

A Disappearing World: Historic Villages beyond the Proximity to Metropolises

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Abstract

With a new wave of urbanisation and the call for building a new socialist countryside, rural areas of China have been undergoing a dramatic change. Rural areas in China have always been the major part of China's vast territory, in which historic villages still comprise one of the main types of settlements even today. The Chinese ancient villages usually followed the philosophy of "Unity between Human and Nature", pursuing the creation of harmony between humans and their environment. Admittedly, in the past a few years, China has achieved some success in historic village conservation; a typical case is "the Six Water Towns". However, those villages enjoy a superior location advantage, adjacent to local metropolises. By developing tourism industry, these ancient villages have become backyards for centres such as Shanghai, Hangzhou and Nanjing. With such a large market, investments are flooding in, which provide a strong support for their conservation. But many more historic villages, which are even more ancient, typical and precious, disperse in much more rural and even mountainous areas, far away from large cities and not very easy to access. Contrasting the booming development of cities and historic villages in the proximity to large cities, historic villages outside of the radiate circle of metropolises are just like in the cleft. It is urgent to save those historic villages in China now. As a Research Fellow and Urban Planner, I have been participating in the whole programme of Landscape Villages of China launched in April 2007, which was hosted by the Chinese Committee of Conservation and Development of Historic Villages. Based on the study during the above programme, this paper aims to present a framework of those historic villages "trapped in the cleft". Firstly, it reviews the conservation and development of historic villages in China. Then an analysis on the threats to historic villages, especially those villages are not in the proximity to metropolises is forwarded. Furthermore, new initiatives of the programme of Landscape Villages of China to solve those issues harassing Chinese historic villages are presented. Finally, a ladder of conservation and development of historic villages is forwarded.

Key Words: historic villages, conservation, development, threats, China

Introduction

If there is no doubt that modern China has undergone dramatic change over the past 3 decades, it is equally certain that with continuous modernisation and urbanisation, historic villages in China have also experienced a sea of change.

With a continuous history stretching back 5,000 years, there are thousands of historic villages dispersing in the vast territory of China. Generally, Chinese historic villages followed the philosophy of “Unity between Human and Nature”, pursuing to create high harmony between human and their environment.

It is obviously that in the past three decades, China has achieved outstanding economic progress and urbanisation. With the increasingly flooding foreign investment and splendid growth of its GDP, a wave of grand construction has been seen almost in every city in China. Typical cases are such as National Stadium for 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing Capital International Airport Terminal 3 and Shanghai World Financial Centre. More and more New York styled skyscrapers have been building in Chinese cities, which shows the great ambition of a booming country.

According to the *Global Urban Competitiveness Report(2007 ~2008)*, written by Dr. Pengfei Ni from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Prof. Peter Karl Kresl from Bucknell University of the United States, the rate of urbanisation of China has reached 44.9% by the end of 2007. Meanwhile, in terms of urban competitiveness, 59 Chinese cities have upgraded to Top 500 among the global cities, with Shanghai seating Top 41, Shenzhen Top 64 and Beijing Top 66.

In recent years, benefiting from the achievement of economic development, incomes growth and the carrying out of long holiday system such the Golden Weeks (National Day Holiday and the Labour’s Day Holiday(suspended in 2008)), more and more Chinese people have shifted their travelling destinations from big cities to historic villages and towns. For instance, the number of tourists to visit Anhui historic villages to 13,000 people in the National Day holiday in 2007, which has increased 12.0% than the figure of 2006 (Anhui Provincial Department of Agriculture, 2007). This has generated a number of famous travelling destinations such as “the Six Water Towns”, namely Jiangsu Province’s Zhouzhuang, Tongli and Luzhi and Zhejiang Province’s Xitang, Nanxun and Wuzhen. Those six water towns have achieved great success in terms of conservation and development, which have won a global fame.

However, while we celebrating those kind of achievements in big cities and outstanding cases like “the Six Water Towns”, far more historic villages far away from big cities should never be forgotten. The Six Water Towns are all located in the most prosperous region of China, the Yangtze River Delta. With such a superior location, there are no doubt that tourists flooding in and consequently the funds for conservation and development. But historic villages as fortunate as “the Six Water Towns” are small in number. They can not receive as many tourists and as much

concern as “the Six Water Towns”.

