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CONSERVATION AND REVITALIZATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE VILLAGES: A CASE STUDY OF JINXI COUNTY, CHINA

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Abstract

China's heritage protection system encompasses material, intangible, and traditional village heritage. A combination of tangible and intangible cultural resources produces traditional villages. How to revitalize these villages has become a significant issue, as they represent the inheritance of agricultural civilization. In the northeastern part of Fuzhou City, Jiangxi Province, the proportion of traditional villages is highest in Jinxi County. Using a combination of field surveys and in-depth interviews, this article clarifies the process of conserving and revitalizing traditional villages in Jinxi County. It shows that the layout, architectural features, and integrating of multiple cultural elements embodied in the villages construct Jinxi's sense of place. These villages are also components of the ecotourism industry and are thus essential to revitalizing rural economies. From initiatives such as the "Rescuing Old Houses Action" to the implementation of "Ancient Village Financial Loans," various government and social capital investments provide financial support to protect traditional villages. Furthermore, a diverse governance model has been established, involving active participation from government entities, village committees, villagers, development companies, and social organizations. The conservation and revitalization of traditional villages in Jinxi County is a noteworthy example, demonstrating the synergies among government initiatives, community involvement, and financial investments to preserve cultural heritage.

Keywords: Traditional Villages, Value Characteristics, Conservation and Revitalization, Governance Models, Jinxi County

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, rural areas in China have faced significant challenges due to rapid industrialization and urbanization. The migration of the youth and middle-aged workforce to urban areas has resulted in the decline of many villages, particularly in traditional villages, causing population hollowing, cultural decline, and land idleness (Green, 2018; Li et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2022). Additionally, some unscientific construction practices, such as using non-traditional materials, demolishing old buildings, and excessive tourism, have caused damage to architectural integrity and traditional lifestyles (Sun, 2017; Zhang, 2017). Studies show that traditional villages hold historical value and are recommended as heritage tourism resources supporting urban development (Ahmad & Ramli, 2022). Traditional architecture, as a critical element, attracts tourists (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Protecting these villages preserves cultural heritage and promotes balanced tourism and urban-rural development.

After 2012, the Chinese administration began to issue a sequence of policies to make traditional villages effectively protected, reasonably utilized, and efficiently governed. In July 2023, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development released the first batch of referable experiences for protecting and utilizing traditional villages, covering provinces with dense distributions of traditional villages, such as Jiangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Anhui.

Focusing on Jinxi County, a region with many traditional villages in Jiangxi Province, the objectives of this paper are (i) to highlight the value attributes of traditional villages about tourism; (ii) to analyze financial sources for the preservation and revitalization of traditional villages; and (iii) to clarify the governance models that involve various stakeholders. The outcome of this paper will provide insights and case studies for similar initiatives elsewhere.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Study on the Conservation and Advancement of Traditional Villages in Jinxi County

Studies on the conservation and advancement of traditional villages have intensified since the establishment of the village protection system in China in 2012. Studies have focused on analyzing spatial layouts and characteristics (Hu et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020), public spaces' transformation and optimization (Chen et al., 2018; Feng & Zhao, 2016), and developing evaluation systems and methods (Wang & Sun, 2021). Ancient villages in southern Anhui (Wannan) and Huizhou ancient villages have been focal points of scholarly research (Li et al., 2017).

Due to the later initiation of traditional settlement protection efforts in Jinxi County, more research is needed on the conservation and advancement of traditional villages, as current research primarily concentrates on the following facets. First, field research on typical traditional villages is conducted to determine their value and structural characteristics (Fan & Zhong, 2017; Yang &

Long, 2021). The second covers local practices of cultural heritage protection and development (Wang et al., 2021; Wu, 2020). After nearly ten years of local practices, the conservation and improvement of traditional villages in Jinxi County have successfully revitalized tangible heritage and government effectiveness. Systematic investigations and research are needed to summarize experience.

Jinxi County

Established in 994 AD during the Chunhua era of the Northern Song Dynasty, Jinxi County is located northeast of Jiangxi Province, between the Wuyi Mountains and the Poyang Lake plain (Yao & Cai, 2020). Regarding natural geographical conditions, Jinxi has a mild climate and fertile soil, leading to prosperous agriculture and earning the historical designation of "Grain Production Base in Eastern Jiangxi." Regarding historical and cultural aspects, Jinxi has a longstanding tradition of cultural reverence and educational importance, resulting in numerous talents. In the core region of Linchuan culture, Jinxi County has been deeply influenced by this cultural heritage, becoming a national base for the woodblock printing industry and flourishing in commercial trade based on the Fuhe River in the Qing Dynasty.

