

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring elite involvement in China's rural revitalization: A case study of three villages in Shunde

Yixin Tao¹  and Xiao Liu^{2*} ¹Department of Environmental Design, School of Architectural and Environmental Arts, Beihai University of Art and Design, Beihai, Guangxi, China²Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology, Taipa, Macau, China(This article belongs to the *Special Issue: Conservation and Utilization of Rural Heritage in the Context of Rural Revitalization*)

Abstract

Rural revitalization stands as a current development strategy strongly advocated by the government, aimed at fostering rural economic development and improving the livelihood of rural residents. Central to this process is the active participation of the social elite, recognized as a major driving force behind rural revitalization efforts. Through a comprehensive literature review, this article groundbreakingly identifies three models of social elite involvement in China's rural revitalization: government elite-led, capital elite-led, and intellectual elite-led. Employing a comparative case study approach focusing on three villages in Shunde (Qingtian Village, Fengjian Village, and Gulang Village), each representing one of the aforementioned models, this article conducted extensive field studies and in-depth interviews. By doing so, it aims to examine the strengths and weaknesses of each model, as well as the challenges they encounter. Ultimately, the study endeavors to uncover a locally sustainable model of social elite involvement that best suits the needs of the local community, thereby promoting greater achievements in the pursuit of rural revitalization.

***Corresponding author:**Xiao Liu
(xialiu@must.edu.mo)

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the domestic tourism market has experienced significant growth, leading tourism development and characteristic towns to emerge as the mainstream of rural revitalization strategies. However, the prevalent capital-oriented tourism development models often fail to foster genuine rural revitalization. On the contrary, many villages undergo homogenization in the wake of tourism development, resulting in a loss of vitality. Moreover, the historical and cultural resources, as well as historical traditional spaces, of these villages suffer varying degrees of damage. Recent initiatives, such as the government-led deployment of “planners, architects, and engineers as professional volunteers to serve the countryside” and the “Beautiful Countryside” movement, have become crucial means for implementing rural revitalization strategies across various

regions. However, in the pursuit of immediate results, many local governments resort to blind demolition and construction, thereby destroying the authentic features of the countryside. On the other hand, intellectual elites, such as artists, architects, and academic professionals, have also engaged in rural revitalization efforts through various avenues. However, the absence of scientifically informed top-down planning and policy guidance has led many places to adopt identical rural planning that disregards local folk traditions and culture. Consequently, this approach leads to the barbaric erasure of cultural heritage and natural landscapes, replaced by trendy tourist attractions and various grandiose “government projects.”

While each of the aforementioned rural revitalization models has its own focus, they encounter similar challenges. All three tend to overlook a critical aspect of rural revitalization: the villagers’ subjective initiative. Consequently, they lack local characteristics, cultural connotations, and sustainability. This article aims to analyze these three rural revitalization models through theoretical examination and practical case studies. By doing so, it seeks to gain a glimpse of a profound and sustainable approach to rural revitalization.

2. The elite’s intervention in rural revitalization

The term “elite” first appeared in 17th-century France, referring to a select few or exceptional individuals. Its usage expanded into the field of social sciences during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pareto’s (2010) theory of social elites posits that elites comprise individuals with the highest abilities within their respective circles of activity (Xiang & Zhou, 2001). Based on the social resources they control and their varying degrees of influence, social elites are generally divided into government elites, capital elites, and intellectual elites (Li, 2022).

2.1. Government elites

In this article, the term “government elite” encompasses not only administrative institutions, construction organizations, and poverty alleviation agencies at the village, town, district, and city levels but also various professional entities and personnel led by the government involved in rural revitalization efforts.

Regarding construction, the government aims to improve the rural living environment while avoiding the application of the so-called “urban modern construction model.” This approach prioritizes preserving rural forms as much as possible while also “activating” and adapting to modern lifestyles (Liu, 2018). Notably, the Guangdong government has launched the “Planners,

Architects, and Engineers as Professional Volunteers to Serve the Countryside” initiative (abbreviated as “Three Professionals Entering the Countryside”). This initiative calls upon local rural design professionals to volunteer for rural construction projects, thereby revitalizing confidence in traditional architectural culture (Hong, 2015).

