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THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TROUPES UNDER THE RURAL VITALIZATION STRATEGY IN CHINA

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Abstract. In line with the rural vitalization strategy of China, the performing organizations are getting increasingly more attention from the government to flourish the traditional culture in rural China. Rural troupes have emerged as a new strength to promote the cultural prosperity. The research team, under support of support of the Public Culture Service Department, State Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of China, carried out surveys in three characteristic provinces including Hebei, Chongqing and Zhejiang. After analysing the questionnaires, the situation of rural troupes in these provinces is presented. The article discusses the problems and challenges these troupes encounter in their development and provides a model for continuous ambidexteous rural troupe development.

Keywords: rural vitalization; rural development; troupes' development; creative industries

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JEL Classifications: D21, O31, O10, O32

1. Introduction

Rural troupes could be defined as the troupes who give performance in the rural area. China is a large country with 41.4% of the population living in rural areas. There are different kinds of performing originations with different styles. In the survey, we defined the rural troupes with the Public Culture Service Department, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China as follows:

1. The main actors of the performing organizations are peasants.
2. They give performances in rural areas.
3. Most of their audience are peasants.
4. The organizations are commercially oriented.

From the perspective of township, the rural troupes are all private. This kind of troupe is a highly unique performing organization, which has rooted in the traditional relationship and culture in rural area. Most of the members are all peasants making a living from agricultural industries or some other service industries in rural areas. Once performing was a kind of entertainment for peasants in their spare time but now it has become a good way to make money. The troupe is organized based on the relationship of relatives or neighborhood. They have no fixed site or performing plans but give shows in big festivals or on special occasions such as marriages and funerals in rural areas, which are traditional Chinese folk customs. The members are experienced in playing one or two musical instruments or demonstrate other artistic abilities. Agents who are familiar with villagers and have very many ties with different troupes organize most of the performances in rural areas. They invite or organize troupes to give commercial shows whenever there is a need expressed by villagers and get benefit from these activities. A troupe can give different performances according to the customs common to different places in towns or neighboring villages at a fixed price. The troupe meets the demand of peasants and it is also a new way for them to add economic value. From the survey we can see that this kind of performing organization has provided performance mainly to the audience in a rural area. In the meantime, the troupe has provided another way for peasants to make profit on the basis of their own art talent instead of labor and work on land which has been the only way for survival in rural China for thousand years. After conducting theoretical and empirical research on rural troupes, a Continuous ambidexteous rural troupe development model (see Figure 3) was developed.

2. Literature review

In general, rural areas have been associated with certain functions and characters such as agriculture, low number of populations, dispersed settlement patterns and peripherality. Thus, rural represents something opposite to urban and city and is characterized by relatively small settlement patterns and low population density. However, rural areas are not always restricted to any particular land use form, economy or degree of economic wealth, but rurality can be seen more as a socially constructed idea that characterizes it and also differentiates it from urban in specific, but culturally changing, contexts. This kind of rurality refers to different landscapes and a way of living in different cultures and economic spaces (Cloe, 2003).

Rural communities are challenged to move from primary industries and manufacturing to knowledge-based services and to respond to the globalization of national economies and the emergence of complex economic environments. In the changing context, rural communities struggle to preserve historical, cultural and environmental distinctiveness, and achieve economic competitiveness. Changes include economic and technological transformation and evolving social attitudes. Farming is no longer a sole pillar of a rural economy; some economies have successfully accessed or grown amenities for tourism and recreation, cultural and historical heritage, or natural resources for farming. Diversification makes traditional economic development strategies less relevant and meets the changing market conditions (Haggblade, Hazell, Reardon, 2010). Rural communities engage in innovation marketing of natural amenities, cultural heritage and other income-generating strategies attracting people and creating jobs (Woodhouse, 2006) not only in terms of natural resources, but also historical heritage, cultural uniqueness, geographic distinctiveness, human talent and cultural values (Daskon, 2015). To enhance rural communities as place to live, retire and/or holiday. If focus is laid on traditional revenue and employment-generating activities, there is a threat to overlook the opportunities, for embedded knowledge, skills and creative practices that offer a unique community-based learning and growth.