Furthermore, Jinxi County historically had a relatively slow economic development compared to other regions in Fuzhou since ancient times, which is the main reason behind the preservation of many traditional villages (Chen et al., 2018). Most of these traditional villages were established during the Song Dynasty, prospered in the Ming Dynasty, and were stable and perfected during the Qing Dynasty, earning them the title of living fossils of well-preserved Ming and Qing-style Gan architectural settlements (Wu, 2020).

Traditional settlement conservation in Jinxi County began relatively late, with Zhuqiao Village added to Jiangxi's historical villages list in 2009. Since then, development has accelerated. The county now boasts one regional historical city, two historical districts, one national historical town, six national historical villages, and 57 Traditional Chinese Villages. The quantity of traditional villages ranks first in Jiangxi Province. Their spatial distribution is shown in Figure 1. These settlements feature well-preserved spatial structures, high-quality traditional buildings, and valuable historical documents, embodying the essence of traditional settlements in the central region of Jiangxi Province (Yao & Cai, 2020).

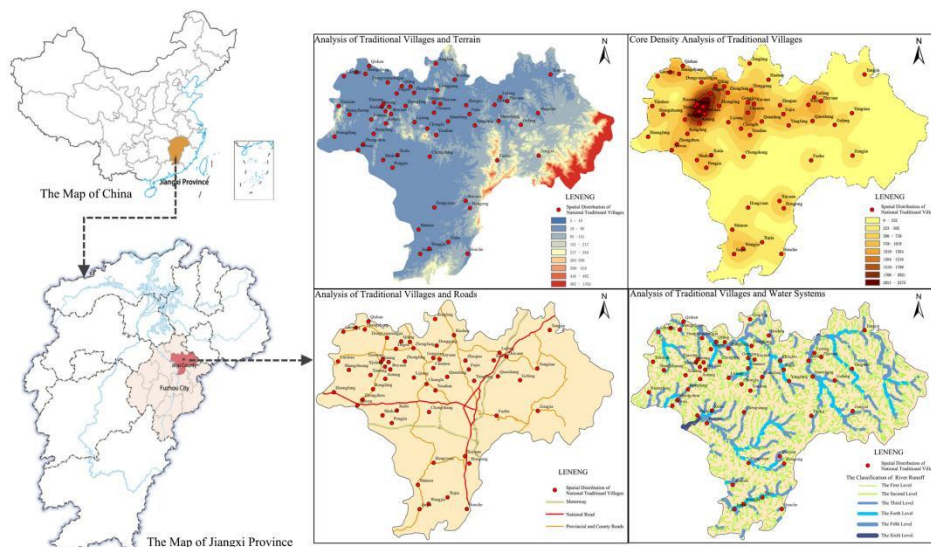


Figure 1: The Location of Jinxi County, China, and the Spatial Spread of Traditional Chinese Villages in Jinxi County
 Source: Author (2023)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data and materials for this study were mainly gathered through fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and the study of documents from June 2021 to September 2022. The fieldwork included active observation, drawings, and photographs. The primary qualitative research methods focused on investigating the attributes of the physical environment in traditional settlements and the implementation procedures. A purposive sampling method was used to select seven participants, ensuring diversity in backgrounds and involvement during the implementation phase. The primary information of the seven interviewees is shown in Table 1. Furthermore, the management methods, implementation plans, rules, and regulations for preserving and enhancing traditional villages were acquired through an analysis of policy documents released by the local government.

Through extensive field investigation, our research probed into three questions: (i) What heritage resources and values do traditional villages depend on to enhance the tourism industry? (ii) What financing sources are available to preserve and enhance traditional villages? (iii) What are the anticipated benefits of the protective practice that local people expected, and what are the actual outcomes achieved on the ground? To address these questions, the interviewees we have chosen mainly include (i) experts studying the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage in Jinxi; (ii) government administrators overseeing traditional village preservation and advancement initiatives; and (iii) local villagers who have consistently participated in protective efforts. This paper

adopts a qualitative research method of thematic analysis to organize interview data. According to the fieldwork mentioned above, we gained a thorough understanding of the development of preservation and sustainable utilization techniques in traditional villages in Jinxi County.

