Opinions on the Future Rural Construction of Zhoushan City," which focuses on the "one unified, three transformed and nine scenes" and integrates the construction of "beautiful countryside, digital countryside, common prosperity countryside, humanistic countryside and good governance countryside." These initiatives aim to make the future countryside a model for comprehensive rural revitalization and high-quality island development. Zhoushan region's rapid economic growth in recent years has steadily improved residents' living standards, creating favorable conditions for achieving common prosperity.

Ganshi'ao' got everything going for it- gorgeous views, a laid-back island vibe, and unique traditions like boat-making. But it's not pulling in the health tourism crowd it could. Crummy roads, weak marketing, and a lack of wellness options are holding it back. This study digs into what's tripping it up and how to turn it around.

## **2. The purpose and importance of the research**

Based on the SWOT analysis framework, the primary goal of this study is to comprehensively assess the development status of rural health tourism in Ganshi'ao, identify its advantages, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, and propose optimization strategies for sustainable growth. By analyzing Ganshi'ao's cultural, ecological, and industrial resources, this research explores its unique significance in the development of health tourism and provides a scientific basis for decision-making for local governments, businesses, and communities.

### **2.1 Theoretical Contribution**

Existing research on rural health tourism primarily focuses micro-level policy analysis and case studies of successful destinations, while micro-level studies on specific rural locations remain relatively scarce. By integrating the SWOT analysis framework with the specific conditions of Ganshi'ao, this study offers a new theoretical perspective on the development potential and challenges of rural health tourism.

## 2.2 Practical value

Through an in-depth examination of Ganshi'ao's current situation and development bottlenecks, this study provides targeted optimization recommendations for communities, tourism businesses, and local governments. These recommendations aim to facilitate the implementation of rural health tourism, enhance market competitiveness, and improve resource utilization efficiency.

## 2.3 Policy Implications

The findings of the study can serve as a valuable reference for Zhoushan City and other similar regions in formulating rural health tourism policies. By promoting the integration of the health sector with rural tourism, these insights can contribute to the sustainable development of the rural economy.

## 3. Research Question

What's standing in the way of Ganshi'ao becoming a top rural health tourism spot, and how can it play to its strengths-like its culture and scenery-to get there?

## 4. Method- SWOT Analysis

SWOT analysis is a widely used method for evaluating and positioning an organization's environment and resources across four key areas: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats <sup>[13]</sup>. This study applies the SWOT analysis framework to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the core competitiveness, development bottlenecks, and external environmental impacts of Ganshi'ao rural health tourism. Based on this analysis, the study aims to propose feasible optimization strategies and provide strategic guidance for its sustainable development.

### 4.1 Strengths Cultural Heritage and Resource Advantages

Ganshi'ao Village boasts a rich culture heritage rooted in the traditions of "Ritual and Filial Piety" and the craftsmanship of the "Five Artisans". These elements provide a strong foundation for rural tourism, allowing immersive experiences that integrate local intangible cultural heritage, such as ship model building and woodworking. This approach not only enhances visitor engagement but also contributes to the preservation and innovation of rural traditions.

The relatively low and costs in rural areas present an economic advantage for tourism development. Ganshi'ao can make full use of its underutilized farmhouse resources and vacant land to develop distinctive homestays, reducing construction costs while enhancing the rural landscape. Additionally, integrating local residents into the tourism service sector-leveraging their cultural familiarity and hospitality-can enhance visitor experiences while fostering employment and economic growth.

The demand for rural tourism in China has been steadily increasing. While 70% of the country's tourism resources are located in rural areas, they currently attract only 30% of total tourists, leaving significant room for growth <sup>[14]</sup>. Ganshi'ao benefits from its proximity to Zhoushan City, whose population of 1.173 million and rising disposable income create a solid customer base National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024. The city's tourism industry is also expanding, with a 38.1% revenue increase in 2023, reflecting growing market potential <sup>[15]</sup>. Furthermore, Ganshi'ao's favorable geographic position-close to Shanghai and Ningbo and well-connected by land, sea, and air- makes it an attractive destination for short getaways, family trips, and wellness tourism <sup>[16]</sup>.

