

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reflections on rural spatial construction based on place identity: A case study of spatial reconstruction in Xiaoshi village, Pengzhou

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Abstract

With increasing urbanization, rural areas face challenges, such as the loss of local distinctiveness and weakened community identity among villagers. Reconstructing place identity has thus become pivotal to rural revitalization. By reviewing China's century-long trajectory of rural construction, this study examines the evolution of rural identity from deconstruction to reconstruction. This study also highlights present critical issues, including insufficient participation from villagers, spatial designs that are detached from production and daily life, and homogenized esthetics due to the misuse of traditional symbols. Place identity encompasses three dimensions: Socio-cultural significance, socio-economic functions, and a foundation of spatial imagery. Using Studio Dali's practice in Xiaoshi village in Pengzhou, Sichuan, as a case study, this study proposes different approaches to reshaping public spaces, innovating industrial models, and expressing local character. Across the synergistic activation of space, economy, and culture, place identity can be effectively rebuilt, stimulating endogenous vitality in rural construction.

Keywords: Place identity; Practice of Xiaoshi village; Rural construction; Studio Dali***Corresponding author:**Ye Li
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Citation: Gu, Y., Liu, Y., & Li, Y. (2026). Reflections on rural spatial construction based on place identity: A case study of spatial reconstruction in Xiaoshi village, Pengzhou. *Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism*, 8(1):4930.
<https://doi.org/10.36922/jcau.4930>

Received: September 24, 2024**Revised:** July 17, 2025**Accepted:** August 12, 2025**Published online:** August 28, 2025

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of rapid urbanization, globalization, and digitalization, rural areas are experiencing profound transformations in their physical spaces, economic structures, lifestyles, and esthetics. This has led to the weakening of the social fabric and the homogenization of spatial forms in villages. As the primary agents of rural life, villagers' sense of place identity is gradually eroding, weakening their subjective sense of initiative to build their homeland. Recent rural policies issued by the central government emphasize the pivotal role of farmers (Feng *et al.*, 2024). Thus, restoring place identity and reviving the unique nature of rural areas have become urgent priorities in rural revitalization.

Rural spaces constitute a physical foundation for constructing place identity. Today, public spaces that once provided a basis for grassroots education and ritual systems are

collapsing, while traditional features are fading. Addressing these persistent issues requires not only spatial adjustments but also the rebuilding of villagers' place identity through spatial redesign. This study applies the concept of place identity to spatial contexts, reviews the literature on rural construction history, analyzes contemporary rural challenges, and investigates spatial strategies using Studio Dali's project in Xiaoshi village, Sichuan, China, as a case study.

2. Research foundations of place identity and rural spatial construction

2.1. Place identity

The concept of place identity, introduced by Proshansky (1978), has been continuously enriched by the addition of new connotations and interpretations, gradually evolving into one of the core concepts in environmental psychology and human geography (Peng *et al.*, 2020). Although a universally accepted definition has yet to emerge in academia, there is a broad consensus that place identity, as one dimension of a sense of place, arises from the foundations of place attachment and place dependence. It represents a cognitive relationship between people and place (Qian *et al.*, 2019) and a process of interaction between people and their locale (Dai & Liu, 2019). The concept of place identity encompasses two aspects: First, the differences that are attributed or perceived by people residing inside or outside a specific place that distinguish it from other places, termed place-based place identity; Second, the incorporation of a place into an individual's self, making it a component of personal identity, termed people-based place identity. In recent years, the field of architecture has also begun to focus on place identity. When addressing topics, such as urban identity, community identity, or rural identity, the concept largely refers to "place-based place identity" (Peng *et al.*, 2020).

Place identity is a subjective social construct based on the objective physical environment. Consequently, the subject of rural identity can be multifaceted. From a tourism perspective, the subject of identity is often tourists who yearn for rural life. Research on regional domains focuses on the general public, where the perspective of spatial construction prioritizes the place identity of villagers who live in the countryside, as they are the most frequent users of rural spaces.

2.2. Spatial construction

The term "construction" (营造; *yingzao*) originates from traditional Chinese architectural philosophy and carries profound connotations. Beyond its literal meaning of "building," the character "营" (*ying*) also conveys the ideas

of "planning, management, operation, restoration, and measurement" (J. Huang, 2011). Thus, spatial construction transcends mere physical creation to include the formation of abstract constructs. In rural studies, spatial construction plays a pivotal role, engaging political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions of rural development. At its core, it represents a process wherein diverse social actors leverage space as a medium to conduct practical activities, collectively shaping social attributes, restructuring societal frameworks, and cultivating culture (Meng & Zhang, 2018).

2.3. Rural studies from a place identity perspective

The enduring allure of rural areas lies in their regional distinctiveness, which is intrinsically linked to place identity. As a fundamental attribute of architecture, regionality has long been a focus of architectural discourse, tracing back to Vitruvius (ca. 80–70 BCE–ca. 15 BCE) in ancient Rome. His *The Ten Books on Architecture* noted correlations between architectural features and local climatic/natural conditions (Rowland & Howe, 1999). In pre-modern societies, western architectural regionalism intertwined with politics and nationalism—such as the Renaissance and French Classicism, the 18th-century British picturesque style, and German Romanticism—where locality served as a form of cultural resistance against hegemonic political orders (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 2003). Similarly, pre-20th-century Chinese villages reflected dual influences: Their spatial forms and site layouts adhered to Confucian ritual norms and feng shui, demonstrating cultural commonality, while local artisans adapted their designs to the climate and topography, forging a distinctive regional character that reinforced villagers' place identity.

The 20th-century modernist movement, however, prioritized new materials, technology, and functionalism, suppressing regionality and fostering rationalist global homogenization. In the 1950s, Lewis Mumford's (1895–1990) critique of the international style in *The New Yorker* proposed regionalism as an alternative (Ockman & Eigen, 1993), sparking renewed architectural interest in locality. Postmodernism countered the erosion of local or national identity by reviving classical forms and symbols, yet its superficial, context-agnostic approach stripped architecture of local value and tradition, failing to resonate with communities (Klaufus, 2006).

Meanwhile, in the 1970s, human geographers, represented by Tuan (1990), introduced the perspective of "place" into scholarly explorations of human–environment relationships, profoundly influencing architectural discourse. Christian Norberg-Schulz (1979) advanced the concept of a *genius loci* (spirit of place), defining "place" as a space with distinct characteristics and using "dwelling" to

express the holistic relationship between humans and their environment. He distilled the *genius loci* into a “sense of orientation” and a “sense of place identity,” asserting that human identity pre-supposes the identity of place.