Table 1: Interviewees' demographics

ID	Age	Occupation	Role
IV1	55-60	The director of the Cultural Relics Research and Conservation Center	The expert specializes in safeguarding cultural artifacts in Jinxi County and has participated in assessing the value of numerous traditional villages and conducting research on traditional building construction.
IV2	50-55	The head of the Old House Management Office	Involved in the "Rescuing Old Houses Action" in Jinxi County.
IV3	40-45	The director of Rural Development and Revitalization Investment Group	Responsible for transferring traditional village operating rights and financial loans for ancient villages.
IV4	35-40	The inheritor of Jinxi woodblock printing intangible cultural heritage	A returning adult who repairs old buildings and promotes intangible heritage culture experiences.
IV5	60-65	The former village secretary of Youdian	A local cultural heritage conservator and the First, we need to protect the historic building in Youdian village.
IV6	45-50	The hotel owner and tour guide in Zhuqiao village	Integrating accommodation with the surveying and mapping of ancient architecture courses of universities.
IV7	40-45	A local cultural tourism company owner	Involved in developing rural cultural tourism in Lufang village.

Source: Author (2023)

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Heritage Conservation Value of Traditional Villages in Jinxi County

Traditional villages in Jinxi County exhibit unique settlement characteristics, creating a cohesive ecosystem with the natural environment. Situated in varied landscapes, some villages are in hilly areas by water bodies, while others are on plains encircled by farmland. These types of site selection are highly conducive to developing traditional agriculture. Despite years of development, the spatial configuration of streets, alleys, and architectural styles remains preserved. Notably, these villages often feature defensive layouts with gatehouses at cardinal points (Chen et al., 2018), resembling fortresses (Figure 2), as seen in Beikeng and Chenghu Villages, enclosed by continuous exterior walls. According to IV1, a local cultural heritage expert, this defensive design stems from two main reasons: (i) Many of these villages are single-surname villages, where the entire clan of several hundred households is considered one village, constituting a large

family. (ii) During invasions of mountain bandits, this layout served as a defense mechanism against external threats.



Figure 2: The Defense Pattern with Gatehouses of Village Construction
Source: Author (2018)

Ceremonial buildings and Gan-style residential architecture are a form of essential tangible cultural heritage that shape the local identity of Jinxi and serve as the core carriers for rural cultural tourism development. Clans in China are historically a self-governing social structure in rural areas, typically formed around familial relationships (Shen & Chou, 2022), and the villagers with the same ancestor and surname laid out their residential buildings around ancestral temples, forming a spatial form of "cohabitation of clans." Ceremonial buildings encompass ancestral halls, academies, stages, and archways, creating the spiritual space of the village's "cohabitation of clans." For instance, the Lu clan organizes the yearly ancestor worship event in the ancestral hall of the Lu family in Lufang Village on Lunar New Year's Day (Figure 3), drawing numerous tourists. IV1 stated that the ancestor worship ceremony enhances visitors' comprehension of the local culture. Traditional residential buildings are distinctive Gan-style houses with Jiangxi characteristics shaped by the natural environment and village layout. These dwellings primarily adopt a courtyard-style layout (Huang, 2008), using the "Jin" as the basic structural unit, with the typical floor plan often following the "one bright, two dark" three-space pattern (Figure 4).

In addition, traditional villages in Jinxi County incorporate various cultural elements such as the Philosophy of the Mind, business guild culture, and clan culture. Lufang Village is famous for Lu Jiuyuan, a key philosopher from the Southern Song Dynasty, and now is a recognized site for family tradition and education in Jiangxi. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Zhuqiao and Huwan Villages were significant centers for woodblock printing, significantly influencing the Jiangxi business guild with their widespread trade. These

historical cultures have inherited cultural values and strengthened the sense of belonging among the local villagers.