The “Three Professionals Entering the Countryside” initiative mainly provides construction consultancy services, disseminates scientific concepts of rural revitalization, delves into rural traditions, aids village committees in salvaging the “silent” village history, and assists in its documentation. Furthermore, it plays a crucial role in fostering understanding among rural cadres and young people about the historical significance and value of historical villages and traditional dwellings. Building on these efforts, the initiatives consciously endeavor to safeguard traditional villages, traditional dwellings, and historical buildings. “The ‘Three Professionals Entering the Countryside’ initiative fully utilizes the professional advantages to give more suggestions for local areas, better plan for beautiful countryside, improve the living environment of rural residents, and enhance the quality and taste of rural construction” (Hong, 2015).

While the “Three Professionals Entering the Countryside” initiative represents a significant effort toward rural revitalization, it cannot be denied that it has its shortcomings. Many local governments, driven by the need to demonstrate effective governance, often blindly apply urban construction experience. This results in large-scale demolitions and construction projects, such as the development of grand parks and large squares. Unfortunately, these endeavors often deviate from the original purpose and reality of the countryside, exacerbating prominent issues such as the destruction of rural landscapes and disruption of natural ecologies (Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of Fujian Province, 2017).

2.2. Capital elites

China’s rural tourism has flourished under the circumstances of imbalanced urban-rural economic development, propelled by governmental macroeconomic policies. It has played a unique role in narrowing the urban-rural gap, optimizing rural industrial structures, addressing rural employment issues, driving the development of associated industries, and fostering cultural exchanges between urban and rural areas (Guo & Han, 2010).

More than 20 years of practical application in rural tourism underscore its significant contributions to rural economic growth, the proliferation of employment opportunities, and the improvement of villagers’ income. However, rural tourism grapples with problems such as

environmental degradation in rural areas and the gradual erosion of rural cultural heritage. The pragmatic challenges confronting rural tourism development in China mainly entail inappropriate tourism development, small-scale operations, insufficient branding efforts, erosion and detachment from rural traditions, inequitable distribution of benefits, and disparate power endowment (Wang & Zhang, 2018). Consequently, tourism development in many rural areas in China lacks distinctiveness and strategic focus, leading to pervasive homogeneity across numerous villages after tourism development, thereby diminishing tourist interest as observed in the proliferation of so-called “characteristic towns” (Figures 1 and 2).

2.3. Intellectual elite

In recent years, amid the strategic push for rural revitalization, an increasing number of architects and

artists have been venturing into rural areas, imbuing them with their own design concepts and visions. This influx has spawned a plethora of contemporary rural architectures, ostensibly aimed at cultivating the cultural value of these regions. Regrettably, however, many of these structures are gradually abandoned in the daily lives of villagers. A truly successful rural building must be tailored to meet the needs of its users, and a proficient rural architect must prioritize the users’ needs over treating rural areas as mere experimental grounds for architectural design (Zuo, 2020).

Jing Zuo, from the School of Journalism and Communication at Anhui University, stands as a prominent figure within this intellectual elite cohort. He has spearheaded the revival of Dananpo village in Henan province (Figure 3) and Bishan village in Anhui province (Figure 4), respectively. He asserts that “architects who work in rural areas are not only designers of physical architecture but also designers of rural society. They actively or passively undertake a considerable part of the economic, social, and cultural “design tasks” of the rural areas and can be said to be carrying out “social design” in rural areas. This means that from the moment the architect enters the rural area, he must consider and build on many matters related to construction and beyond. The former needs to consider the geographical and climatic conditions of the building, as well as historical context, traditional materials, new technologies, and costs within the professional scope. The latter needs to deal with a wide range of issues in the field of sociology, such as land systems, villagers’ appeals, public culture, and rural industries. However, not all architects working in rural areas are rural social designers.” (Zuo, 2020, p. 1).



