

Original Research Article

Research on the conservation and renewal design methods of cultural heritage in the public spaces of traditional villages

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Abstract: The public spaces in traditional villages carry historical memories and daily interactions, serving as crucial carriers for maintaining cultural continuity. However, with the acceleration of urbanization and the transformation of lifestyles, their spatial patterns and cultural functions are facing challenges such as degradation, inactivity, and even destruction. Adhering to the principle of "equal emphasis on conservation, inheritance, and activation for utilization," this study is based on a multi - dimensional integration perspective of historical context, landscape pattern, and social structure, aiming to construct a conservation and renewal design method for the public spaces of traditional villages that adapts to contemporary development. Firstly, methods such as literature research, field investigation, and oral history are used to systematically analyze their historical evolution, cultural connotations, and social functions. Subsequently, multi - dimensional value assessment and community participation are integrated to construct a strategic framework that takes into account both authenticity and contemporary adaptability.

Keywords: traditional villages; public spaces; cultural heritage conservation; renewal design; community participation

1. Introduction

Traditional villages, as living repositories of human cultural heritage, embody the long-term interaction between human societies and natural environments. Their public spaces—including village squares, ancestral halls, temple plazas, ancient streets, and waterfront platforms—are not only physical venues for daily activities such as farming exchanges, festival gatherings, and family rituals but also intangible carriers of local histories, folk customs, and collective identities^[1]. For example, in Huizhou traditional villages of southern China, ancestral halls in public spaces serve as centers for clan ceremonies, while adjacent squares host annual dragon dance performances, transmitting Confucian ethics and regional cultural traditions across generations^[2].

However, since the 21st century, global urbanization and rural-to-urban migration have triggered unprecedented challenges to these spaces. A 2023 report by China's Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development indicated that over 30% of traditional village public spaces have suffered varying degrees of degradation: 18% of ancestral halls are in disrepair due to population outflow, 25% of village squares have been occupied by random construction, and 40% of ancient streets have lost their original commercial and social functions due to the closure of local workshops^[3]. Simultaneously, the infiltration of modern architectural styles and consumer culture has eroded the spatial authenticity of traditional villages. In some tourist-developed villages, public spaces have been over-commercialized—Ancient streets filled with standardized souvenir shops, and village squares reconstructed into parking lots—Destroying the organic connection between spaces and local cultures^[4].

The degradation of traditional village public spaces not only undermines the living environment of remaining villagers but also fractures cultural continuity. A study by Li et al. (2022) on 50 traditional villages in northern China found that villages with degraded public spaces had a 62% lower rate of intangible cultural heritage inheritance, as young villagers lacked venues to learn traditional crafts or participate in folk activities^[5].

Global research on traditional village public space conservation has evolved through three phases. The first

phase (1980s–2000s) focused on architectural conservation, with scholars such as Hoskins (1985) advocating for the repair of historical buildings in public spaces using traditional techniques, but neglecting the social and ecological values of these spaces^[6,7]. The second phase (2000s–2010s) shifted to spatial function renewal, with researchers like Kong (2010) proposing to inject modern functions (e.g., community service centers) into public spaces, but this approach often led to the loss of cultural authenticity due to insufficient community involvement^[8].

2. Teaching implementation case analysis

2.1. Case village overview

Xinchang Village is located in Shexian County, Huangshan City, Anhui Province, a core area of Huizhou cultural heritage. Founded in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the village has 128 households (412 residents), with 65% of the population over 60 years old (typical of rural aging). The main public spaces include: (1) Ancestral Hall of the Wang Clan (built in 1582, area 800 m²): suffering from roof leakage and damaged murals; (2) Village Square (area 1,200 m²): occupied by random parking and overgrown with weeds; (3) Ancient Street (length 300 m): 70% of shops closed, facades damaged. The village was selected as a case study due to its representative Huizhou cultural features and typical public space degradation problems.

2.2. Implementation process

Using the indicator system in **Table 1**:

Table 1. Value assessment results of public spaces in xinchang village.