## 4.2 Weakness Infrastructure Gaps and Service Limitations

Several challenges hinder the development of rural health tourism in Ganshi'ao. One major issue is the lack of well-planned routes and clear signage. Current road signs lack pinyin annotations, making navigation difficult for foreign visitors. Additionally, the tourism route design is simplistic, with little integration between scenic spots, reducing the overall visitor experience.

Infrastructure deficiencies further impact tourism quality. Public restrooms are inadequate, with outdated facilities and unclear directions. Emergency response capabilities are also lacking, with insufficient medical supplies, first aid stations, and trained personnel, compromising visitor safety.

Tourism services require improvement as well. Inefficient staff scheduling and high turnover rates affect the maintenance of infrastructure and overall visitor management. The lack of creative and well-organized entertainment activities diminishes the appeal of local tourism experiences. Environmental hygiene also needs attention-trash bins are outdated, waste management is inconsistent, and public spaces suffer from inadequate cleanliness.

Retail and dining options remain underdeveloped. The limited number of shops offers an insufficient variety of products, and vending machines are scarce. Local dining primarily consists of simple home-cooked meals, lacking distinct regional flavors and a structured culinary experience. Moreover, branding and marketing efforts are insufficient. Local specialty agricultural products are not effectively promoted, and many businesses lack clear external signage, further reducing consumer-interest.

## 4.3 Opportunity Policy Support and Market Trends

The national rural revitalization strategy provides strong policy support for Ganshi'ao tourism development. Government initiatives, including financial subsidies, tax incentives, and loan assistance, help mitigate investment risks and enhance funds and industry support policies further ensure sustainable development for rural health tourism.

Market trends also favor rural tourism. With rising disposable incomes, consumers are willing to pay a premium for high-quality and personalized experiences. This creates opportunities for Ganshi'ao to develop premium homestays, immersive cultural activities, and customized wellness tourism offerings. Additionally, the growing popularity of themed tourism-such as ecotourism, cultural tourism, and study tourism-aligns well with Ganshi'ao's rich cultural assets and traditional craftsmanship.

The rapid advancement of digital technology further supports rural tourism. Online marketing through social media and tourism e-commerce enhances brand visibility and attracts targeted audiences. Smart tourism innovations-such as mobile payment, online reservations, and tour guides-improve convenience for visitors while optimizing tourism management efficiency. By embracing these technologies, Ganshi'ao can develop a modern and efficient tourism ecosystem that enhances visitor satisfaction.

## 4.4 Challenges Intensified Competition and Market Differentiation

The rapid expansion of rural tourism has led to increased market competition. Many neighboring villages have launched similar tourism projects, resulting in resource and product homogenization. In the Zhanmao area, overlapping cultural and natural attractions further intensify competition, making it challenging for Ganshi'ao to establish a unique position.

Beyond competition within the tourism sector, Ganshi'ao also faces pressure from urban leisure tourism and traditional sightseeing destinations. Cities offer well-developed infrastructure, diverse entertainment options, and high-quality hospitality services, making them strong competitors.

Additionally, high-end resorts and wellness retreats continue to refine their offerings, attracting health-conscious travelers with premium accommodations and specialized wellness programs.

To remain competitive, Ganshi'ao must focus on product innovation, service excellence, and brand differentiation. Leveraging its cultural heritage and natural resources, it should develop a distinctive rural health tourism brand that enhances visitor engagement and ensures long-term sustainability.

## **5. Recommendations**

### **5.1 Enhancing Infrastructure and Public Services**

For Ganshi'ao's sustainable rural health tourism growth, optimizing infrastructure and public services is essential. The lack of clear signage negatively impacts visitor experiences, making it necessary to install multilingual signs and improve tourist route design. Additionally, upgrading public health facilities and emergency response systems-such as modernizing restrooms, adding first aid stations, and equipping medical facilities-will enhance visitor safety and satisfaction. Strengthening waste management systems and environmental regulations will also ensure a cleaner and more sustainable scenic area.