Inspired by these intellectual currents, a redefined regionalism—critical regionalism—emerged to counter modernist universalism and the superficiality of postmodernism’s historical symbol appropriation. This approach re-examined locality through the lens of “place,” emphasizing the reinterpretation of local culture through contemporary integration and adaptation (Lin *et al.*, 2020). In the past decade, critical regionalism has significantly shaped China’s rural construction. Architects and planners now recognize that cultivating rural distinctiveness requires forging a sense of place—an emotional bond and place identity between people and locale (Zhu & Liu, 2011). However, such place-based sensibility cannot be achieved through mechanically stacking vernacular symbols or manufacturing nostalgic familiarity to resonate with villagers, as this forced affinity lacks authenticity. Instead, as Frampton (1992) argues, authentic vitality arises from transforming local elements, enabling architecture and space to respond to a site’s topography, climate, context, light, and materials.

3. Present status and challenges in rural spatial construction

3.1. Historical trajectory of rural construction practices in China

Scholarly consensus (Guo & Wang, 2014; Sun & Zhang, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2020) holds that China’s rural construction movement, initiated during the late Qing dynasty’s (1644–1912) modernization drive amid industrialization’s disruption of agrarian society, has unfolded in four distinct phases. Each wave of attention to rural issues from the state emerged from crisis-driven imperatives within specific historical contexts, with corresponding rural practices (Table 1) serving to advance integrated urban–rural modernization.

3.1.1. The rural construction movement in the period of the Republic of China in the 1920s–1940s

Pre-20th-century Chinese villages functioned as kinship-based societies, rooted in agrarian civilization. The sedentary demands of farming and the self-sufficient nature of peasant economies fostered high levels of self-isolation, minimizing external connections. Traditional rural construction emphasized harmony between humans and the environment, adhering to locale-responsive approaches. Organized through family or clan units, villagers’ production and daily life embodied Confucian ritual principles. Routine farming activities and clan-based

ceremonies reinforced their sense of belonging and place identity, resulting in distinct regional variations and strong local attachment.

However, the late Qing modernization commencing in 1860 and the collapse of traditional governance systems devastated villages. Rural decline and peasant impoverishment rendered the elite-centered construction model unsustainable. Against this backdrop, early-20th-century intellectuals, such as Liang Shuming (1893–1988) and James Yen (1893–1990), initiated a bottom-up rural construction movement. They pursued rural economic revitalization through education, healthcare, cultural programs, and agricultural modernization. Although it was interrupted by the Second Sino–Japanese War (1937–1945), these practices continue to influence China’s rural construction today (H. Huang *et al.*, 2019).

3.1.2. Socialist rural transformation and people’s commune movement in the 1950s

Following the founding of the People’s Republic, agricultural production recovered, yet remained technologically underdeveloped. To resolve tensions between industrialization’s capital demands and peasant economies, the state revolutionized land ownership through collectivization, establishing rural cooperatives that were centered around the principle of the collective economy. This “socialist rural transformation” triggered revolutionary changes: Collective ownership of land and the means of production reduced intra-village wealth disparities, while production and living spaces became standardized. While farmers gained collective ownership and agency, villagers’ attachment to their localities was redirected toward national allegiance and socialist ideology. Place identity peaked in the form of loyalty to the party and state, yet villagers’ autonomy diminished. Consequently, the diversity of rural construction and regional distinctiveness faded. Concurrently, shifting values led to the rejection of traditional culture: The ancestral temples and shrines housing rituals were demolished, replaced by utilitarian communal buildings—commune offices, public canteens, and cultural auditoriums—as new collective spaces.

3.1.3. The rural reform era in the 1980s–1990s

After 1978, urgent economic needs propelled nationwide rural reforms centered around the household responsibility system, leading to the state’s gradual withdrawal from village governance. As rural economies were revived, market capital penetrated the countryside. While the household contract system decentralized agricultural production, management, and organization—liberating farmers from collectivization and enabling personalized lifestyles—it simultaneously dissolved communal cohesion

Table 1. Significant rural practices in China since the 20th century^a

Actor/Initiator	Period	Description
Yan Yangchu (1893–1990)	1926–1936	Dingxian experiment: Established rural schools; addressed farmers' issues with "ignorance, poverty, physical weakness, and selfishness" through mass education, cultivating farmers' intellectual power, productive power, physical strength, and sense of solidarity; established a rural healthcare system (J. Huang, 2020).
Liang Shuming (1893–1988)	1931–1937	Zouping experiment: Focused on cultural education, attempting to construct a neo-Confucian ideology suited to the era to transform rural conditions (R. Chen, 2016).
Li Xianting, Fang Lijun, <i>et al.</i>	1994–present	Songzhuang artist village: Artists-led housing acquisition, forming a large-scale community of independent artists. This transformed the local industrial structure, as well as the villagers' social structure and lifestyle, establishing a cultural and creative industry (Xie, 2021).
Huang Yinwu, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Swiss Foundation	2002–present	Shaxi rehabilitation project: Focused initially on cultural heritage preservation, ancient building restoration, and infrastructure construction. Later stages leveraged tourism development to protect the traditional village's living environment and sustainable industrial development (Y. Huang & Ke, 2023).
Wen Tiejun	2003–2007	"New rural construction" at Yan Yangchu Rural Reconstruction College: Promoted the formation of farmers' cooperatives and conducted training; established experimental ecological agriculture fields and promoted ecological architecture (Wen & Lin, 2023).
Qu Yan	2007–present	Xucun plan: Organized artists for sketching, field research, residencies, and creation in Xucun; hosted art festivals and established an art commune; ultimately developed a full-chain art industry within the village (Qu, 2013).
China Resources Group (Architects: Li Xinggang, Wang Zhu, Zhang Qi, <i>et al.</i>)	2008–present	China Resources Hope Town: Leveraged corporate resources to build hope towns in revolutionary base areas and impoverished regions, including Guangxi Baise (W. Wang & Ding, 2016), Hebei Xibaipo (Li, 2013), Hunan Shaoshan (Z. Wang & Qian, 2015), and Anhui Jinzhai (Zhang <i>et al.</i> , 2016). Employed a tripartite approach of environmental transformation, industrial support, and organizational restructuring to improve villagers' living environments, promote collective rural economic development, and solve the issues relating to agriculture, rural areas, and rural residents.
Ou Ning, Zuo Jing	2011–2016	Bishan project: Invited groups from the cultural and artistic fields to reside in the countryside, attempting to revive rural culture through art (Ou, 2015).
Wang Shu	2012–2016	Renovation of Wen village in Fuyang: Based on the concept of natural growth, renovated 14 buildings (24 households) using locally sourced materials, old and recycled materials, and local traditional construction techniques. This catalyzed transformation of the entire village's character (S. Wang & Qiu, 2016).
Luo Deyin, Xu Tiantian, <i>et al.</i>	2012–present	Songyang path: Songyang County, Zhejiang, seized the opportunity of the national traditional village conservation initiatives. They activated traditional villages through the "Action to Save Old Houses," utilizing the mountainous landscape and ecological attributes to explore a culture-led path to rural revitalization (D. Luo <i>et al.</i> , 2021).
Zhao Chen	2013–present	Beicun revitalization (Pingnan, Fujian): Established a villager self-governance system, consulted with villagers to define the aims for village revitalization, and determined spatial planning principles for holistic planning. Architecturally, updated designs were employed based on the traditional Northeastern Fujian construction system to adapt to modern lifestyles (H. Luo & Zhao, 2015).
Zhang Lei	2013–2018	Eshan practice: Architect-led initiative. Through a series of vernacular building renovations and operational practices (including residences and bookstores), it attracted artists, operators, and media. Promoted rural development through a small-scale, actionable practice model (K. Wang <i>et al.</i> , 2016).
Chen Haoru	2013–present	Sun commune (Lin'an, Zhejiang): Established a modern ecological farm, opened sales channels for agricultural products from the village, and re-established the integral participation of agricultural production/life within rural society (H. Chen, 2014).
Donglian Design Group (Architects: Zhou Ling, FuXiao, Ding Wowo, Wang Fangji, Zhuang Shen, <i>et al.</i>)	2014–unknown date	Nanjing Huashu dual-action plan: Explored a model where the government leads in platform building, while private capital participates, and residents/civil groups carry out the project. Achieved village activation through environmental remediation, ecological pond purification, farmland protection, infrastructure improvement, housing renovation, and business implantation (Zhou, 2015).