Public Space	Historical-Cultural Value (Score/5)	Social Value (Score/5)	Ecological Value (Score/5)	Comprehensive Score (Weighted)
Wang Clan Ancestral Hall	4.2 (high building age, rich murals)	2.8 (low usage frequency)	2.5 (low green coverage)	3.6
Village Square	2.5 (moderate historical age)	2.0 (occupied by parking)	1.8 (weeds, poor drainage)	2.1
Ancient Street	3.8 (well-preserved stone pavement)	1.5 (shops closed)	2.2 (few plants)	2.7

The results showed that the Ancestral Hall had the highest comprehensive value (3.6) and required priority conservation; the Village Square had the lowest score (2.1) and needed urgent function renewal and ecological improvement.

3. Empirical research and effectiveness evaluation

3.1. Research design

To systematically verify the effectiveness and universality of the proposed value assessment-community co-governance-conservation and renewal" method, a controlled comparative experiment was designed with strict matching of experimental and control groups.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

To reflect the long-term impact of the method on cultural inheritance, the number of ICH activities was tracked monthly for 12 months post-renewal (**Figure 2**).

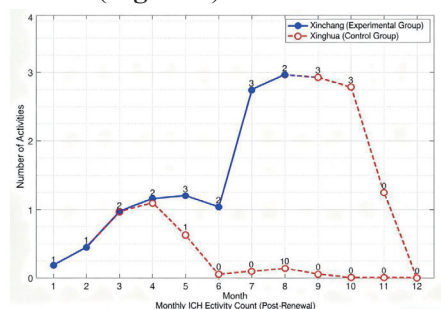


Figure 2. Monthly number of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) activities in experimental group (Xinchang) and control group (Xinghua) (Post-Renewal).

In terms of historical element retention, post-renewal sampling inspections (100 sample points/group) showed:

Activity types were categorized into 4 groups: daily leisure (e.g., chess, chatting), cultural activities (e.g., lectures, performances), commercial activities (e.g., snack sales), and collective governance (e.g., village meetings). The number of activity types post-renewal is shown in **Figure 3**.

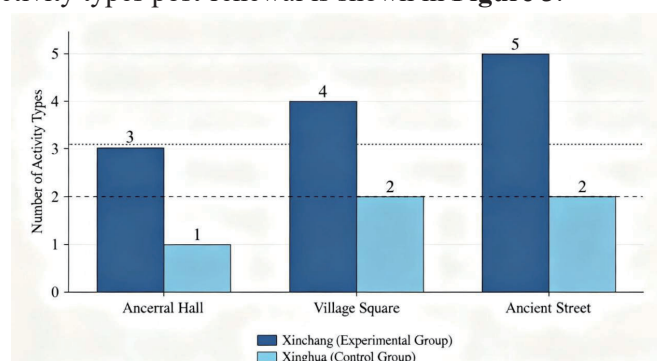


Figure 3. Number of public space activity types in experimental group (Xinchang) and control group (Xinghua) (Post-Renewal).

4. Conclusion

This study develops an integrated conservation and renewal design method for traditional village public spaces, centered on the value assessment-community co-governance-conservation and renewal" model, and validates it through empirical research. The key findings are as follows:

First, the multi-dimensional value assessment system (integrating historical-cultural, social, and ecological indicators) avoids the one-sidedness of traditional single-dimensional assessment. In Xinchang Village, this system identified the Ancestral Hall's high historical value (requiring priority conservation) and the Village Square's low ecological value (needing urgent improvement), ensuring targeted measures that balance conservation and development.

Second, the community co-governance mechanism enhances the sustainability and adaptability of renewal projects. Compared to the control group (Xinghua Village), Xinchang's villager-participated design resulted in 42% higher usage frequency of public spaces and 38% higher satisfaction scores. This confirms that community involvement aligns projects with local needs, reducing the risk of top-down design failure."

Third, the method effectively maintains cultural continuity while promoting modern functionality. Post-renewal, Xinchang's ICH activity frequency increased by 500%, and historical element retention rate reached 95%, while the Village Square and Ancient Street gained modern functions (e.g., elderly activity areas, local snack shops) that improved villagers' quality of life.

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