Figure 1. Fenghuang town in Hunan province. Source: Photo by the authors



Figure 2. Lijiang town in Yunnan province. Source: Photo by the authors



Figure 3. Dananpo village. Source: Photo by Becca Kong (https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/62e338050000000011012bf4?app_platform=android&ignoreEngage=true&app_version=8.34.0&share_from_user_hidden=true&type=normal&author_share=1&xhsshare=WeixinSession&shareRedId=Nz1HQUTU6OU09Tug3S0AwOzg3OT9INT9P&apptime=1715761838)



Figure 4. Bishan village. Source: Photo by Siweiankou (https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/659b5d590000000001d0368da?app_platform=android&ignoreEngage=true&app_version=8.34.0&share_from_user_hidden=true&type=normal&author_share=1&xhsshare=WeixinSession&shareRedId=Nz1HQTU6OU09TUg3S0AwOzg3OT9INT9P&apptime=1715762073&wechatWid=79e5912e93e61ef3c9c691bba812d70f&wechatOrigin=menu)

While many social capitals enter rural areas for development with the support of national policies, not every village can attain the status of a beautiful village or a characteristic town. Villages lacking distinguishing features and environmental advantages gradually disappear from social attention, leaving their inhabitants feeling voiceless amidst the tide of rural development and construction. Outsiders, such as artists, are recognized by villagers as holding a dominant position, relegating decision-making authority to them. Consequently, villagers find themselves on the sidelines, rarely participating in the rural construction process. In addition, the dominance and superiority of elitism may breed problems, even when the intentions of the outsiders are well-meaning (Liu, 2018).

However, the design techniques and perspectives of some villages are gradually shifting toward community construction. They are transitioning from a focus on locational advantages and physical structures to rebuilding interpersonal relationships within rural society. This shift is exemplified by the widespread adoption of participatory design methods, which empower villagers to actively engage in the design process (Zuo, 2020).

2.4. Research question

Although the social elite, spanning across governmental, capital, and intellectual realms, are actively involved in rural revitalization efforts, the prevailing discussions and research pre-dominantly focus on promoting and publicizing model examples, often lacking critical reflection. A comprehensive and systematic study of the three models

of social elite participation in rural revitalization remains scarce. Consequently, this article attempts, with an objective and cautious attitude, to utilize three villages in Shunde—each representing an intervention model—as case studies. The aim is to achieve a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the aforementioned intervention models.

3. The three villages in Shunde

3.1. The “Qingtian Model” led by government elites

Qingtian village boasts a rich historical legacy, adorned with numerous historical and cultural landmarks as well as scenic farmlands. Located away from bustling urban areas and untouched by industrialization, it resembles more of an abandoned village left behind by modernization compared to other rural areas that have already been commercialized or developed for tourism. Consequently, its original rural civilization and environment have been well preserved. However, Qingtian village faces similar problems to many other villages, such as a declining population, with young people migrating to urban areas for work, resulting in severe hollowing.

In 2017, the Shunde Town government invited Professor Yan Qu and his team from the Guangdong University of Technology to Qingtian village to begin its rebuilding and revival. Professor Qu immediately proposed a comprehensive revival plan for the village, which was later named the “Qingtian Model” by the Shunde government and established as a typical example of rural revitalization. Specifically, the “Qingtian Model” mainly focused on the following three aspects:

3.1.1. De-artification

The “Qingtian Model” emphasizes the villagers as the main body, respecting local culture and reviving rural civilization from various aspects such as rural beliefs, ethics, history, and economy simultaneously. Professor Yan Qu believes that it is most important to prevent artists from turning Qingtian village into an art village. This approach could lead to the detachment of artistic rural construction from the social and cultural context of rural society and the demands of the main body, ultimately displacing the villagers (Qu, 2021).

3.1.2. Cultural construction and emotional involvement

The “Qingtian Model” advocates for immersing themselves in the villagers’ lives, becoming local apprentices, conducting field investigations, and humbly learning local knowledge and history. The team restored folk activities, such as “Burning Pagoda,” attempting to maintain rural ethics through traditional cultural rituals. At the same

time, they regularly hold lectures, inviting primary and secondary school students to participate in extracurricular research and learning activities, such as “fishing” in fish ponds and researching and participating in the process of vegetable cultivation in ponds. For the villagers’ daily lives, they organize rural concerts, Qingtian singing concerts, and even fashion shows.

