

Conservation and Revitalization of Rural Heritage: A Case Study of the Mountainous Traditional Village

Shuyi Li

School of Design Art & Media, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China

Email: qianruo96688@126.com

How to cite this paper: Li, S. Y. (2023). Conservation and Revitalization of Rural Heritage: A Case Study of the Mountainous Traditional Village. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 13, 877-893. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2023.1312051>

Received: November 23, 2023

Accepted: December 24, 2023

Published: December 27, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Rural heritage represents the sustained interaction between humans and nature, serving as historical evidence for the study of the evolutionary trajectory of rural societies. The future of rural heritage is crucial for the development of rural communities. It not only serves as a carrier of agricultural memory but also fosters rural social cohesion, and even becomes a pillar supporting rural economic growth, offering potential employment opportunities. In recent years, China has implemented a series of rural revitalization policies, propelling the conservation of rural heritage and fostering its sustainable development. Shixia, a typical mountainous village, stands as a successful case in the protection and activation of rural heritage. This study introduces this village's tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources, analyzes the challenges and constraints faced by the village in its developmental stages before the Rural Heritage Revitalization Action (RHRA), and presents the transformative journey of Shixia from poverty to rejuvenation. The study dissects the revival strategies employed in this successful rural heritage revitalization case, aiming to inspire the development of other traditional villages.

Keywords

Rural Heritage, Rural Revitalization, Mountainous Village, RHRA, Shixia

1. Introduction

With the extensive implementation of the rural revitalization initiative in China, there is an increasing public interest in the cultural heritage located in rural areas. Rural heritage is formed over a long historical period by the residents' sustained interaction with a specific natural environment through unique production and lifestyle practices. It encompasses not only tangible elements such as

landscapes, architecture, and vegetation but also intangible aspects like production techniques and cultural wisdom. This concept emphasizes the uniqueness and value of rural areas and underscores the importance of preserving, inheriting, and promoting the rural traditional culture. In academic discourse, rural heritage is often defined as concepts like vernacular architecture, traditional villages, and village landscapes, reflecting a shift in heritage recognition criteria from a focus on history and art to a more life-oriented perspective.

Currently, rural heritage faces multiple threats, including urban expansion, natural disasters, cultural loss, and pollution, which can lead to the destruction of natural landscapes, historical buildings, cultural heritages, and farmland. The need to protect rural heritage is pressing. As a valuable resource for education and research, rural heritage contributes to the transmission and learning of traditional culture, fostering rural community cultural identity. Additionally, rural heritage holds tourism appeal, attracting visitors to explore, thereby promoting economic development and creating job opportunities for rural communities. The conservation and activation of rural heritage are essential strategies for the revitalization of rural communities.

This article introduces Shixia 石匣, one of the typical rural heritage sites with mountainous village characteristics. This ancient village is located in the mountainous region of central Shandong Province, under the jurisdiction of Guanzhuang 官庄 Street, Zhangqiu 章丘 District, Jinan City 济南市. Covering an area of 10 square kilometers, it is the largest village in the southern mountainous area of Guanzhuang. The village is nestled amidst mountains and rivers, boasting picturesque scenery and a rich historical and cultural heritage. It has been successively recognized as a provincial-level traditional village, and a provincial-level cultural and ecological village. In 2021, Shixia was successfully rated as a national AAA-level tourist attraction and was included in the sixth batch of national-level traditional villages in 2022. However, before the rural heritage revitalization initiative, Shixia was a poverty-stricken remote mountain village with inadequate public infrastructure, significant challenges in environmental governance, and numerous grassroots conflicts that hindered its development.

In 2018, Shandong Province initiated the Rural Heritage Revitalization Action (RHRA) with the slogan “Protecting rural heritage, empowering rural revitalization”. This action aligned with the “Shandong Province Rural Revitalization Strategic Plan (2018-2022) 山东省乡村振兴战略规划” aimed to propel comprehensive revitalization of rural areas in Shandong, injecting robust momentum into rural development. Shixia’s rural revitalization action, focusing on comprehensive environmental improvement, mobilized local officials to take the lead and called upon the masses to participate collectively. It guided villagers to engage in village construction with a sense of ownership and raised awareness of their involvement in beautifying and managing the village environment. Through the RHRA, Shixia carried out extensive renovations, including the reconstruction of more than 300 meters of river weirs and the demolition of over 150 illegal constructions, transforming the disorderly and dilapidated environment. Following the

revitalization efforts, Shixia underwent a remarkable transformation, becoming an ecologically livable paradise within three years. Recognized as a successful case of rural heritage preservation and activation, Shixia has been highlighted by central news media as an exemplary model of rural heritage conservation. Therefore, documenting the transformation process of Shixia and exploring the pathways and strategies for activating rural heritage have significant implications for the revival of rural heritage on a global scale.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rural Heritage

The UNESCO World Heritage program, initiated in 1972, focused primarily on heritage in urban and natural landscapes. Over time, researchers began to recognize the presence of heritage in rural areas. Rural heritage gradually became part of international discussions on heritage preservation and sustainable development, being regarded as a crucial component of cultural, historical, and natural resources that requires attention (Ducros, 2017). Research on rural heritage, village culture, and folk craftsmanship as central themes has steadily expanded.