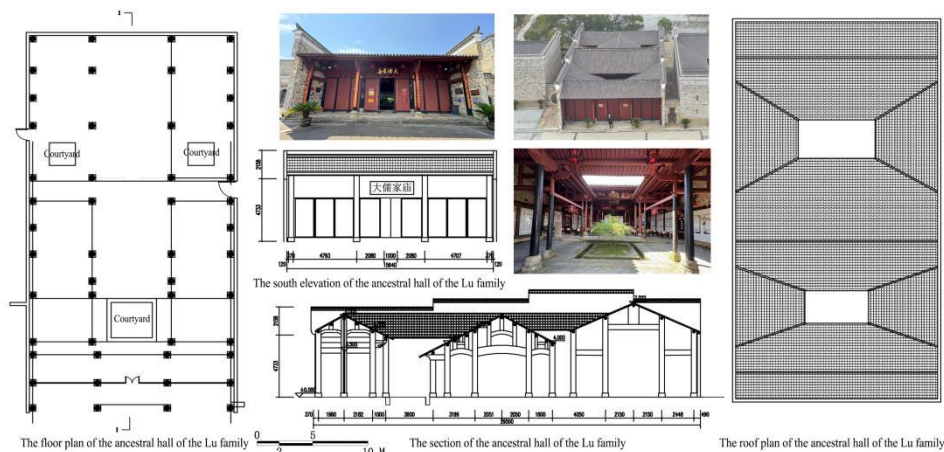


Figure 3: Mapping the Lu Family's Ancestral Hall in Lufang Village
 Source: Author (2023)

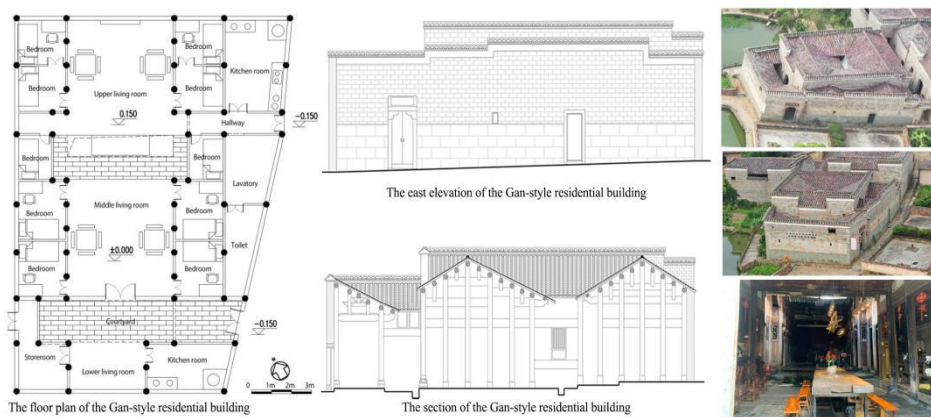


Figure 4: Mapping of the Gan-style residential building in Zhuqiao Village
 Source: Author (2023)

Conservation and Revitalisation Funds

The primary task of protecting traditional villages is preserving and renovating traditional buildings, which require substantial funds for restoration. From the "Rescuing Old Houses Action" to the "Ancient Village Financial Loans," Jinxi County has made valuable explorations on raising conservation funds.

The "Rescuing Old Houses Action" Project

The "Rescuing Old Houses Action" project, funded by the Ministry of Finance and managed by the Chinese Cultural Heritage Foundation, concentrates on preserving traditional villages. It began with a successful pilot in Songyang County, Zhejiang Province, in 2016 and expanded to Jinxi County, Jiangxi Province, in 2018. The project, completed over two years, involved a total investment of 80 million yuan. The Foundation contributed 40 million yuan, with Jinxi County providing matching funds of 24 million yuan, and property owners self-raised 16 million yuan. Property owners identified as impoverished were paid a full subsidy for renovating their old houses. IV2, the head of the Old House Management Office, stated:

"The "Rescuing Old Houses Action" project has renovated 750 ancient dwellings in the county. Some renovated ancient dwellings have been revitalized and transformed into homestays, restaurants, and private museums, creating a certain economic value."