Although in recent years, a new kind of tourism form “Farmhouse Home Stay” (Nongjiale in Chinese), which is featured to provide tourists a chance to stay in a local farmer’s home and experience a rural pastoral life, has been flourishing in China and has generated a considerable amount of funds for those historic villages not in the proximity to large cities, the funds for the conservation are utterly inadequate. Moreover, in a weave of urbanisation and commercialisation in China, in order to attract more and more tourists, many historic villages build new parking lots, restaurants, hotels and highways in historic villages, which have destroyed the elegance and peace of those living museums. In 2005, the Central Government of China released a new policy aiming to build a new socialist countryside. This policy provides a new opportunity for historic villages, but also poses great challenges. For many historic villages maintain that to build a new socialist countryside is just to demolish the old buildings and erect new ones. Many of those historic villages are disappearing. Saving those precious historic villages which are also the nature links of our society is urgent in China now.

Conservation and Development of Historic Villages in China

As a kind of cultural heritage, historic villages represent the historic evolution of a place in different periods, different regions, and different social economic development periods. They record traditional architecture images, excellent building arts, traditional folk customs and original spatial form (Zhigong Party, 2007).

The earliest conservation to cultural heritage in modern China can be traced back to 1920s, when Committee of Heritage Conservation was established. Then in 1930, the Guoming Government, the central government of China at that time, approved Heritage Conservation Law, containing 17 articles which defined the meaning of heritage, requirements of conservation and regulated excavation conditions. In 1948, the List of Major Historic Buildings in China was developed by Prof. Sicheng Liang, which became the basis of the first list of key heritage units after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. After the born of the People’s Republic of China, the central government published Decree on Cultural Heritage Conservation in May 1950. In the 1958’s Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, it stated that the state conserves historic sites, precious heritages and other important cultural heritage. In 1961, the State Council approved Regulations on Cultural Heritage Conservation and Administration, which established the system of “cultural heritage conservation unit”. In 1982, the State Council published the first list of 24 excellent historic and cultural cities in China. In 2003, the first list of 12 excellent historic and cultural villages was published by the State Council of China, which characterised the form of a system of historic village conservation. There were 3 lists of Excellent Historic and Cultural Villages, containing 72 villages in China having been awarded (State Administration of Cultural Heritage, 2008).

Although the conservation of heritage in China is not short in history, the development of historic villages is a new subject to both the government and scholars. At a stage of governments can not provide sufficient budgets for historic village conservation and the immature of private funds, to most historic villages, it seems that developing tourism industry is the only way to maintain and develop those precious treasures, because it can bring immediate funds to historic villages. Zhuge Village, a historic village located in Zhejiang Province, after the open of tourism in 1994, the revenue from the entry fees has grown from 20 thousand Yuan (about 2,941 US dollars) in 1994 to 8,600,000 Yuan (about 1,264,705 US dollars) in 2006. They have set a collective fund of 40 million Yuan (about 5,882,352 US dollars) which can be used in conservation and infrastructure construction (Yun Li, 2007). This huge interest is certainly a best incentive to historic villages and even to investment enterprises. With successful cases like Zhuge Village and other villages, more and more historic villages copy the way of developing tourism industry.

As identified by Jicai Feng (2005), Vice President of China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, there are three major tourism development ways for historic villages in China:

- ◆ Pattern I: Local people still live in historic villages while tourists need to pay entrance fee to visit, such as Wuzhen of Zhejiang Province;
- ◆ Pattern II: Accumulated exhibition which means to exhibit historic villages like a settlement museum, such as historic traditional houses in Shanxi Province;
- ◆ Pattern III: Separation from the historic village site and the new constructed area, where local people can still live in or move out from the historic village.

The above classification is from the perspective of management mode. Actually, we can find that considering the source of investment, two sorts of development can be generalised:

- ◆ External source: investments from local government or development enterprises, using modern enterprise system while historic villages and their villagers are not involved;
- ◆ Internal source: historic villages and villagers are the direct interest body and collect development funds by themselves.