The field of rural heritage research is diverse, encompassing disciplines such as economics, agriculture, history, sociology, geography, and tourism. From a tourism perspective, Makwindi & Ndlovu (2022) explore the development, management, marketing, and tourist experiences in rural tourism, along with their impact on rural communities. Quintana et al. (2022) and Ortegón & Acosta-Prado (2023) delve into sociological issues within rural communities, examining aspects like social structure, cultural identity, and social change, emphasizing that population loss and economic decline are the primary factors constraining rural area development. From a cultural geography perspective, Wang et al. (2012) elucidate the geographical characteristics, landscapes, and spatial layout in rural areas, underscoring how different geographical environments give rise to distinct regional cultures, determining the uniqueness of rural heritage. The studies by Wang & Han (2021) and Qin et al. (2023) encompass rural culture, traditional architecture, handicrafts, and opera performances, presenting the characteristics and evolution of traditional villages in China.

These studies focus on various aspects of rural areas, including history, natural resources, community dynamics, and sustainable development. They explore the value, composition, and characteristics of rural heritage, as well as its impact on society, culture, and the economy. Furthermore, through these investigations, it is evident that rural heritage commonly faces challenges such as the lack of effective protection mechanisms, uneven regional development, and the loss of local resources. Simultaneously, during the preservation and revitalization processes, there is a need to pay more attention to opportunities for rural residents' participation and benefits to achieve balanced development. All of these literatures provide a theoretical foundation and research perspectives for this study.

2.2. Mountainous Villages

Mountainous villages are characterized by breathtaking natural landscapes, intricate topography, abundant ecological environments, traditional agriculture, ancient architecture, and tightly-knit community life. These attributes render mountainous villages unique geographical entities, garnering the attention of both tourists and researchers. Nevertheless, mountainous villages are gradually experiencing decline and confront a plethora of developmental challenges. These challenges encompass threats from disasters such as landslides and floods, economic downturns due to poor accessibility, cultural isolation, and population loss.

In recent years, academic interest in mountainous villages has been steadily increasing. Christmann & Menor (2021) emphasize that the focus on mountainous village development lies in the management of the ecosystem, biodiversity, water resources, and soil protection in mountainous areas. They also discuss strategies for preserving the ecological diversity and enhancing the disaster resilience of mountainous villages. Ciolac et al. (2019) and Qin et al. (2022) examine mountainous villages from the perspectives of agriculture and rural development, introducing agricultural practices, land utilization, and constraints on rural economic development. They explore methods to promote sustainable development in mountainous villages. Dömeová & Jindrová (2011) and Evgrafova et al. (2020) propose strategies for the revitalization of mountainous villages, highlighting that the development of tourism can stimulate economic recovery. In terms of culture, Zhang (2023) delves into the characteristics and transformations in the cultural identity, traditional lifestyles, and religious beliefs of mountain communities, underlining the necessity of understanding the history and culture of mountainous villages for their revitalization. Chen (2009) and Lu & Hu (2017) offer insights from the perspectives of policies and urban planning, analyzing how government policies and urban planning projects impact the economy and development of mountain communities.

The research on mountainous villages underscores their diversity and complexity, as they typically possess unique cultural and social characteristics. These studies contribute to promoting the exploration of cultural heritage in mountainous villages, all within the context of sustainable development. Building on the foundation of research on mountainous villages, this study, focusing on the cultural and geographical characteristics of Shixia, aims to uncover its cultural value and heritage resources and attempts to explore the pathways to its revival from a multidisciplinary perspective.

3. Village Landscape and Heritage Resources

3.1. Location and Landscape

Shixia is situated at the northern foothills of the central Shandong mountain region, surrounded by mountains on all sides. Within the village, there is a unique west-to-east flowing water system known as the Shixia River. The village is built

on both sides of the river, dividing it into the southern and northern banks. Serving as the headwaters of the Da Wen River 大汶河, the Shixia River's water source originates from the foothills of Jiuding Mountain 九顶山, forming a babbling tributary that flows eastward through the mountainous ravines. This river has provided the villagers with abundant water resources and convenient transportation conditions for generations. With the progress of urbanization after the reform and opening-up, transportation infrastructure has gradually improved.

Shixia is located 60 kilometers west of Jinan 济南, 40 kilometers east of Zibo 淄博, 8 kilometers north of National Highway 309, and 10 kilometers from the Jiaoji Railway 胶济铁路. It is intersected by Township Road 023. Its surroundings include the Zhujiayu 朱家裕, Xueye Lake 雪野湖, and Qiaoling scenic areas 樵岭前, creating a clustering effect that offers possibilities for tourism development (see **Figure 1**). In terms of natural landscapes, the unique geological formations, sculpted by the forces of nature over time, have given rise to the distinctive rocky valleys and ravine landscapes of Shixia. Additionally, the village maintains a pristine ecological appearance, characterized by lush ancient trees, abundant greenery, and an absence of industrial zones. There is zero industrial pollution, resulting in a landscape of green mountains and clear waters, with green space coverage exceeding 90% (see **Figure 2**).