3.1.3. Overall village restoration

Before Professor Yan Qu came to Qingtian village, the historical stone street in the village was dilapidated, with sunken and uneven ground, and residents had haphazardly installed electrical wires under the eaves of their houses. On the arrival of Professor Yan Qu and his team, they used government and multi-party funds to repave the roads, relay sewage pipes, restore the ecology of the Diaolou and the large pond, and repair the ancestral hall (which also serves as a traditional school), leading to overall restoration and improvement of the village’s physical appearance.

With the tilt of official government policies, support from various funds, and Professor Yan Qu’s social background, the “Qingtian Model” is intended to revive traditional Chinese civilization in Qingtian village, face the challenges brought about by modernization, as well as rediscover and rebuild the cultural logic of rural areas,

In October 2020, China Central Television, the government’s official media outlet, conducted an extensive report on the “Qingtian Model.” In April 2022, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences included the “Qingtian Model” in their blue book titled “Report on the Development of Rural Cultural Construction in China (2018–2021),” providing national-level recognition for its significance as a pilot project for rural revitalization.

However, during the field investigation in Qingtian village in November 2021, the authors discovered that the government’s perception of the “Qingtian Model” mostly exists only on paper and has not been effectively implemented. For instance, numerous restored historical buildings in the village have remained vacant for an extended period without being utilized efficiently. Moreover, subsequent architectural designs and transformations within the village have gradually become standardized (Figure 5), focusing solely on restoring rural culture and architecture without achieving sustainable revitalization for its residents. The majority of what is referred to as cultural revival primarily resides within imagination and media reports.

It becomes evident that this “Qingtian Model” led by government elites is merely wishful thinking and unsustainable. Since continuous financial support from both governmental sources and external funds did not



Figure 5. Closed academy of traditional learning. Source: Photo taken by the authors

end up with satisfying outcomes, Professor Yan Qu and his team withdrew from Qingtian village, making the “Qingtian Model” a good-looking propaganda tool without substantial content.

3.2. The “Fengjian Village”, led by capital elites

Fengjian village is surrounded by water on all sides, with the village built along the river and stone embankments stretching for over 10 km, while trees grace the riverbank, earning it the moniker “Guangdong’s Zhouzhuang village”—a world-famous water village in Jiangsu province. In 2016, Fengjian Water Township Tourism Development Co., Ltd. (Fengjian Tourism Company in short) was established, commencing its capital operations in Fengjian village. In November of the same year, Fengjian village gained recognition as part of China’s Traditional Village Inventory, included in the fourth batch by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and other departments. In November 2017, it attained the prestigious designation of National Civilized Village and Town, and on September 9, 2020, it was announced as a Beautiful and Leisurely Village in China by the Office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. However, during the authors’ field research in November 2021, it was found that beneath its picturesque surface, issues such as the lack of comprehensive planning, chaotic management, and cultural alienation stemming from tourism development were prominent in the Fengjian village scenic area.

3.2.1. Renovation and reuse of old buildings

The Fengjian Tourism Company has undertaken the renovation and transformation of the village landmarks, such as the ancestral hall and other buildings, into new spaces, such as painting and calligraphy institutes,

exhibition halls, bookstores, and retail spaces. These spaces are intended to serve as leisure and cultural sharing venues for both villagers and tourists, aiming to revive and strengthen rural vitality. However, during the actual renovation process, various problems emerged, such as ignoring the cultural connotations of the buildings in favor of superficial renovations and the forced creation of Instagram-worthy spots. In addition, it is puzzling to observe that the restored ancestral hall is either inaccessible to the public or left unused (Figure 6).