Threats Facing the Historic Villages beyond the Proximity to Metropolises

Outstanding examples of conservation and development of historic villages do not occur in a vacuum or even by chance. They require encouragement through appreciation of their values, stimulation to benefit from the conservation and combination of local wisdom from the local people.

In the study on the 23 villages in the programme of Landscape Villages of China last year, dispersing around the whole China and the later research on historic villages this year, it has been identified that 6 key threats are the most predominant to historic

villages in China.

- Short of Conservation Funds

Although in the past 3 decades, China, especially the urban regions of China have experienced dramatic changes, and have accumulated huge wealth and even have reached foreign exchange reserves of US \$ 180 billion in June 2008, which is the No.1 compared to other countries in the world (State Administration of Foreign Exchange, 2008), the rural areas in China have not fully enjoyed the fruits of the Reform and Opening Up. Vast rural areas of China are still very poor. The incomes gap between urban residents and rural residents has grown from 1.8:1 in mid1980s to late 1990s's 2.5:1, and 2003's 3.2:1 (Mengkuai Wang, 2004). In 2006, Justin Yifu Lin, currently World Bank Chief Economist and Senior Vice President, pointed out that the gap between urban China and rural China would keep enlarging and the incomes gap would reach 4.9:1 in 2020.

Thus even though in Dec. 2005, *The CPC Central Committee and State Council on Promoting the Building of a New Socialist Countryside* states that it is of great importance to protect historic villages and ancient settlements with historical and cultural value, huge amount of funds are in great need to save historic villages in China.



Figure 1: Historic Buildings in Urgent Need of Repair, Huangtian Village, Jin County, Anhui Province, China

In certain prosperous regions, for example in Suzhou's Wuzhong District, it can afford to set an amount of annual 3 million RMB (approximately 44 thousand US dollars) special funds to protect historic villages in its district. Nonetheless, there are 11 historic villages in Wuzhong District (Suzhou Daily, 2007). 3 million RMB is obviously not enough.

Actually, the case in Wuzhong District, Suzhou is a comparative sound one. In many other inner land or rural areas, the conservation funds for historic villages are utterly in adequate. Figure 1 on left shows the great need of conservation funds to protect those high valued historic assets.

- Dilemma Between Conservation and Development

To many historic villages, they have encountered a same headache that is how to treat the dilemma between conservation and development. Tourists usually expect to visit the original image and life style in historic villages. Thus, in order to attract more tourists, the historic villages have to keep their original but poor condition of buildings. And some times the local governments also try to convince villagers to keep this original image and need to live in those old buildings.

This view point sometimes has been further strengthened by experts. There is no fault for experts to emphasise on the historic value and aesthetical aspects of authenticity. However, take a further reflection on the villagers living in those historic villages; it can be found that no body would be willing to live in an awkward building, without sufficient light, drainage system, and even decent toilets. With the improving economic condition and the better living habits learned from even visitors, villagers are eager to improve their living conditions, for example, improved facilities like modern toilets.

- Too Many Recovery Reconstructions

In an era characterised as over-commercialised, a very popular principle goes market is the ultimate driving force. In many places, it has been found that quite a number of historic villages rebuild temples, repave road surface, and restore building facades.

It is true that many historic buildings and even fine building decorating parts of historic buildings have been destroyed in the history of China, such as in the Culture Revolution. The intention of the recovery reconstructions is to recover the original images of the historic villages. However, few of people will think that the destroying itself has already turned to be a part of the current village fabric now. The ruins of those sites actually can also valuable asset to villagers and even to the visitors.

- Village, County Government, Regulating Committee and Development Enterprises

Trapped in shortage of public funds, quite a number of Chinese historic villages seek private funds for help. Some historic villages even consider the private funds are the last straw. A typical development cooperation mode is to entrust tourism development of historic villages to development enterprises. Commonly, the county government, the historic village and the development enterprises sign a development contract for a certain years, for example 50 years.