The globalisation of a society has led to the introduction of competition-oriented strategies, whereby cities and regions adopt a more development-oriented and entrepreneurial role. In the neo-liberalist spirit, they take more responsibility for their own development in competition with other cities and regions (Williams, 2003). Culture

and entertainment are central factors in the ability of cities and regions to compete in attracting tourists, new citizens and highly competent labour forces. Current theories of regional development encourage harvesting the grassroots creativity of local communities in order to pursue the regional development goals of particular kinds of. Examples from rural and indigenous communities in Australia and Latin America demonstrate a distinct pattern of tapping into culture, identity and creative expression to draw market resources into particular communities and regions (Eversole, 2005). A deeper understanding of creativity means to help communities reflect on their experience, define and pursue their own regional development goals. Rural communities in disadvantaged regions may find themselves working together to attract outside resources by all possible means: they may target at tourism, perhaps, or try to market local products such as handicrafts or foodstuffs. To draw the needed resources into their region, they must either find what they have that is unique – or create it. Rural communities harness the raw materials of art – if not art itself, in the form of painted streetscapes and music festivals, traditional weavings and local stories – as a way to draw market resources into their communities and regions. Regional development theory concurs that harnessing local creativity is a sound strategy: creative activities are often used by community developers as tools for community building (Boulet, Dunphy, 2005). Yet this ‘community building’ can mean different things: community art activities simply provide opportunities for local people to come together and express themselves or community art activities and events can also be managed and manipulated, so that local people must express themselves according to particular (perhaps externally imposed) categories and value systems (Eversole, 2005).

The promotion of culture and arts within the context of local development strategies may provide a crucial contribution to harmonizing the goals of economic competitiveness and social cohesion (as well as economic and social innovation). The potential for arts to support community development is based on the concept that the arts may connect with broad community agendas, products and services. The concept of community arts derives from a belief that cultural meaning, expression and creativity reside within a community so that the artists assist each other to “free their imaginations and give form to their creativity” (Goldbard, 1993:2).

Many local development initiatives have been undertaken through music (e.g. the Birmingham opera company, UK), theatre (e.g. Theatre of the Oppressed, Brazil), circus (Machincuepa Social Circus, Mexico). Arts do not necessarily provide the solution, but they help to ‘illuminate the way by inspiring people and communities. In case of deprived contexts, arts have emerged as facilitators of communication (Andre, Abreu, Carmo, 2014) by facilitating the emergence of new answers to the unsolved (political, social, economic and environmental) problems. It is apparent that creativity – social, economic or cultural – also exists outside large cities, including rural regions experiencing decline. Rural tourism is often suggested as a possible way for overcoming the difficulties that characterize these territories. In terms of the EU, the support to the development of rural areas has been mainly targeted towards social issues, the preservation of the environment and the landscape, and the diversification of the economic basis (Borruip, 2006; Skippington, Davis, 2016).

The literature on cultural industries and creative regions support idea that the arts specifically, and creativity in general, are important to regional (and rural) development - there can be a direct economic benefit to the regions in cultural industries (Gibson 2003, SGS 2004). Residents of small towns and invisible regions can use their unique cultural outputs to challenge the ascendancy of urban ‘creative classes: affirming that creativity itself by nature is neither elitist nor metropolitan. As rural communities are encouraged to take on the challenge of self-help development creatively, they are increasingly tapping into their cultural capital for practical regional development ends. Often this means a close engagement with commercial markets: tourism, handicrafts, and so forth, in order to generate economic returns. The entire communities of people, their identity, culture and creative processes can become the focus of market-oriented regional development efforts. Tapping into cultural traditions of art and craft production to support regional economic development has positive implications for people living

in poor regions as it offers an accessible income-generating opportunity, using the existing skills. It can be an option for people to maintain the existing communities and traditional ways of life while securing better livelihoods through links with external markets. Another positive regional development aspect of traditional art and craft is that they can serve as a form of cross-cultural communication between marginalised groups and the rest of the world, in which the craftsperson-artist communicates his or her way of life and way-of-seeing to outsiders. The development of a museum-shop in a Bolivian city to display and sell these indigenous textiles has led to a greater public awareness of the area's indigenous heritage and traditions and the expressiveness of this traditional art form – providing a tourism resource for the area, while also helping to improve weavers' livelihoods (Healy, 2000).