3.2.2. Preservation of the original style and characteristic culture

The Fengjian Tourism Company has established the Fengjian Lingnan Cultural and Art Exhibition Center and the Lingnan Cultural and Creative Park to preserve the existing features and cultural characteristics of the area. Their aim is to develop distinctive tourism projects, assist villagers in building characteristic bed and breakfasts (B&B), harness surrounding resources, and gradually establish a tourism-supporting industrial chain. This initiative is designed to raise the income of local villagers, foster agricultural cooperatives, and cultivate a community of shared interests. Furthermore, the company has introduced cultural and art conservation and creation organizations such as the Ancestral Hall Restoration Association and the Calligraphy and Painting Institute to spearhead a series of activities aimed at inheriting historical culture and traditional folk arts. However, various problems have emerged during the implementation process. For example, the monthly rent for storefronts along the main tourist route within the scenic area can exceed 1000 USD, while outside the scenic area, rents drop significantly to around 200 USD. This discrepancy leaves villagers without storefronts, lacking in additional income opportunities. Moreover, they must contend with inflated prices within the scenic area and occasional disturbances from tourists (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Closed ancestral hall. Source: Photo taken by the authors

While the Lingnan Cultural and Creative Park has evolved into little more than an empty expanse, serving primarily as a symbolic structure, several genuinely valuable cultural heritages within the scenic area remain inadequately protected. The Yonghe Academy, for instance, is damaged and collapsed yet remains unrepaired. In addition, the stone tablet commemorating nominees who successfully passed the highest-level Imperial Examinations has been used as paving and subjected to daily foot traffic and disregard (Figures 8 and 9).

3.3. The “Gulang Village”, led by intellectual elites

Gulang village boasts a history dating back over 700 years, originating at the end of the Song dynasty (960 – 1279) and the beginning of the Yuan dynasty (1279 – 1368). Despite its proximity to the famous Fengjian village, Gulang village maintains its simplicity and tranquility, so much so that not a single restaurant graces its streets. In 2018, retired artist Shixiong Wu arrived in Gulang village. His dual identities as a village squire and intellectual elite allowed him to seamlessly integrate into village life.

3.3.1. Community environment building

Shixiong Wu embarked on an extensive effort to connect with the villagers, initiating the “Most Beautiful Courtyard” community beautification campaign. Collaborating with the villagers, he mobilized them to participate in the beautification of community public spaces and their own courtyards. This endeavor encompassed a series of activities, including wall paintings, planting greenery and flowers, conducting beautification classes, and creating public landscapes, all aimed at preserving rural ecology (Figures 10 and 11). In addition, Shixiong Wu voluntarily collected the scattered steles commemorating nominees who passed the highest-level Imperial Examinations,



Figure 7. Villagers at the stall. Source: Photo by the authors



Figure 8. Damaged Yonghe Academy. Source: Photo by the authors



Figure 11. Doorway of Gulang village. Source: Photo by the authors



Figure 9. Damaged stone tablets commemorating nominees who passed the highest-level Imperial Examinations. Source: Photo by the authors



Figure 12. Steles commemorating nominees who passed the highest-level Imperial Examinations. Source: Photo by the authors



Figure 10. Wall painting in Gulang village. Source: Photo by the authors

strategically placing them throughout the village to foster a sense of community (Figure 12). He frequently hosts

lectures, importing fresh knowledge and information from the outside world into the village. Moreover, with the help of local organizations and village cadres, Gulang village regularly hosts various cultural and sports activities.

3.3.2. The renewal and reuse of old buildings

Shixiong Wu initiated a project to integrate a 100-year-old memorial archway with the village's rustic charm and historical tombs, aiming to establish a leisure park that highlights the village's traditional culture and offers leisure and entertainment options for the villagers (Figure 13).

3.3.3. Promoting rural development through art and literature

Together with local artists, such as Yan Kong, Shixiong Wu launched art courses, organized concerts, and introduced urban cultural education to the countryside. He compiled materials on local esthetic and art education for rural



Figure 13. Leisure park in Gulang village. Source: Photo by the authors

children and organized various art exhibitions, concerts, and other activities (Figure 14).

Since Shixiong Wu's arrival in Gulang village, the village environment has improved, prompting more villagers to return from other places. There is a prevailing sentiment among residents that the current living environment in Gulang village is highly comfortable, fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging. However, during a field visit in November 2021, the authors observed that commercial activities in Gulang village exclusively cater to locals, offering amenities such as small supermarkets, vegetable markets, and hair salons. Unfortunately, there is a lack of facilities for outsiders, such as restaurants and cafes. Visitors seeking meals must either bring their own food or travel 4 km to an industrial area.