The development enterprises will invest and run the marketing of the historic villages and pay a certain amount of money to villagers each year. And the three parties will organise a regulating committee to deal with possible conflicts among the three parties. However, it is apparently founded that this mechanism is ineffective. It always turns to be like that villages usually can not get the proposed investments and the villagers' interest can be hurt as they could run some home stay or operate some small business in the village, with the entering of development companies, this kind of business is forced to stop. However, on one hand the county government wants to bring in investments, while on the other hand the enterprises want to make largest profits, and the villagers have little say, the regulating committee sometimes actually can pose little influence on both powerful sides and the villagers' interest is difficulty to safeguard.

- Not Effective Enough Planning Practice

It has been so delighted to see that more and more historic villages have been formulating conservation plans. This will undoubtedly be beneficial to the conservation and development of historic villages. However, many conservation plans are much too physical planning and lacks of practical effects. In order to satisfy the requirements of the clients, many plans are actually splendid drawings rather than practical policies.

- Security and Privacy Concerns

The tourism mode of historic village usually focuses on the visit around the villages. For most historic villages still act as the settlement to their residents, the pouring of visitors will apparently disturb the daily life of villagers.

It has been reported that more and more stolen cases have occurred. Many valuable antiques in the homes of local villagers have been stolen even by visitors. Moreover, many fine historic building decoration parts are found to be either stolen or be



Figure 2: Villagers' Complaint: Need to Rest in the Noon, Please Talk Quietly, Zhangguying Village, Yueyang County, Hunan Province, China

damaged by visitors. As indicated by many historic villages, this kind of vandalism has kept rising.

Besides, since the visiting routes may contain visits to villagers' homes, the constant visits are annoying to anybody. Some impolite behaviours may trigger the conflicts between the local people and tourists and if it is not treated properly, in the long run, it will be extraordinary detrimental to both the villagers and the tourists.

The Programme of Landscape Villages of China

Launched in April 2007, the programme of Landscape Villages of China was hosted by the Chinese Committee of Conservation and Development of Historic Villages. This programme aims to outline the current conditions of Chinese villages with high traditional culture and seeks to revitalize traditional villages' landscape value in the new era. It pays special attention to the conservation and development of historic villages that are far away from metropolises. As a NGO programme, the committee and the programme are non-profit. The committee enjoys independence in its service to historic villages' conservation and development. Although the committee adopts some officials from the governments in different levels, the committee is accountable primarily to the trust of the public, especially to the interest of historic villages.

This programme echoes China's new policy of building a New Socialist Countryside. The central government of China calls for enhancing village planning and habitat

environmental amelioration as well as maintaining a sustainable development pattern in rural areas.

The programme comprises three main aspects. First is to conduct a comprehensive research on the basic conditions of historic villages in the vast territory of China. The second responsibility is to evaluate and award the title of Landscape Village of China to those villages that are evaluated and considered to be qualified to the criteria of landscape villages by the evaluating panel of the committee every two years. According to the *Convention for Landscape Villages of China* approved in Beijing in December 2007,

Landscape Villages of China are villages that have a history nearly or more than a hundred years, with affluent and aggregate tangible and intangible cultural heritage, well conserved traditional images, local identities and folkloric customs and high visual aesthetic value in terms of physical and cultural landscape, physiognomy, vegetation, water system and so on.

The third task for the programme is to provide planning consultation service and development schemes for those landscape villages. This can provide sustainable development advices from experts of the think tank of the committee. The programme maintains that the way to conserve and develop those historic villages that are far away from metropolises should be different to the mode of “the Six Water Towns”. The committee has launched a pilot village development scheme. It was hoped to build some of those historic villages as superior places for high level tourism and can be a satisfactory places for people to stay in those villages for a short period and experience a refreshing life outside the chaos in cities. Comparing to the current tourism modes in China, this mode is quiet a new one.