Jinxi County developed specific policies for effective project implementation, such as the "Implementation Plan for the Rescuing Old Houses Action in Jinxi County" and the "Financial Management Measures for the Rescuing Old Houses Action in Jinxi County." Based on these policy documents and building upon the implementation plan of the "Rescuing Old Houses Action" project in Songyang County (Zhang et al., 2021), the author has summarised the collaborative relationships among various parties in the project (Figure 5). The collaboration framework includes the following stakeholders: (i) The owners of old houses, the leading force in the project, selecting craftsmen to assist them in completing project applications, renovation plans, budget preparations, and construction organization. (ii) The "Old House Office," which offers help and guidance to villagers in various procedural aspects of the project, playing a supporting and supervisory role. (iii) The Design Research Institute, as the technical support team of the project, focuses on the technical direction of project implementation and the training of local craftsmen. In addition, the foundation provides funds and oversees progress. The foundation also engages the media to enhance the project's visibility, ensuring a well-functioning system involving property owners, government, foundation, and technical teams.

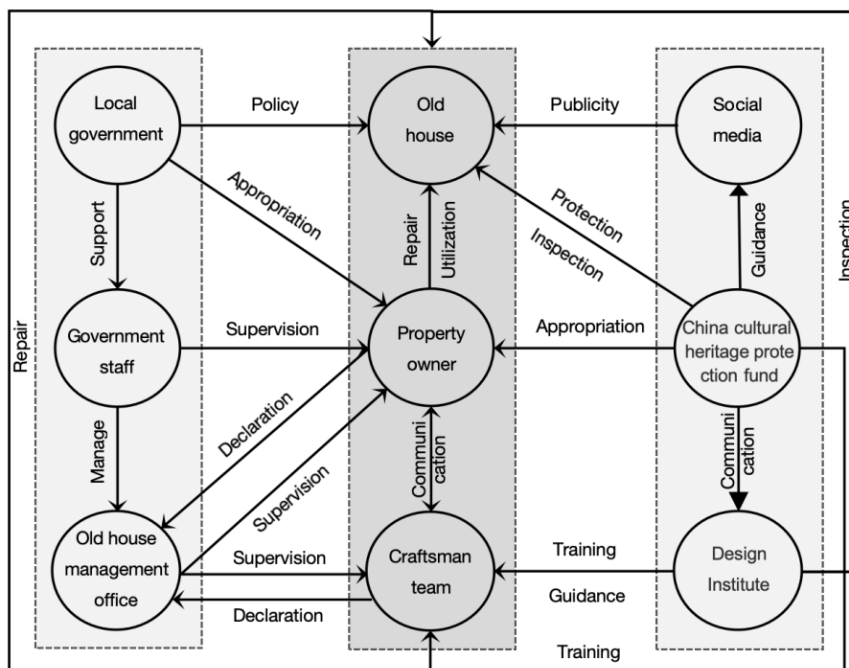


Figure 5: Work Relationship Diagram of "Rescuing Old House Action" in Jinxi County

Source: Author (2023), based on the police documents about the "Rescuing Old Houses Action" project

The "Ancient Village Financial Loan" Project

Besides the special funds supported by the central government, social capital's participation is a crucial driving force for revitalizing traditional villages. In 2020, Jinxi County launched the innovative "Ancient Village Financial Loan," intended to stimulate social capital's enthusiasm to actively renovate and utilize ancient villages and traditional buildings. IV3, the director of Rural Development and Revitalization Investment Group, introduced the "Ancient Village Financial Loan" operation process, which uses old houses with clear property rights as collateral (Figure 6).

First, the Jinxi County government established a dual certificate system for old buildings' property and operating rights. Through the "Jinxi County Ecological Product Trading Centre," the old buildings' property rights registration system is improved. Second, as the property owners of old buildings, villagers can voluntarily entrust the old buildings to the village committee. The committee then transfers the operating rights to the county's tourism investment or development company. After entrustment, the property rights of old buildings remain unchanged, and investors can use part of the operating rights of old buildings as collateral to apply for loans from banks.

With the expansion of China's domestic demand market, local talent is required in rural regions (Shen & Chou, 2022). Youthful abilities can significantly boost innovative business advancements in rural areas (Kao et al., 2018). Implementing the 'Ancient Village Financial Loan' has attracted some youth to return to their hometowns for entrepreneurship. IV4, a returning adult and the inheritor of Jinxi woodblock printing's intangible cultural heritage, repaired his old house and rebuilt it into the Qin Tian Academy. The academy is open to visitors free of charge and provides reading spaces and books. Furthermore, IV4 leased and renovated old houses, turning them into homestays and traditional skill workshops, such as Jinxi woodblock printing craftsmanship. Revising old houses has also stimulated employment opportunities for other local villagers.