4. Social perceptions through interview analysis

As previously discussed, the three villages in Shunde are undergoing rural revitalization in distinct manners, with each reaping unique benefits and facing specific problems. In this section, the authors meticulously analyze the implications of social elite involvement in rural revitalization to enhance comprehension. The ensuing statistical analysis drew upon a compilation of interviews with various stakeholders conducted during the field investigations. This approach aims to provide a holistic understanding of the social perception of each model.

4.1. Issues of the “Qingtian Model” led by government elites

4.1.1. Government elites' perception

In the top-down approach of the “Qingtian Model,” government elites view measures such as comprehensive



Figure 14. Wood engraving course conducted at Longqiao Wugong Ancestral Hall. Source: Photo by Yan Kong (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/TA4BDkxa-m8r0LFW2RPo1w>)

renovation of village buildings and environments, tapping into traditional village culture, and offering educational programs as “successful” in tangibly revitalizing the village and evidentially showcasing achievements in their official careers. However, this successful revitalization is limited to Qingtian village alone, as replicating this model in other villages lacking government policies and financial support proves challenging.

4.1.2. Visitors' perception

For visitors from outside, expectations may include experiencing a pristine rural atmosphere characterized by newly renovated buildings and a clean environment. However, during the authors' autumn 2021 visit, an absence of activities, including cultural and commercial events, was observed. Even the exhibition hall dedicated to showcasing the “Qingtian Model” was closed. Without professional knowledge or enthusiasm for traditional architecture, the village may appear quiet and somewhat dull, offering little beyond a brief visit of 1 or 2 h.

4.1.3. Local villagers' perception

Local villagers also benefit from the comprehensive repair and improvement of historical buildings and infrastructure, which enhances their sense of belonging and living comfort. However, villagers express frustration at being sidelined during the rural revitalization process, citing a lack of measures to provide sustainable income for their development.

4.1.4. Findings

The success or failure of rural revitalization rests on the same factor—the “Qingtian Model” led by government elites. While initial government policies appear promising, their implementation tends to become formalized and

detached from rural reality, evolving into “vanity projects” aimed at political achievements rather than bringing tangible benefits to villagers.

4.2. Issues of the “Fengjian Village”, led by capital elites

4.2.1. Capital elites’ perception

Similar to the “Qingtian Model” led by government elites, the capital elites in Fengjian village take pride in the village’s tangible revitalization efforts. These efforts include the construction of sewage treatment stations to purify water, the restoration of ancestral halls and temples, the removal of illegal structures, and the adaptation of traditional dwellings into commercial stores. However, due to a lack of scientific and sustainable planning, some traditional buildings remained unrestored, and many historical relics have been casually discarded. Additionally, the Lingnan Cultural and Creative Park, along with related service facilities, have been left vacant after construction.

4.2.2. Visitors’ perception

In contrast to the tranquil Qingtian village, Fengjian village has undergone heavy commercialization. Visitors lament the excessive homogenization of stores and the lack of unique cultural characteristics. They also notice the inadequate repair of historical buildings, with many remaining unused or unattractive even after restoration. Furthermore, the once-promising Lingnan Cultural Park now sits empty, failing to fulfill its intended role as a special attraction. As a result, the overall tourism experience is deemed average.

4.2.3. Local villagers’ perception

The restoration of the village’s ecological environment and infrastructure improvements has successfully transformed Fengjian village into a tourist attraction, yielding a multifaceted impact on local villagers. Positive outcomes include increased income and overall infrastructure upgrades. However, negative consequences arise from unauthorized tourist entry into villagers’ homes, noise disturbances caused by tourists, income disparities among villagers based on housing locations, restricted vehicle access to residences within the scenic area, and the transformation of traditional culture into mere performances.

4.2.4. Findings

The capital elites, driven by self-interest, often disregard the villagers’ sentiments and the preservation of the original rural culture. This pursuit leads to the construction of similar scenic spots, improper rural development, environmental destruction, and the gradual alienation of rural culture, resulting in an unequal distribution of benefits among villagers.