### **5.2 Leveraging Cultural Heritage for Unique Tourism Experiences**

Ganshi'ao's distinctiveness lies in its rich cultural heritage. By utilizing the “Five Craftsmen Culture” and “Cultural Rites and Filial Piety”, immersive experiences can be developed, such as wooden boat model-making and traditional woodworking workshops. Tailoring programs for different demographics-study courses for youth and wellness experiences for middle-aged and elderly tourists-will further enrich the tourism offerings. Additionally, promoting local artisans, revitalizing intangible cultural heritage, and developing region-special handicrafts and cultural products will expand market appeal and strengthen Ganshi'ao's identity.

### **5.3 Strengthening Branding and Digital Marketing**

A strong brand identity is a key to distinguishing Ganshi'ao from competing rural tourism destinations. Emphasizing its unique cultural elements while enhancing digital marketing efforts-through social media, short videos, and e-commerce-will attract younger travelers and family groups. Developing high-value rural brands, integrating online sales for local agricultural products and handicrafts, and expanding distribution channels will not only boost tourism impact but also drive local economic growth.

### **5.4 Encouraging Government-Community Collaboration**

Sustainable rural tourism requires active government support and community involvement. Ganshi'ao should leverage national rural revitalization policies to secure funding and tax incentives, reducing financial risks for development. Encouraging local residents to participate-through operating homestays, providing tour services, and engaging in tourism-related businesses-will enhance economic benefits and social cohesion. Additionally, professional training for tourism practitioners will improve service quality and help establish a high-standard rural tourism reception system.

## 5.5 Implementing Smart Tourism and Sustainable Management

Adopting smart tourism technologies will enhance visitor convenience. Implementing digital tools such as online reservations, mobile payments, and smart navigations systems can streamline the tourist experience. To prevent overdevelopment and environmental degradation, a scientific carrying capacity management system should be introduced, incorporating visitor flow control measures. Additionally, integrating green development principles, such as promoting low-carbon travel, optimizing water resource usage, and utilizing renewable energy, will support Ganshi'ao's long-term ecological and economic sustainability.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 Summary of SWOT findings

This study evaluates the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of rural health tourism in Ganshi'ao. The region's rich cultural heritage and natural resources, particularly the Five Craftsmen Culture and Li Xiao Culture, provide a strong foundation for unique tourism experiences. Government policies supporting rural rehabilitation, growing demand for health tourism, and the advancement in smart tourism technology further enhance its development potential. However, weak infrastructure, homogeneous tourism products, limited marketing, and low community participation remain key challenges. Additionally, increasing competition and environmental concerns pose risks to sustainable growth.

### 6.2 Implications

To ensure long-term sustainability, Ganshi'ao should focus on five key areas: infrastructure, cultural tourism development, branding, government- community collaboration, and smart tourism. Enhancing public services, optimizing tourism signage, and improving safety measures will elevate visitor experiences. Deepening cultural engagement through immersive tourism projects will strengthen connections with local heritage. Establishing a clear brand identity and expanding digital marketing efforts will increase market reach. Encouraging community participation and leveraging government support will drive economic vitality. Integrating smart tourism technologies and promoting eco-friendly initiatives will balance development with environmental sustainability.

### 6.3 Future research

Future studies could explore the integration of health tourism with sectors such as rural education, agriculture, and wellness programs to enhance tourism value. Understanding visitor preferences and behavior will help refine market positioning and optimize offerings. Further research should also assess the role of community engagement in sustainable tourism and identify ways to encourage greater local involvement. Additionally, examining the application of smart tourism technologies and developing ecological protection strategies will ensure a balance between economic growth, social benefits, and environmental sustainability.

With strategic planning, continuous optimization, and adaptive management, Ganshi'ao can build a competitive rural health tourism brand and achieve long-term sustainable development.

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