It is clear that in order to raise the economic and cultural level of rural troupes, their activities need to be constantly and systematically improved. Continuous process improvement techniques such as Six Sigma, Lean and TOC have been applied in manufacturing plants. Later, they were adapted in the service and public sectors (Pepper, Spedding, 2010; Sreedharan, Raju, 2016). A key element of Lean is the Kaizen approach, which is about engaging employees in continuous process improvement (Womack, Jones, 2003). A key element of KAIZEN is the continuous process improvement cycle of the PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act). Kaizen teams meet regularly, identify the process issues, anticipate and implement the improvement solutions. The application of the KAIZEN method to creative industries and especially to the development of rural troupes has not been widely discussed. The downside of this method is that it is more focused on improving the existing processes. In addition to developing the existing programs, the development of new show programs is a very important aspect of the activities of rural troupes. This means that efforts to improve the activities of rural troupes should also focus on developing new programs. The question is how to maintain the balance between the existing programs and the process improvement in terms of exploitation of activities and exploration of new capabilities and development of new show programs. The literature addresses this dilemma as organizational ambidexterity.

Organizational ambidexterity has been defined as the ability of an organization to make an effective use of current opportunities, while being able to identify and explore future opportunities and trends. It is argued that balancing exploration and exploitation is fundamental to firm profitability and survival (March, 1991). The existing literature on ambidexterity focuses on inter-firm ambidextrous relationships (Rothaermel, Deeds, 2004; Lavie, Rosenkopf, 2006). There are also efforts to analyze the ambidexterity of public organizations (Cannaerts et al., 2019; Bakhshi, Throsby, 2009; Rinaldi et al., 2015). The development of rural troupes through the application of duality principles has not been widely studied.

3. Research results

The research team, supported by the Public Culture Service Department, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, performed surveys in three characteristic provinces including Hebei, Chongqing and Zhejiang. The questionnaire has been developed and distributed in these provinces. The team has received and analysed 192 questionnaires. Based on the data received the modern characteristics of the Chinese rural troupes are defined as follows:

(1) Peasants Transform to Full-time or Part-time Performers.

Totally, most of the actors and actresses are from the rural areas that are specializing in some art abilities; some of them are retired professionals from the state-owned theaters in the town or the city. With the development of cultural consumptions, a strong demand on behalf of villagers provides many commercial opportunities for the troupes. Some troupes can receive orders one by one. Many of the members are becoming full-time performers in

the troupe leading to a possibility of another main income in addition to the income generated from agriculture. According to the survey, 12% of the troupe members are full time performers while 86% of them are part-time ones.

Full-time performers are still peasants in the domiciliary register but from the occupation perspective, they have transformed to professional actors or actresses, and the income structure is upgraded from the primary industry to the tertiary industry. During their development, they have produced a unique performance, which is not only different from that available in state-owned theaters but also the ticket price is lower. For example, the Yongnian xidiao is a very traditional Chinese opera in Handan, Hebei province. The troupe has 35 members and their featured performance is the Yongnian Xidiao, which performs in a local area and a neighboring town on each big festival and important days/special occasions. Year by year they have built a good reputation and receive a warm response from the audience. In 2017, their income was 2,800 Yuan per one performance which is 300 Yuan higher than that in 2016. They have signed a few performance protocols with some villages and towns and will be performing there on a schedule. According to the statistic, the troupe holds nearly 410 performances a year.

(2) The Performing Skills are More Professional

Though the troupe is self-organized by rural artistic talents, the actors and actresses are becoming more and more professional with the commercial practice growing year by year. To develop as professionals, the most of these people are insufficiently educated. They have acquired their artistic skills just because of their interests. Many of them have learned from their parents or even grand-parents. Some of them have learned by themselves. Nevertheless, there are still a few professionals who specialize in the opera or in some musical instruments because they have been educated or trained by high-level masters in the region. The troupes can provide different performances including singing, dancing, traditional opera, magic and crosstalk. At the beginning, the performances were of purely amateur nature, later the actors gained more experience their skills became more professional which lead to delivery of high-quality performances and attraction of villagers eager to watch and pay. The troupe members always play two or three roles in the troupe. Everyone is an actor and everyone is a supporter. As years go by and members develop their skills, the division of work is observed in big troupes. There is somebody responsible for performing and somebody for logistics, some of the members - for marketing and so on. Some of them will become superstars in the region, receive high reputation because of a specific program, a song or some other skill.