Note: ^aSelected cases feature involvement periods exceeding one year or encompass multiple village renovation projects.

and collective capacity. The depoliticization of rural life weakened traditional mechanisms for reinforcing place identity, yet no new cultural frameworks emerged to replace discarded traditions, plunging rural identity into a

phase of disordered deconstruction. Concurrently, surging demand for farmhouses and factories led to uncoordinated settlements. Traditional construction techniques were eroded under Westernized esthetic influences, stripping

rural construction of its regional distinctiveness. By the late 1980s, the mass migration of surplus laborers to cities (Su *et al.*, 2024) accelerated rural hollowing, diminishing farmers' participation in village development. This exodus triggered a deterioration of public facilities and spaces, paralyzing communal life and intensifying social fragmentation (W. Wang & Ding, 2015).

3.1.4. New rural construction era in the year 2000–present

By the mid-to-late 1990s, the state's promotion of policies aimed to attract investments and increase exports shifted China's economic structure toward heavy industry, thus diverting labor, capital, and resources from rural to urban sectors. This triggered the re-marginalization of villages. To address the "agriculture, rural areas, and peasantry" dilemma, the 2005 Socialist New Countryside Construction initiative was launched. Under the influence of the market economy, new industries—construction, transportation, and tourism—emerged, diversifying spatial typologies. Yet as living space standards modernized, the vernacular character and locale-responsive traditions of rural areas eroded further. This dual trajectory homogenized rural landscapes, effacing regional distinctiveness.

After 2008, following major events, such as the Wenchuan earthquake and the introduction of national policies that strengthen the ecological civilization construction, the architectural field began to become deeply involved in rural construction. Government support and subsidies provided institutional and financial guarantees for designers to develop rural regions; simultaneously, the focus of major domestic and international architectural awards on rural practices inspired more architects to actively engage in the rural domain (H. Huang & Zhou, 2019). Early practices of "architectural design going to the countryside" focused on the social value of architecture but often overlooked the economic concerns of rural communities. The "Beautiful Countryside" initiative, introduced after the 18th National Congress, ushered in an era in which the revitalization of rural industries drives rural development. Initiatives, such as "Co-creation" and "Rural Revitalization Units" represent attempts to redefine the identity of villagers, transforming them into practitioners and builders of rural development and thereby strengthening their sense of place identity. In 2015, President Xi Jinping of China proposed the concept of "nostalgia for homeland," positioning rural areas as vital vessels of traditional culture and the fundamental foundation for rebuilding cultural confidence. Rural construction has entered a phase of comprehensive rural construction (H. Huang & Zhou, 2019; Y. Huang *et al.*, 2020), characterized by multi-party collaboration involving technical professionals, such as architects and planners,

open government cooperation, and the participation of private capital. There is a growing emphasis within villages on integrating environmental improvements, industrial revitalization, and preservation of cultural heritage. Consequently, rural place identity has begun to reshape.

3.2. Present issues in rural spatial construction

Based on the above analysis, it is evident that place identity in China's rural areas has undergone a process of de- and reconstruction. Although revitalizing villages through rural spatial construction is currently receiving increasing attention from diverse sectors of society, existing practices have revealed persistent issues, some of which are described below.

3.2.1. Spatial construction with a lack of villager participation and ignoring villagers' needs in rural construction

Amid the rapid construction wave of the past two decades, rural development has exhibited pronounced trends of urbanization and gentrification. Due to tight timelines and heavy workloads, the dominant actors in the design process often lack thorough investigation and democratic consultation with villagers. This top-down model imposes the subjective construction intentions of government departments or designers, which are misaligned with rural realities, onto villages.

Furthermore, theme-oriented rural projects that are developed for tourism experiences and esthetically driven rural projects led by architects often remain detached from villagers (Wu *et al.*, 2017). The funding, design, and construction of such projects may operate independently of the village, and the outcomes frequently cannot be utilized by villagers. Evidently, in present rural spatial construction practices, villagers are rarely positioned as the clients of planners or architects. Designers intervene as outsiders, resulting in rural spaces that fail to resonate with villagers' sense of place identity.

3.2.2. Detachment of space from production and life, and difficulty in establishing social order in rural construction

Under the influence of urban culture, traditional rural spaces are often perceived as symbols of poverty and backwardness, leading to new rural planning and designs that incessantly imitate urban architectural models. This emulation of urban culture results in the gradual replacement of traditional spatial vessels—carriers of vernacular culture—with modernized spaces. However, these purely urban-life-oriented modern spaces struggle to accommodate the vernacular cultural behaviors of rural users, becoming rigid showpieces within villages.