4.3. Issues of the “Gulang Village”, led by intellectual elites

4.3.1. Intellectual elites’ perception

Intellectual elites such as Shixiong Wu express satisfaction with their cooperation with local village committees to revitalize village culture and inherit traditional folk activities. This partnership has generated numerous employment opportunities, enhanced the village’s environmental quality through initiatives such as waterway cleanliness and governance, and facilitated the renovation of community parks and the repair of ancestral halls.

4.3.2. Visitors’ perception

Despite a wide array of folklore activities and unique cultural experiences, the revitalized village often receives complaints from visitors about the lack of essential tourism facilities such as restaurants, tea and coffee shops, or similar businesses. This inadequacy makes it difficult for visitors to prolong their stay in the village, as they must seek food options outside the village.

4.3.3. Local villagers’ perception

Through interviews, local villagers express considerable appreciation for the rural revitalization efforts led by the intellectual elite in Gulang village. They have witnessed firsthand the positive effects, including a notable trend of younger generations opting to return to the village instead of migrating to larger cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen. This trend has reduced the village’s depopulation, while collaborative efforts between local village committees and various organizations have enriched villagers’ daily lives and enhanced their sense of identity and attachment to the village.

4.3.4. Findings

While the revitalization of Gulang village appears to navigate the propositions of various stakeholders sensitively, it unveils a potential dilemma. The intervention of the intellectual elite may either dominate proceedings, relegating villagers to the role of spectators with minimal participation in the rural development process, or it may be insufficient, merely addressing villagers’ basic needs without providing sustainable regeneration or meeting outsiders’ needs.

5. Conclusion: Strategies for the involvement of the social elite in rural revitalization

This study combines theoretical analysis with practical case studies to explore three models for rural revitalization. As a concluding note, the authors aim to provide several

recommendations for the engagement of the social elite in rural revitalization. It is hoped that this study will not only inspire further exploration into rural revitalization but also serve as a reference for the social elite's intervention, ultimately contributing to the rejuvenation of rural areas in China.

5.1. Multi-stakeholder collaboration with local villagers as the main participants

Engaging in rural revitalization inevitably brings forth various demands and beliefs from each stakeholder, often leading to conflicts of interest (Li & He, 2022). To address these challenges, all parties must exercise subjective initiatives in cooperative construction, establishing a balanced structure where the villagers take center stage, government elites guide the process, capital elites fund initiatives, and intellectual elites contribute knowledge (He, 2012). Despite encountering agreement, opposition, unity, and disagreement, consensus can be reached, with the villagers' needs prioritized above art or capital considerations.

5.2. Tracing back to the authentic culture of the village

Government-led rural beautification often focuses on exterior esthetics or Instagram-worthy appearances, neglecting deeper cultural elements (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). True rural revitalization involves more than physical renovation; it necessitates the reconstruction of a spiritual home rooted in the discovery and interpretation of authentic cultural tradition (Liu, 2017).

5.3. Clear planning vision

External social elites require a clear planning vision for rural revitalization (Yang, 2014). Drawing from research on community resources and global experiences, social elites should formulate forward-looking plans aligned with the village's actual circumstances. Clear planning vision stems from establishing a healthy "relationship with the villagers." (Dou, 2015)

5.4. Knowledge cultivation

Social elites should provide knowledge support and activity guidance, including knowledge training and assistance, to the villagers in order to gradually establish close and continuous interaction with them, and ultimately be accepted by them. Only through this process can villagers who receive professional, systematic training provide better services, thereby enhancing the tourist experience. In addition, imperceptible knowledge cultivation enables local villagers to re-understand and recognize the value of the village they live in, further stimulating their enthusiasm to participate in its revitalization and development (Gao & Ji, 2018).

5.5. Establishing a win-win mechanism between villagers and social elites

Establishing a win-win mechanism is imperative for fostering a healthy relationship and sustainable interaction between the social elite and community residents (Yue & Cheng, 2016). Based on the principle of "knowledge cultivation," social elites can utilize their social capital and knowledge resources to bridge the community with the market, aiming to achieve a win-win situation rather than a zero-sum game. Consequently, villagers reap the rewards of "protecting rural ecology, solving life problems, and even getting rich," thereby further stimulating their subjective initiative (Li & Shi, 2021).

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The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Further disclosure

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