(3) The Performance Based on Traditional Rural Chinese Culture

The rural troupe serves the villagers in a certain area. The performers and the audience have very close cultural ties with the same living conditions and are even linked with their close relatives. Their performances show the local culture and traditional opera. To a large extent, a troupe can be considered as a symbol of local culture. The survey shows that local opera and intangible-culture heritage performance take a larger part in the performing lists of many troupes. For example, Yue opera in Shenzhou, Zhejiang province is quite famous. Most of the troupes can perform the Yue opera and some of the troupes have their own original programs. As for the Nanxiong Troupes in Wanzhou, Chongqing troupes are specialized in playing different musical instruments and also play in traditional operas. The traditional performance attracts people who are interested in the traditional Chinese culture.

(4) Commercial Relations Rely upon the Traditional Interpersonal Relations

Even though the troupe is quite commercial in the rural market, the official contract is not very important as the activities is mostly regulated by mutual trust. Traditional interpersonal relations are still the center of the commercial performance in rural areas. The agent is always a person who has many different good relations among villagers and has worked in the troupe as a member or a manager. Villagers have much trust in them.

Usually, he is the opinion leader in this circle. With his recommendation, it is much easier to get a commercial task for the troupe. In fact, these agents have a great responsibility in choosing a qualified troupe for villagers because of their pure interpersonal emotions. It is quite different from constructing modern brands. For example, these rural agents in Fuyang District arrange 60% of the local performances.

(5) Services Provided by the Troupes are Becoming Diversified

In the course of the development of rural troupes, their regular performance service has been extended and resulted in the diversification of services. For example, there is a kind of custom that demonstrating/exhibiting/experiencing/having more cries means having more sadness in the funerals. Thus, in some places, rich people ask others to cry in funerals. The troupes sometimes provide this type of services. Apart from that, the troupe also carries on some business when performing in some rural area. "Performing+retail" has been a popular mode for the medium-size troupes. For instance, when performing, they may hold an exhibition of commodities such as cooker, steamer, oven, grill and cultural stuff with a cheaper price. According to the statistic, most of the audience would buy commodities after watching the promotional demonstration. It is a new model of advertising/ promotion/ sales/ purchase called "performing shopping". It becomes an important way for the troupes to generate profit. It is reported that this kind of performing shopping model has created more than 1 million jobs and gross income has reached up to 3.5 billion Yuan per year.

Even though rural troupes have made a great effort and gained much economic and social benefit, still many problems have occurred. Some findings of our survey show the challenges of the rural troupes, as follows:

(1) The Modern Operation System is Weak for Most of the Troupes.

First, most of the troupes, especially small ones, have inexplicit positioning and no performing plans. Most of the members are insufficiently educated. Their aim is to making money though performance. If their performance is popular, they will carry out shows again and again. When the audience is tired of their programs, the troupe will be dissolved. Secondly, they have little sense of marketing. The troupes just give performances when someone invites them or they are given a task to perform by their agent. They have little sense to compete in the market to find a new niche/space and never think about giving performances to the whole city even in the province. Thirdly, they have no efficient managing system. The troupes are established based on personal relations and the common interests in the rural area. The actors and actresses have weak relations with the troupe. There are just aiming at making money for their performance. Most of them have no long-term contracts with the troupe and have cooperation on the case by case basis. Thus, they have low responsibility for the troupe. Furthermore, the leader of the troupe will invest little money in training their members to promote their career.

(2) The Troupes Lack Innovation

Rural troupes are famous for their traditional performances including a local opera. What they perform is an imitation show or an old style of a traditional art, as observed in our survey - 30% of the troupe has no new creative pieces of work. In all, 76% of cultural officials in local governments consider that rural troupes are quite weak in innovation and art creation. One reason is that the original members are not professional but amateur performers. One more reason is that they have undergone little training in professional skills. 61% of the members of the interviewed troupes think they lack creative talents to give new performances. Due to a shortage of money, only 14.7% of troupe members are supported to participate some training programs. Alongside with the development of media, rural villages have access to watching varied performances on TV and on the Internet. The survey shows that nearly 76% of the respondents prefer an original performance versus even good imitation. Another important question is how to innovate old-style traditional performing to meet the modern demands. Thus, the creation and innovation of troupes have become important issues for survival.