Consequently, the rural cultural fabric fractures, and the sense of place diminishes.

On the other hand, contemporary external rural environments have undergone fundamental transformations from those of traditional societies. Triggered by these shifts, rural interiors have also adapted under an urban cultural influence, manifesting in a series of changes including, but not limited to, the replacement of clan-kinship ethical orders by a market-consumption economic logic, alterations in production and lifestyles, and the disintegration and reorganization of internal rituals and customs. Ultimately, shifts in beliefs, values, social norms, and daily life have rendered traditional rural rules obsolete, while new vernacular rules remain unestablished (Wu *et al.*, 2017). Hence, traditional rural spaces—as physical manifestations of these rules—no longer align with contemporary needs.

3.2.3. Overuse of traditional symbols and a lack of innovation in local style in rural construction

China's rural typology is notably complex. However, dominant actors in rural construction often lack a deep understanding of the local vernacular culture. During rapid development processes, they reductively interpret rural character as visual cultural symbols with local features—mechanically applying elements, such as white plaster walls, dark gray tiles, pitched roofs, wooden gates, earthen walls, and memorial archways to evoke idyllic landscapes. This approach establishes a simplistic paradigm that is bluntly replicated across numerous villages, gradually rendering settlements visually indistinguishable and ultimately producing numerous villages with identical appearances. Such homogenization dissipates the cultural significance of place and disrupts human-place identity (Zhu *et al.*, 2010). This arbitrary, collage-like construction fundamentally reflects a crisis of deep-rooted rural cultural identity (Lin *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that the formation of a traditional rural spatial character represents an adaptive expression of local natural environments and socio-cultural contexts through geographically available materials and indigenous construction techniques. With societal evolution, not only have rural socio-cultural structures transformed, but building technologies and materials also diverged from historical practices. Thus, the mechanical application of traditional symbols essentially ignores the temporal dynamism of rural locality.

4. Rural construction strategies based on place identity

Rural areas should neither engage in apish imitation of cities nor indulge in nostalgic representations of their traditions.

The locality of villages stems from their authentic lives and developmental needs. According to place identity theory (Haartsen *et al.*, 2003), residents' identification with a place originates from three dimensions (Figure 1): Socio-cultural base, socio-economic functional base, and space-figurative image base. The socio-cultural base refers to the combination of unique lifestyles, value systems, traditional customs, and social relations that have developed over time in rural areas. Socio-economic functional bases—colloquially understood as how villages operate—encompass rural industries, a dimension that has frequently been overlooked in previous rural construction practices. Space-figurative image base denotes the most visually immediate rural landscape, which is commonly discussed in architectural discourse. These three dimensions offer actionable guidance for rural spatial construction.

4.1. Revitalizing rural socio-culture through public space reconstruction

The design of rural public spaces encompasses daily production and living spaces, as well as socio-behavioral cultural spaces. Agricultural production remains integral to daily rural life. Before widespread modernization, farming exhibited strong rhythmicity and sociality. Villagers worked collectively throughout the day, fostering mutual understanding and trust through cooperative labor. Agricultural activities—planting, harvesting, and processing—require dedicated spaces that simultaneously serve as vital communication hubs. Yet contemporary rural construction, while providing new housing, often neglects such spaces.

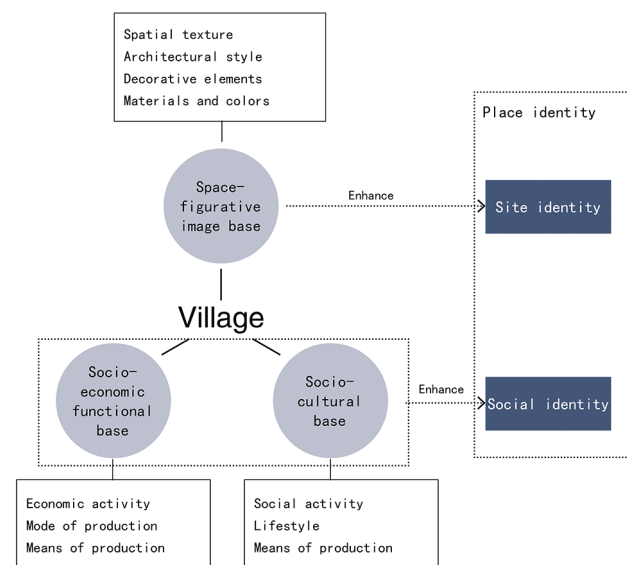


Figure 1. The mechanism of rural development and local identity formation

Source: Diagram by the authors

Socio-behavioral spaces host village functions, ritual practices, festive ceremonies, weddings, or funerals, and other communal practices. These ritual spaces from traditional agrarian society have gradually vanished during rural modernization. Weddings, funerals, and ancestral worship ceremonies constitute the most significant collective activities, not only sustaining interpersonal relationships but also establishing a ritual and social order.

These two types of public spaces carry rural cultural DNA, which is crucial for reconstructing village norms and community bonds. They enable cultural cohesion, place identity, and collective values among villagers (Fu & Li, 2022). Consequently, prioritizing these spaces in rural construction is imperative, and it requires designs that respect villagers' practical needs.

4.2. Supporting rural economic functions through industrial revitalization

Industrial economies form the foundation of rural development and villagers' place identity. Traditional villages predominantly relied on primary industries. However, agricultural modernization and post-reform urbanization have driven farmers to seek urban employment. As urban industries disrupt rural systems, villages suffer from industrial deficiency, economic decline, hollowed-out social structures, and the loss of vitality.

Many villages facing such dilemmas now opt for rural tourism, attracting urban visitors with boutique resorts to create local jobs and stimulate economies. While this model offers universal applicability and operational feasibility, providing short-term economic relief, its limitations are revealed during crises, such as pandemics (Wu & Ma, 2024). First, when tourism halts unexpectedly, villagers' livelihoods face immediate collapse. More critically, to cater to urban expectations, tourism/themed rural construction inevitably assimilate urban lifestyles and esthetics. Rural spaces thus transform from authentic living and working landscapes into romanticized cultural symbols, eroding genuine daily practices (Yang & Xu, 2022). Once rural authenticity vanishes, so does the location's appeal to tourists. Essentially, while locality constitutes rural charm, monocultural tourism undermines it. Hence, sustainable resilience requires hybrid economic models integrating tourism with endogenous industries.