The committee has also proposed several other initiatives to advertise and boost the brand of those villages. One initiative is to launch a “One ticket passes all” scheme, which unites all Landscape Villages of China together and allows visitors to enjoy a much cheaper price to tour over those villages in a certain period. Under a same brand, it is hoped that those villages can be united, conserved and developed in a sustainable

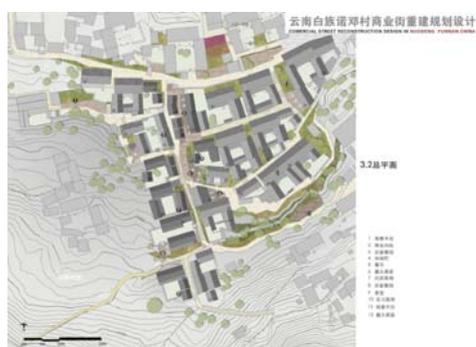


Figure 3: Master Plan of Commercial Street Area at Nuodeng (Leibo Mao, 2008)

way. The other is to provide planning consultation services to those historic villages that might not offer the consultation fees. For example, the committee has finished an ancient commercial street reconstruction planning at Nuodeng historic village, Dali, Yunnan Province, which was also awarded as Landscape Village of China in 2007. The reconstruction planning will greatly improved the current landscape image (See Figure 3). In the long run, the committee

hopes to establish a foundation for the conservation and development of historic villages, especially Landscape Villages of China.

Conclusion

The previous studies on historic village conservation and development in China have much more concentrated on the historic villages located in superior places near local big cities or certain villages that are extremely famous which might be situated in mountainous areas. The concerns for those historic villages that are not in the proximity to metropolises are few. With the continuous urbanisation process, a special concern should be paid to them. Or otherwise, they will disappear during the urbanisation.

The programme of Landscape Villages of China is a brand new attempt of NGO by way of evaluating, awarding and providing a comprehensive conservation and development aids to those historic villages that are far away from the big cities and could not be focused by people in the past. As a NGO programme, it has already achieved some successful steps in the past one year and a half. However, considering the huge mission of conserving and safeguarding our living museums historic villages in China, it needs a far way to go.

In order to analyse the proper way for the conservation and development, for illustrative purposes, five steps of conservation and development for historic villages in China are arranged in a ladder pattern (See Figure 4). Each rung on the ladder corresponds to a step.

The bottom rung 1 describes a step of awaking awareness of the whole society to consider and protect historic villages. This is not just the calls from the experts, scholars and the governments, but true voices from the heart of our whole society. More education and legislation on conservation and development of historic villages are in great need in China now. The rung 2 indicates that after a great improvement of awareness to historic villages, the entire society especially the villagers begin to rescue those living museums. The middle level, rung 3 demonstrates that a well and harmonious multi-party cooperation mechanism has formed. One of the milestones of this step has been characterised by the burgeoning of NGOs. The Chinese Committee of Conservation and Development of Historic Villages is a desirable pioneer in this movement. The rung 4 comes to a much higher level of improvement, amelioration. This means that after the mechanism of the rung 4 has been established, that the environment, facilities and relationships among

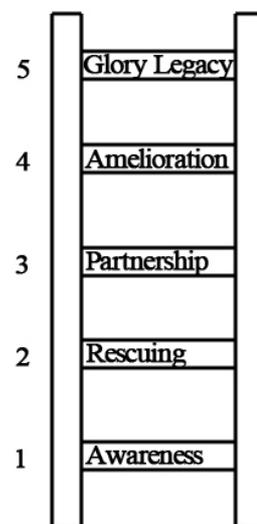


Figure 4: A Ladder of the Conservation and Development of Historic Villages

different parties, such as villagers, investors, local governments and visitors have reached an extraordinary harmonious status. The rung 5 Glory Legacy arrives at the top of the ladder, at that time, the historic villages will have become a real treasure, not a burden, but a true asset that can inspire local pride and become local iconic heritage for the later generations.

Apparently, the above ladder is a simplification. However, it can be helpful to clarify many issues that confuse the conservation and development of historic villages in China currently. When bulldozers roaring from the city to the city fringe and even to the rural areas, in this very process of urbanisation in China, it is urgent for us to pay more attention to historic villages, especially those are beyond the proximity to big cities.

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