(3) They Lack Marketing Strategy

Most of the troupes give commercial performances in the local areas. 68% of them work in the local towns, 26.3% expand to holding shows in the neighboring towns and 5.3% of the troupes who operate well can give performances at the city level or even get a chance to hold shows at the provincial level.

Firstly, they have low knowledge on the modern marketing. Secondly, the programs they show are not popular enough for urban audience. In many cases the urban audience prefer some modern style performance to the rural traditional performance. Thirdly, most of the urban theaters prefer the state-owned performing groups. It is quite hard for rural troupes to perform in these big theaters.

The Income Structure of Rural Troupes

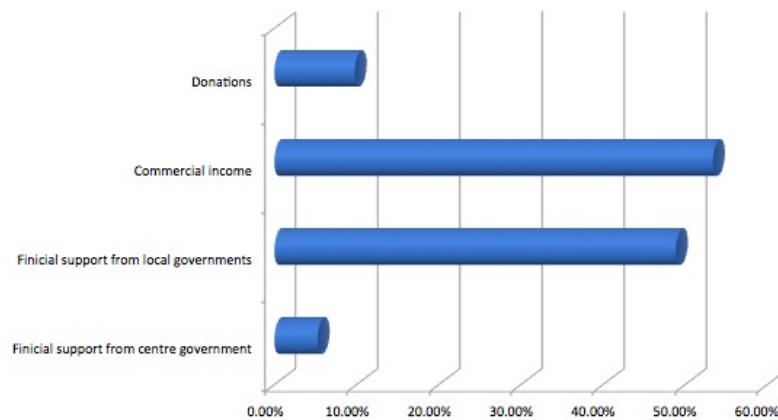


Fig. 1. The Income Structure of Rural Troupes

Source: compiled by the authors

In terms of the income structure of rural troupes, more than half comes from commercial performances (see Figure 1). The local government will provide some support because this or that group has done a lot for rural cultural construction. Local governments encourage these troupes to hold shows and to meet the demand of local villagers to watch traditional operas and other arts.

(4) The Performing Infrastructure in Rural Area is Weak

Our survey shows that the rural performing infrastructure is very weak. There is little effective cultural space for villagers including the stage and other performing equipment. In the rural vitalization strategy, the government pays more attention to the equal rights to each person's cultural development, especially in rural areas according to the rural revitalization strategy. The central government has provided a considerable amount of funds, but the efficiency of the investment should be improved. From the point of view of local and central government it is preference to invest in more populated rural areas. In some villages, there is a lack of young populations. The young generation have moved to cities looking for job, as a result of the ongoing policy of urbanization in China. In average, 70% of the population in rural areas are of the age of 60-80 while only 18% aged 40-60 (see Figure 2).

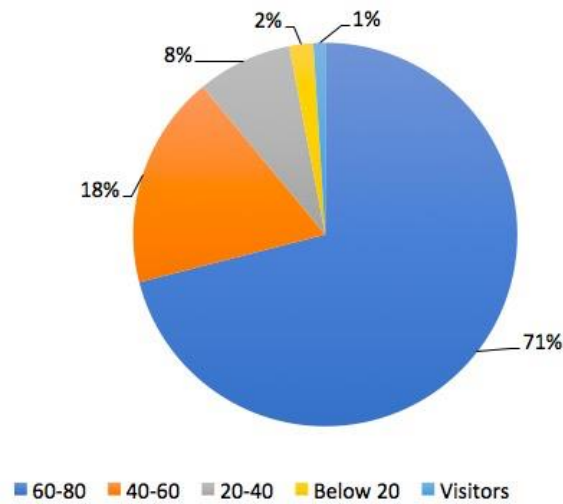


Fig. 2. The age distribution of the audience in rural areas
 Source: compiled by the authors

The population structure restricts the investment from governments. When performing, the troupes should build a contemporary stage or just be showing on the ground. This will grow the cost for troupes and the price for the audience will be higher. On the other hand, remote locations in mountainous areas have influenced much to improve infrastructure. It is difficult for the troupes to take large performing equipment when going to villages, which impacted the performing effect very seriously. Thus, weak infrastructure is a huge obstacle in developing the rural performing industry.