4.3. Enhancing rural figurative image through innovative local expression

The visual identity of villages—encompassing their spatial morphology and architectural character—serves as both the material foundation for place identity and the vessel for socio-cultural and economic functions. As

previously emphasized, rural distinctiveness stems from locality, necessitating that visual forms adhere to the place-form dialectic (Shen, 2004) to strengthen villagers' identification with their surroundings and activate endogenous dynamism (Wu *et al.*, 2017). Unlike architects' focus on esthetics and cultural continuity, villagers' spatial attachment prioritizes economic viability, functionality, and comfort (Lin *et al.*, 2020). Architects must therefore mediate these dual imperatives.

Vital and authentic rural expression emerges from a deep engagement with site-specific elements—topography, climate, sunlight patterns, ecology, local craftsmanship, and living traditions—which are transformed into design strategies. Within modern industrialization, rural expression neither rejects nor avoids contemporary techniques; rather, local materials remain the most potent medium for articulating territorial identity (Tzonis & Lefavre, 2012). When integrated with modern structural systems, these materials enhance thermal insulation, ventilation, and other functions to meet contemporary needs, while simultaneously offering locals the defamiliarized sensory experiences.

The relationship between architecture and nature constitutes a core theme. Spatial design must resonate with the environment through multi-sensory engagement—where thermal flows, humidity gradients, scents, and sounds become palpable dimensions beyond mere visuals—thus awakening humans' synesthetic perception of place.

5. Rural construction practice in Xiaoshi village

In the past decade, increasing numbers of architects (Table 1) have engaged in rural construction. Among them is Li Ye's Studio Dali and its practice in Xiaoshi village. After returning from Harvard, Li immersed himself in vernacular practices across Yunnan, Sichuan, and beyond. His goals extend beyond designing structures that align with neo-vernacular esthetics; he strives to revitalize villages through architectural intervention. Li contends that a village can develop endogenous dynamism for sustainable growth only when it generates a place identity. Xiaoshi village is an example of a project where Studio Dali has realized place identity reconstruction through rural construction.

5.1. Introduction to Xiaoshi village

Xiaoshi village is situated in a valley along the Jian River of Pengzhou city on the Chengdu plain, Sichuan (Figure 2). Originally a traditional agricultural village, its trajectory shifted in the late 1950s when Pengzhou established the

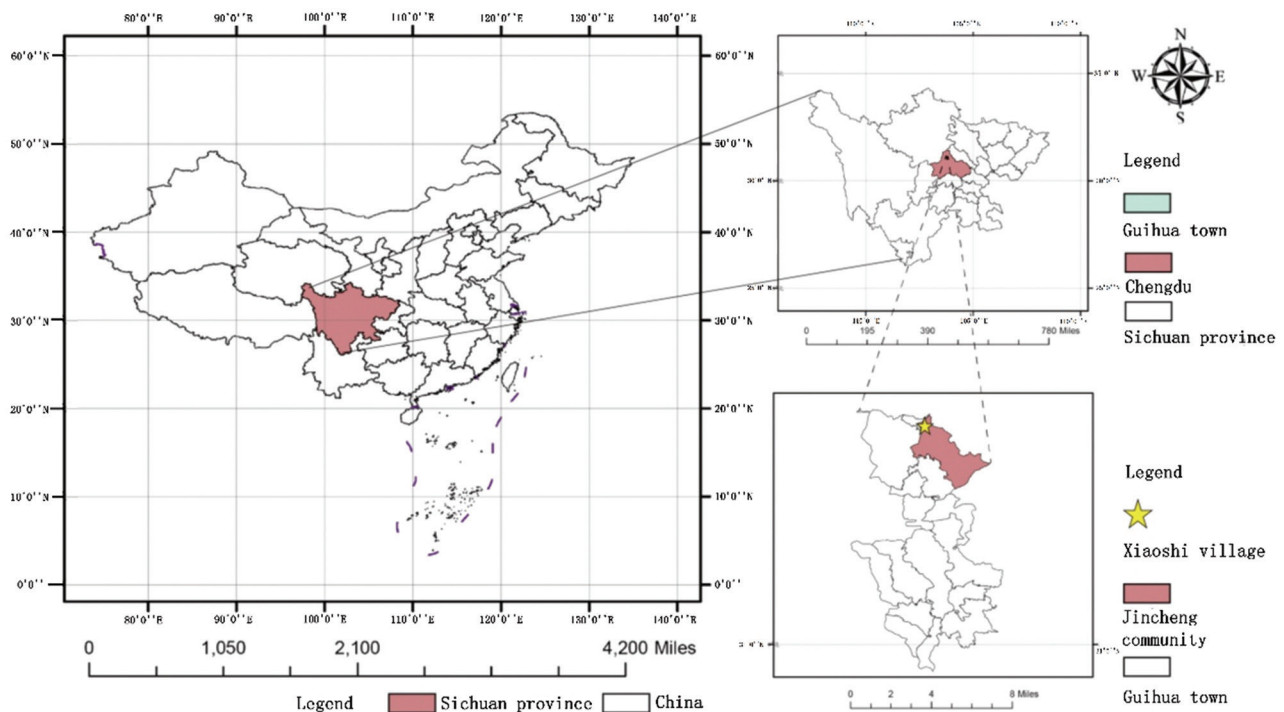


Figure 2. Location of Xiaoshi village

Source: Map by the authors based on the standard map (Approval No.: GS(2019)1697) issued by the National Administration of Surveying, Mapping and Geoinformation, and the base map has not been modified

Yuejin coal mine here. This development triggered the village's rise as a regional economic hub. However, the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake inflicted severe damage: The coal mine collapsed, state-owned industrial mines closed, and village structures were destroyed and rebuilt. Across these industrial and spatial transformations (Figure 3), Xiaoshi's lifestyle and community fabric transformed radically. While the traditional village morphology and dwellings vanished, the collectivist legacy of the Yuejin coal mine era persists in residents' memories.

Against this backdrop, Studio Dali initiated its rural project here in 2017, with sustained engagement over 5 years. The studio implemented a series of construction projects across varying scales and programs (Figure 4), encompassing public facilities, homestay renovations of villagers' residences, and new factories. As an architect immersed in rural praxis, Li Ye contends that fostering place identity extends beyond architectural esthetics and vibrant public spaces; it fundamentally requires spatial interventions that recalibrate residents' lifestyles and economic industries.