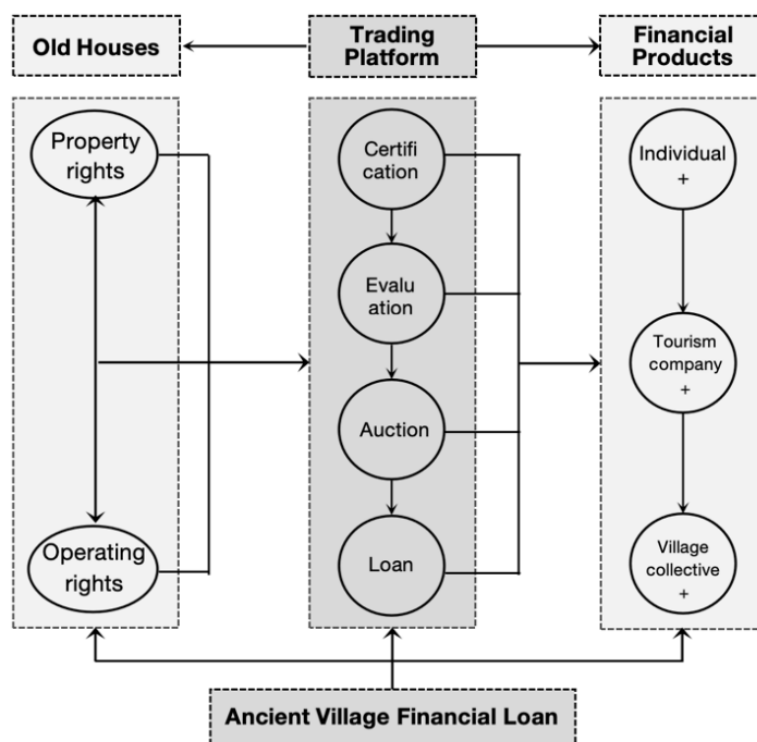


Figure 6: Diagram of " Ancient Village Financial Loan " in Jinxi County
 Source: Author (2023), based on the police documents about the " Ancient Village Financial Loan " project

The Governance Models

In modern society, as traditional villages transform from a single residential purpose to a versatile role encompassing dwelling, tourism, and research, the phenomenon of diversification in rural governance stakeholders has emerged

(Feng, 2013), which include local governments, development companies, village councils, ordinary villagers, and cultural experts (Wang et al., 2021). Some Chinese scholars have analyzed through case studies the roles of various participating subjects in the rural governance process, categorizing rural governance models into government-led, development company-led, and village council-led (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). According to surveys of the implementation process of preserving and developing traditional villages in Jinxi County, it has been found that its governance model generally follows the patterns of typical rural governance but also exhibits uniqueness.

Zhuqiao Village: the local government-led model

Zhuqiao Village was established in the early Ming Dynasty. In ancient times, the village was also one of the leading production centers for Jinxi woodblock printing. In 2010 and 2012, Zhuqiao was designated the Historical and Cultural Village and the Traditional Chinese Village by the Chinese Ministry of Construction and the National Cultural Heritage Administration. The rural governance process in Zhuqiao can be segmented into three phases:

Initially, under the clan family's influence, villagers autonomously organized living spaces around ancestral halls, forming a spatial pattern with traditional Chinese kinship characteristics.

During the second phase, the village's historical significance prompted the local government to implement heritage protection measures. They employed cultural specialists to restore ancestral halls and academies and established legislation to protect them. The village committee was crucial in informing villagers and harmonizing their interests for project success.

In the third stage, the focus shifted to revitalizing the village through investments in traditional buildings and the living environment. Rural tourism facilities were also developed, and various tourism initiatives were enhanced, leading to Zhuqiao Village being recognized as a national 4A-level tourist attraction in December 2017. The following year, a tourism development company was brought in to manage the scenic area.

The comprehensive protection of Zhuqiao Village, from financial investment to the concrete implementation of preservation, has been led by government departments. The cultural experts, local elites, villagers, and development companies support the governance activities of the local government. Under this governance model, Zhuqiao Village has achieved a unified village protection plan. It has also become one of the most mature villages in rural tourism development in Jinxi County, inspiring a group of villagers to return to their hometown for entrepreneurial opportunities. IV6, a local hotel owner and tour guide in the hamlet, converted her new residence into a three-story lodging. She refurbished her ancient residence, constructed during the Qing Dynasty, to accommodate up to 60 households.