4. Discussion and conclusions

After conducting theoretical and empirical research on rural troupes, a Continuous ambidexteous rural troupe development model (see Figure 3) was developed. The model consists of four steps:

i. Establishment of a team for continuous development of a rural troupe. During this stage a team for continuous development of a rural troupe is formed. The team consists of two parts – core-internal team and extended-external team. The main responsibility for a rural troupe development is carried out by the core-internal team, which is formed from most active and motivated members of the rural troupe and the local community. The core-internal team makes a decision on the composition of the extended-external team. It will depend on the identified ambidextrous areas to be developed. The extended-external team is more important for explorative activities e.g. new show programme development, new technology implementation, new commercialization model development, etc;

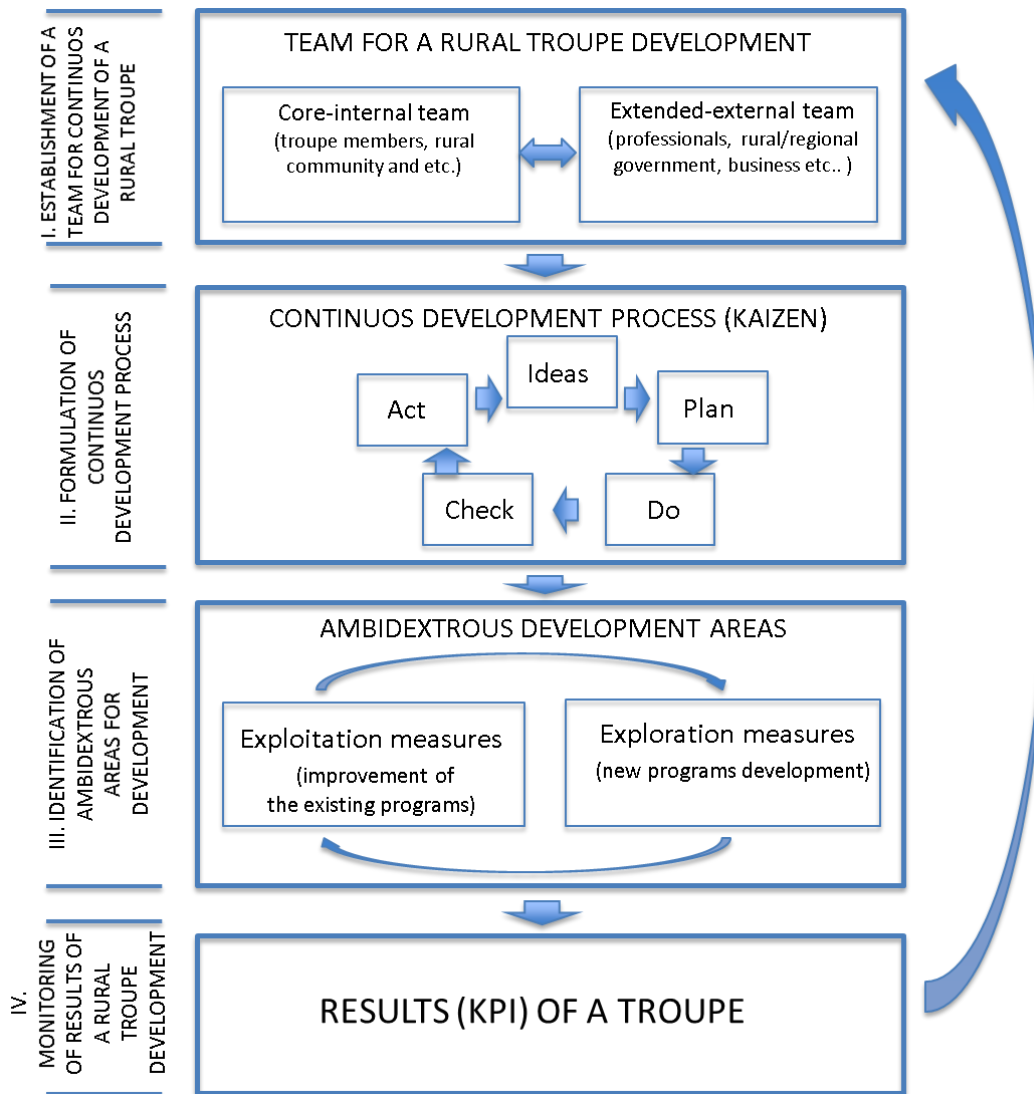


Fig. 3. A continuous ambidexteous rural troupe development model

Source: compiled by the authors

ii. *Formulation of a continuous development process.* This stage is important in order to ensure not fragmented but a systematic and continuous approach on a rural troupe development. During this stage, continuous development procedures have to be established. It is recommended to use a modified KAIZEN approach. Instead PDCA (Plan, Do Check, Act) model for process improvement, IPDCA (Ideas, Plan, Do Check, Act) is recommended to be used as it will stimulate more creative solutions often needed for rural troupe development especially for exploration activities;

iii. Identification of ambidextrous areas for the development. This stage is important to ensure the ambidexterity of a rural troupe development i.e. at the same time to ensure the efficiency and innovativeness of a rural troupe. During this stage, a team for a rural troupe development have to identify the priority area of the development (exploitation or exploration) to be focused on. As it was mentioned earlier, if the core-internal team identifies the necessity to increase the innovativeness of a rural troupe, the extended-external team, most probably, will have to be formed;

iv. Monitoring of the results of a rural troupe development. At this stage, it is important to constantly monitor the performance of the rural troupe development. Key performance indicators (KPIs) should be established to identify the progress of a rural troupe. The internal team should keep track of the indicators and make decisions on how to further develop the troupe.

Suggestions for the government to make rural troupes more sustainable are as follows:

(1) To enhance the performing infrastructure

Performing infrastructure is very important and the basic foundation to flourish the rural culture. The vitalization strategy pays more attention on it and published a series of documents to promote the traditional opera in rural areas. Thus, the government should invest to improve the quality and quantities of the performing infrastructures.