5.2. Reconstructing public spaces and daily life

Unlike some villages that prioritize converting old buildings into tourist-oriented homestays or small public structures

during rural revitalization, Li Ye identified critical gaps in the post-disaster reconstruction of Xiaoshi village: A severe shortage of public service facilities and spaces for daily interactions among villagers. Consequently, he persuaded the village party secretary to initiate the construction of a village cultural compound dedicated to the everyday needs of villagers. This multifunctional hub comprises a range of essential amenities, including an elderly day care center, village filial piety culture exhibition hall, library, fitness center, night school, and village health clinic (Figure 5).

The village cultural compound is located in the center for optimal accessibility (Figure 4). Sichuan's mild, rainy climate makes semi-enclosed gray spaces—long favored by locals—ideal for outdoor activities. Li Ye strategically leveraged eave spaces as catalysts for daily social engagement. The entire structure is sheltered beneath a vast hipped roof. To maximize open eave areas, interior corridors were eliminated, and circulation between functions occurs entirely outdoors under the canopy. At the main entrance, the eaves extend over 10 m, accommodating various gatherings. As anticipated, the compound became the villagers' preferred daily hub. Elders spontaneously place bamboo chairs under the grand eaves to chat over melon seeds, admire songbirds, and socialize (Figure 6). This organic usage crystallized the village's core concept

The historical transitions and identity crisis of Xiaoshi

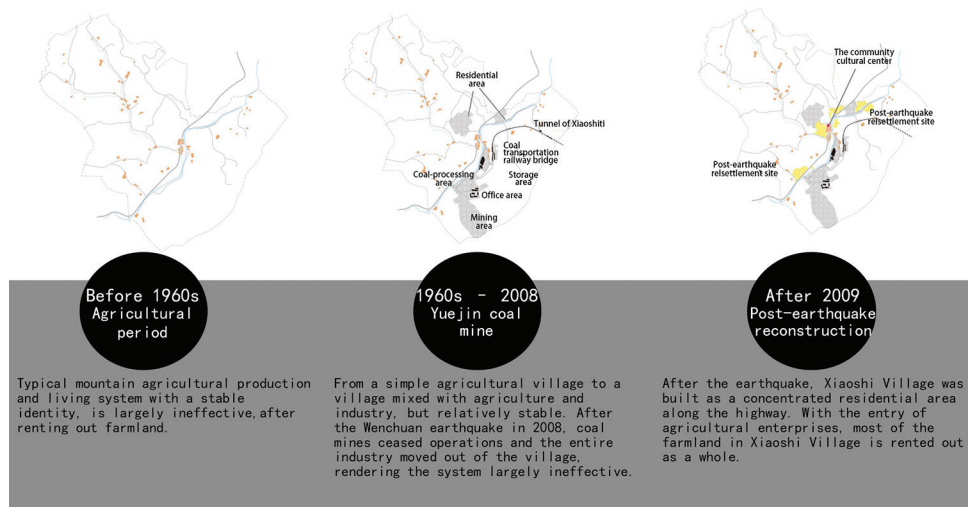


Figure 3. The historical transitions and identity crises of Xiaoshi village. Multiple changes in support industries and the impact of the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008
Source: Diagram by Studio Dali Architects



Figure 4. Distribution of Studio Dali's projects in Xiaoshi village
Source: Map by Studio Dali Architects



Figure 5. The community cultural center of Xiaoshi village
Sources: Left: Photo by Studio Dali Architects (2018). Right: Drawing by Studio Dali Architects

of “Under One Roof.” Subsequent streetscape renovations across Xiaoshi village extended this spatial logic—over 20 street-facing residences and shops expanded their eaves by 2–3 m, forming a continuous covered arcade.

Li Ye also addressed contradictions between traditional agrarian and modern lifestyles. His second project in Xiaoshi village, “The Multi-Purpose Space” (Figure 7), tackles five enduring agrarian activities: Tool storage, grain preservation, crop sun-drying, laundry drying, as well as wedding or funeral ceremonies. The design incorporates a zigzag unidirectional circulation path, respecting the village’s funeral tradition of “no backward walking.” This layout maintains functional connectivity while ensuring spatial independence between activities. Extending the logic of the cultural compound, the multi-purpose space is similarly unified under a vast overhanging eave,

creating expansive semi-sheltered zones. This canopy accommodates over half the village during communal events, such as weddings or funerals. On ordinary days, the space transforms flexibly into a rain-protected area for sun-drying grains and casual gatherings for villagers.

Beyond the cultural compound and the multi-purpose space, the rural marketplace at the northern terminus of the main thoroughfare further anchors daily village life. Over the initial 3 years of Studio Dali’s engagement in Xiaoshi, this series of community-centric spaces collectively formed the basis for villagers’ various activities. These radically inclusive environments have reknitted the communal fabric, allowing residents to reclaim shared emotional bonds. Across this spatial trilogy, Li Ye has accomplished rural construction’s most vital yet often neglected dimension: Designing villagers’ lives.



Figure 6. Villagers’ spontaneous activities under the eaves of the community Cultural center
Source: Photo by Studio Dali Architects (2019)



Figure 7. The multi-purpose space
Source: Top-left and bottom: Photo by Studio Dali Architects (2020). Top-right: Drawing by Studio Dali Architects

5.3. Shared operations as the new industrial model

A process of hollowing out due to industrial scarcity overwhelmed Xiaoshi village, leaving only the elders, children, and people suffering from illness as permanent residents. After establishing the public space framework, the village secretary and Li Ye strategized to introduce commercial initiatives. Xiaoshi's proximity to Chengdu and location bordering the Longmen Mountains—endowed with streams and scenic landscapes—made tourism a logical choice. To extend visitor stays, Li and the secretary prioritized homestays. Innovatively, Li proposed integrating vacant dwellings of migrant workers into a shared “Upstairs Homestay, Downstairs Residence” model (Figure 8). This approach simultaneously addressed the scarcity of land for construction and preserved spatial authenticity, resolving the dual constraints of resource limitation and cultural integrity.

The village secured consent from four adjacent two-story farmhouses to become pilot units, with each household retaining its ground-floor residence, while the village collective leased and renovated the second floors into commercial homestays (Figure 8). Central to the design was achieving a balance between privacy and connection—preserving autonomy for villagers and guests while enabling organic interaction. Between every two farmhouses, external staircases provided exclusive access to the upper levels for the guests. Serpentine eaves separated the floors to mitigate visual and acoustic interference, simultaneously extending shelter to create semi-enriched ground-floor zones for villagers' daily use. Within these transitional spaces, guests naturally pause to observe local rhythms and engage in casual conversation with residents. Above, the homestay units feature communal verandas beneath continuous canopies, fostering socialization between guests beyond what standard rooms offer.