Youdian Village: the village council-led model

Youdian village was established during the early Ming Dynasty. It has preserved over 36 ancient buildings and seven ancient streets from the Ming and Qing periods. Youdian was designated as the Traditional Chinese Village in 2016 and the Historical and Cultural Village in 2018 by the Chinese Ministry of Construction and National Cultural Heritage Administration. The rural governance process in Youdian village can be segmented into two phases:

During the village protection phase, IV6, the former village secretary of Youdian, first realized the village's value and proposed protecting historical buildings. In 2015, he took the lead in repairing his old house, actively mobilizing villagers to restore their houses and coordinating with social forces to donate funds to restore historical buildings. In 2018, the village became among the first in Jinxi County to implement the "Save Old Houses Action" project. Thirty-six residences constructed in the Ming and Qing periods were restored.

During the village revitalization phase, the village became a pilot village for whole-village trusteeship in 2020. The Rural Development Revitalization Investment Group, a dedicated department of the local government, signed a trusteeship agreement with the village. The group applied for mortgage loans using part of the operating rights of old houses and carried out environmental improvement and revitalization of traditional buildings in the village. In 2021, prestigious Chinese universities, including Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Wuhan University, renovated three old houses in Youdian Village, combining cultural heritage with digital technology for display. The village has become the basis for outdoor educational programs of these universities, carrying out ancient village visits, ancient building surveying, sketch teaching, and cultural folk experience activities.

The village council played a crucial role in the early protection stage by integrating various funds to restore historical buildings. The local government was the primary investor in the revitalization and utilization stage. Simultaneously, universities supported the preservation and showcasing of the significance of old buildings through restoration design.

Lufang Village: the development company-led model

Lufang village was built during the Five Dynasties and is listed as one of the fifth batch of Traditional Chinese Villages. In 2015, Lufang Village used special funds for rural construction to renovate the village's living environment. In 2019, to commemorate the 880th anniversary of Lu Xiangshan's birth, the village was leased entirely by a tourism development company. The company invested more than 20 million yuan to initiate the restoration project of ancient buildings, including the restoration of 6 ancient buildings, the construction of 5 water-based homestays, and the development of related tourism. IV7, the local cultural tourism company owner, said:

“The village tourism company development has expanded the villagers' employment opportunities. The company employees comprised many villagers, including two managers, three guides, eight salespeople, five security guards, and ten cleaners.”

In Lufang Village's rural governance, the tourism company has invested in acquiring the right to use traditional buildings. The Village Council coordinates the acquisition matters between the company and the villagers, while the government invests in improving the village's living environment. The village has formed a model with the development company leading, while the government, village committee, and villagers offer collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Protecting traditional villages is primarily a public welfare undertaking and is not easily profitable in the short term. Jinxi County has many traditional villages, and the rich historical heritage poses significant economic and technological pressures on conservation efforts. However, through practical experience in recent years, Jinxi County has accumulated substantial expertise in preserving and revitalizing traditional villages, achieving notable success.

Protection values: Jinxi's historical and cultural heritage, including its traditional village layout, Gan-style architectural traditions, and diverse cultural elements, shapes its unique identity and contributes to the ecotourism industry, which is crucial for rural economic development.

Conservation and revitalization funds: From the "Rescuing Old Houses Action" to the "Ancient Village Financial Loans," local governments have actively applied for special funds from the central and provincial governments, which are critical to protecting traditional villages. At the same time, the involvement of social capital is a significant driving force for revitalizing and utilizing traditional villages.

Governance models: Jinxi's government of traditional villages involves local government, development companies, village councils, and social organizations to preserve and rejuvenate these villages. This effort has taken three main forms: government-led, development company-led, and village council-led.

This article mainly explores the historical significance of traditional villages in Jinxi, the financial sources for their preservation and revitalization, and governance models. Challenges have arisen during the protection and revitalization process, such as the departure of young people from the village, inadequate participatory depth, tourism experience, and a lack of citizen involvement. In-depth research is required to examine the practical factors involved in adopting different governance models and their impact on the rural revitalization of ancient villages.

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