(2) To enhance Professional Trainings

Talent is the core of the troupes, which has been an important part of rural revitalization of culture. Governments in every level should enhance the training programs for rural troupes and help them to improve the performing skills. First, the government should invite some professionals in state-owned theaters to help rural troupes and help them to improve the ability in performing, operating and marketing. Secondly, the government should organize some training courses for the troupes in different art sectors for free or with a low tuition fee. Thirdly, the government can organize/offer the E-learning course for troupes. Rural citizens are familiar with obtaining information on the web. They can imitate new songs, popular dances through the mobile and the Internet. It will be an easy way for troupes to learn fashionable programs.

(3) To Give an Equal Role to the Troupe in Public Service

In the cultural system reform of China, private performing organizations have gained benefit from it in urban areas. In rural areas, the troupes are still weak and cannot get an equal role compared to the state-owned organizations. Most of them cannot enjoy the preferential policy for different reasons. First, rural troupes can be chosen and included into the purchase list of public services paid by government. Secondly, the government makes efforts to encourage the rural troupes carry out some public performing tasks in a larger market. Thirdly, the government should publish documents to promote enterprise donation to the rural troupes and provide/ assign special financial support for rural troupes to develop traditional performing art.

(4) To Create Rural-Featured Programs

A popular program is crucial for troupes. Governments should organize experts and professionals to create new programs on the theme of rural life and people there. Modern dramas, songs, dances, and comic dialogues for the local people will effectively meet the demand of rural citizens in culture.

(5) To Establish a Performing Association of Rural Troupes

Most of the rural troupes are quite weak. Establishing an association for them is a good way to integrate resources and taking full advantage of each other. In the framework of an association, troupes can exchange information and performers for complementary advantages and become much stronger.

(6) To Stimulate the Implementation of a Continuous Ambidexteous Rural Troupe Development Model

The government should encourage the implementation of a Continuous ambidexteous rural troupe development model (see Figure 3). This is a very important step /tool in ensuring the continuous development of rural troupes. The necessary training and financial support should be provided especially during the initial phase of the model implementation.

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