Following completion, the shared homestays introduced a third-party operator for management. Profits are distributed under a 3:3:4 ratio among villagers, the village collective, and the operator (Figure 9). This equitable framework incentivizes all stakeholders: Villagers receive rental income and occupancy-based commissions; some serve as resident stewards for daily operations; and others generate additional revenue by cooking guest meals and selling farm produce. With personal interests aligned to the homestays' success, participants exhibit endogenous motivation to meticulously maintain the facilities. They consciously respect guests' lifestyles—even seamlessly integrating considerate practices into their daily rhythms.

From the perspective of urban tourists, the shared homestay model sacrifices some accommodation privileges. However, it offers a chance to experience



Figure 8. The sharing of homestays and residences
Source: Top-left and right: Photo by Studio Dali Architects (Top-left: 2023; right: 2021). Bottom-left: Drawing by Studio Dali Architects



Figure 9. Operational model of homestay-sharing
Source: Diagram by Studio Dali Architects

authentic rural social life. From the villagers' point of view, these tourists bring more vitality and energy to the aging village, and villagers can connect with urban society. In a sense, shared homestays do not just share space, but also life, culture, and emotions.

Since commencing operations in 2021, the shared homestays have achieved 90% occupancy during peak seasons. This success catalyzed the expansion of the sharing model into Xiaoshi's new food manufacturing workshop (Figure 10). Beyond opening production areas for public tours and experiential activities, the workshop strategically shares facilities with heritage food artisans. This synergy addresses standardization challenges for traditional local foods while providing the factory with product differentiation and technical expertise. In parallel to this initiative, Li Ye has integrated other productive

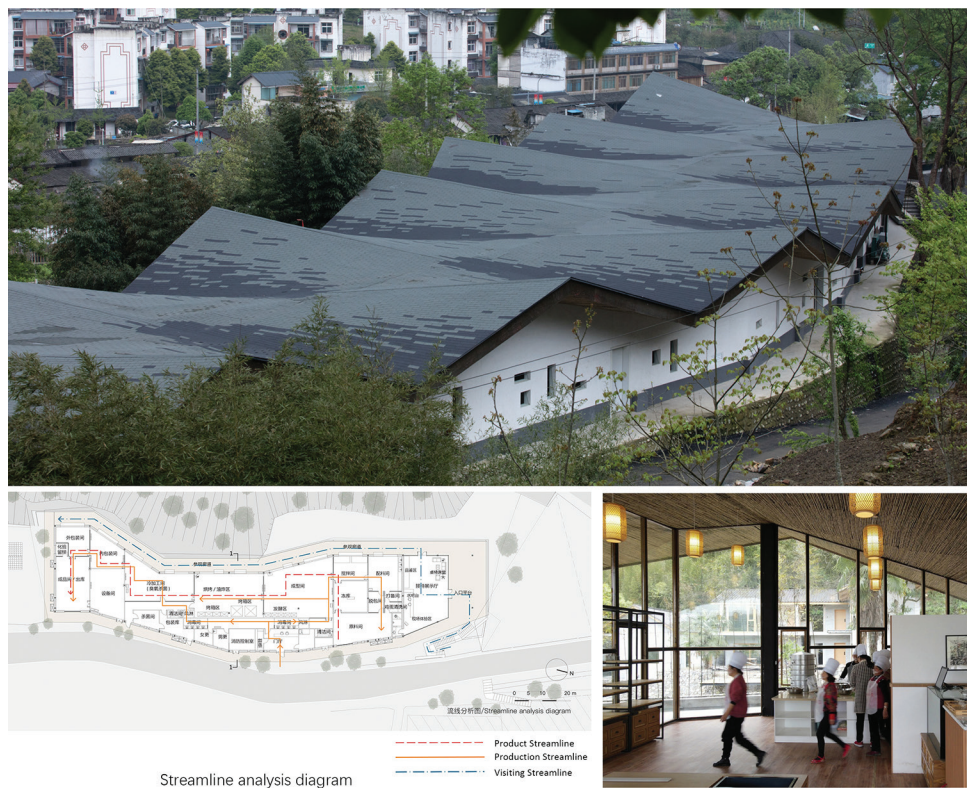


Figure 10. Local food factory

Source: Top and bottom-right: Photo by Studio Dali Architects (2022). Bottom-left: Drawing by Studio Dali Architects

spaces—including a winery and sesame cake workshop—into the village fabric. He argues that rural vitality cannot rely solely on tourism; retaining production assets and manufacturing capabilities within villages buffers them against volatile economic tides in an increasingly uncertain era.

Having operated for over a year, this shared economy model has generated employment for over 100 residents, including 40 young returnees from cities. Progressive industrial maturation has ignited endogenous dynamism within Xiaoshi village, spurring villagers to autonomously develop communal cooking spaces for culinary engagement with guests and pick-your-own gardens for agricultural immersion. The model manifests dual transformative effects: It positions villagers as de facto co-owners of core industries, awakening their recognition of their agentive value to strengthen place identity, while concurrently building economic resilience that mitigates the inherent vulnerabilities of mono-industrial development.

5.4. Crafting place-specific esthetics

Post-earthquake Xiaoshi village retained no pre-existing historic structures. To accommodate the villagers' contemporary lifestyles and esthetic preferences, Li Ye

deliberately employed innovative architectural elements to forge a new local expression—rejecting the replication of traditional vernacular styles.

The most iconic architectural element is unequivocally the “grand eaves.” Starting with the cultural compound, Studio Dali established the roof as the village’s unifying design lexicon. Nearly all subsequent projects feature distinctive blue-gray tiled roofs, each uniquely configured (Figure 11). Beyond esthetics, these canopies function as spatial vessels that embrace local life, narratives, and cultural practices, ultimately reinterpreting the concept of locality. Widely embraced by villagers, Xiaoshi is now affectionately called “Big Eaves village.” The roofs have further crystallized into a tacit spatial code, guiding private constructions—as seen when residents spontaneously added wide eaves to their self-designed communal kitchen, creating covered outdoor dining areas.

Studio Dali extensively incorporated indigenous materials. Bamboo—a quintessential Sichuan species—permeates Xiaoshi’s transformation as a primary architectural element (Figure 12). Inspired by ancestral dwellings, tightly woven fine bamboo appears not only in ceiling panels beneath grand eaves but also as visual partitions and facade ornamentation in homestays and

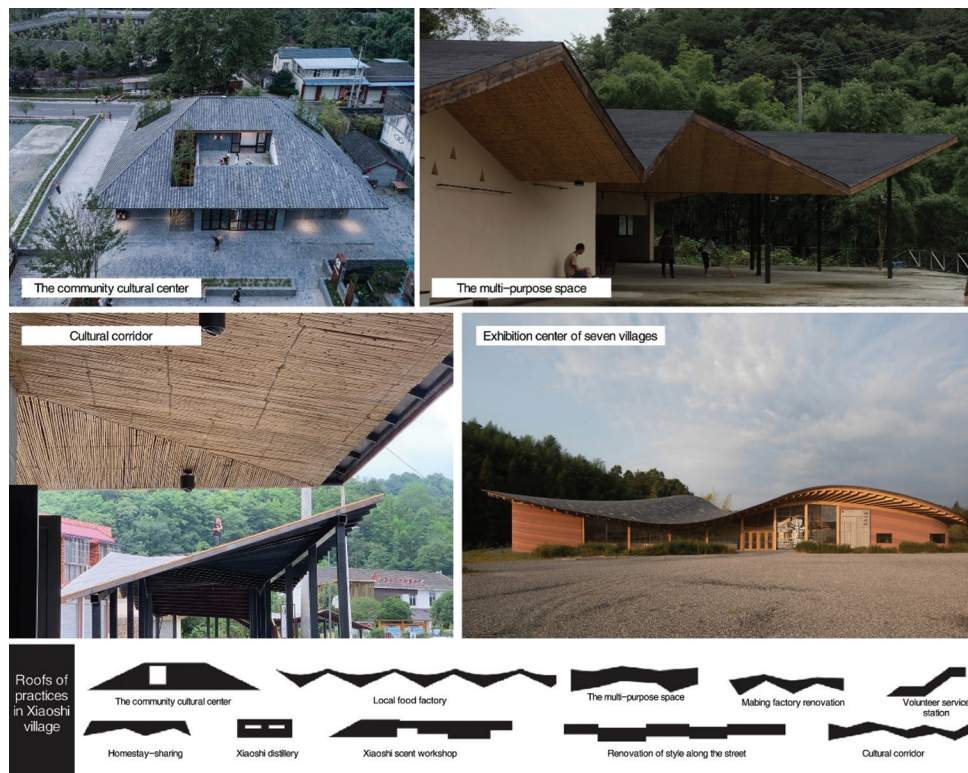


Figure 11. Roof forms of Studio Dali Architects' projects in Xiaoshi village

Source: Top: Photo by Studio Dali Architects (Top-left: 2018; top-right: 2019; bottom-left: 2020; bottom-right: 2022). Bottom: Drawing by Studio Dali Architects

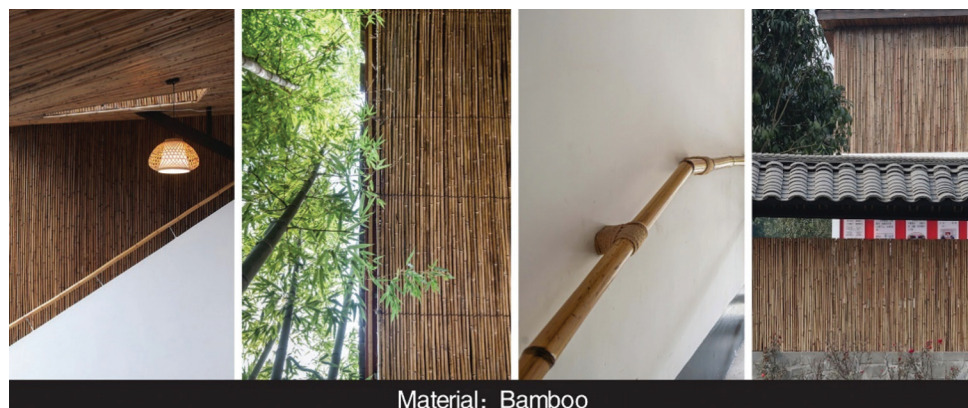


Figure 12. Bamboo as a building material in Xiaoshi village projects

Source: Photo by Studio Dali Architects (2021)

streetscapes. Thicker bamboo poles are used as stair railings and handrails. Courtyards in projects, such as the cultural compound and multi-purpose space, feature locally planted moso bamboo groves, harmonizing the architecture with the landscape. Beyond bamboo, hemp ropes—historically used for agrarian labor—soften structural columns through wrapping techniques. These tactile materials evoke embodied memories of rural livelihoods through sensory resonance.

Xiaoshi's transformation also integrates indigenous construction techniques. Walls employ terrazzo plastering, historically used in mining zones, alongside Sichuan's characteristic white-washed surfaces and blue-brick masonry; the flooring utilizes terrazzo finishes. These easy-to-implement techniques present minimal complexity for local artisans while offering fiscal viability for township governments with limited budgets, ensuring economic feasibility and executability.

Across iterative application and amplification of these architectural elements, the village has achieved visual coherence, cultivating a distinct esthetic that differs from urban homogenization. This consciously constructed landscape is gradually crystallizing into emerging genius loci within villagers' collective memories of forging new place attachment where tradition and modernity converge.

6. Conclusion

Studio Dali's 5-year rural construction engagement in Xiaoshi village has not only enriched residents' spatial experiences but fundamentally reconfigured daily life, catalyzed new industries, and reignited village vitality—forging an incipient rural commons. Throughout this process, villagers evolved from passive recipients to active co-creators, embodying a trajectory of empowered participation.

The inherent complexity of rural societies (Z. Wang *et al.*, 2019) requires architects to take on dynamic roles: Beyond spatial designers, they become listeners to villagers' aspirations, choreographers of new lifestyles, and strategists for economic ecosystems. The practice of the Xiaoshi village project may offer actionable insights for revitalizing villages across the nation to reconstruct place identity amid similar challenges.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

The research is supported by Cultural Heritage Protection and Inheritance Research Special Project of the National Social Science Foundation of China, "Research on the Preservation of Historic Districts, Ancient Villages, and Ancient Towns with a Mix of Old and New Elements" (ID: 24VWB022).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data

All data supporting this study are included in the article.

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