3.2. Architecture and Village Spatial Structure

Within the scope of Shixia, there are nearly 300 traditional residential architectures dating back to the Ming and Qing Dynasties through the Republican period. Among them is a temple named Xinglong Temple 兴隆寺, which dates to the Ming Dynasty and is constructed in the form of a traditional quadrangle courtyard (Siheyuan 四合院). The majority of the other residential buildings in the village exhibit typical characteristics of mountainous architecture. They are constructed using local stone with minimal decoration, featuring only floral and fauna carvings on lintels. They maintain the essential appearance of the original building materials, and their courtyard layout adheres to traditional styles, remaining largely intact. These buildings uphold the traditional style of mountainous rural settlements while incorporating the architectural layout of the central plains' siheyuan (Zhou et al., 2017; Reimer & Bollman, 2010). Most courtyards consist of a main building and wing rooms. The main building typically has three bays, with the entrance located on one side facing the street, featuring a simple sloped-roof gatehouse. Both the courtyard paving and walls are composed of irregular stone blocks. The architectural complexes present a layered and elevated landscape. The age of these buildings varies from three hundred years to recent decades. Although these ancient structures have weathered with time and show signs of wear and tear, they faithfully bear witness to the village's historical journey. Stone walls covered in climbing plants, stone slabs overgrown with moss and weeds, and door pillars weathered to gray by the years all record the storied past of this mountain village.

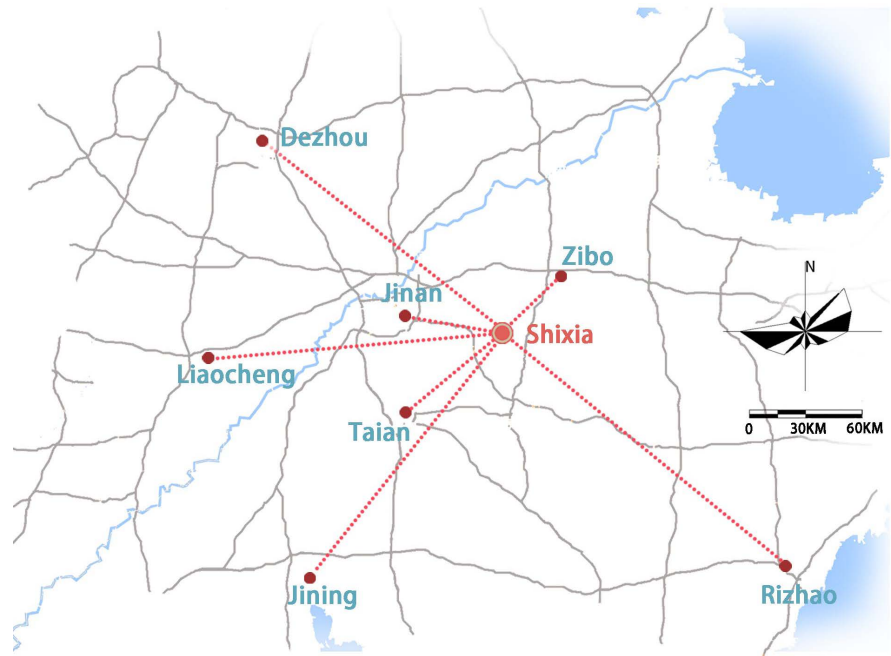


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of shixia.



Figure 2. Aerial photographs of shixia.

In terms of village spatial structure, Shixia is a clustered settlement divided into two parts by Shunhe Street, running north-south. The southern part comprises the new village, while the northern part is the old village, with a crisscrossing network of lanes and alleys. Aerial views reveal that the entire village's architecture is arranged along the Wenxi River's gorge, with building foundations constructed from stacked stones, adapting to the varying terrain (see **Figure 3**). In terms of construction techniques, dry stone walls are predominant in Shixia, and roads are paved with stone slabs or gravel (see **Figure 4**). The new village area primarily consists of newly constructed or renovated buildings, featuring regular streets and a smaller number of traditional structures.



Figure 3. Satellite imagery of shixia.



Figure 4. Buildings and roads in shixia.

3.3. Heritage Resources

Shixia was established approximately during the Hongwu 洪武 reign of the Ming Dynasty, with its ancestors migrating from Shanxi Province, having experienced centuries of historical changes. The Qi Great Wall was located in the south of Shixia. Within the village, one can find ancient temples, wells, and stone artifacts, primarily located in the northern part of the old street and on both sides of four traditional alleys (see **Figure 5**). As crucial heritage resources of this village, stone artifacts include stone rollers, grinding stones, stone troughs, stone stele, and stone tablets. Additionally, there are intangible cultural heritage resources such as Zhangqiu Bangzi opera 章丘梆子戏 and traditional handicrafts left by ancient workshops. All of these heritage resources reflect the village's rich history and the traditional customs of its residents, serving as invaluable tourism resources for the village's future development. More details about these heritage resources can be found below.

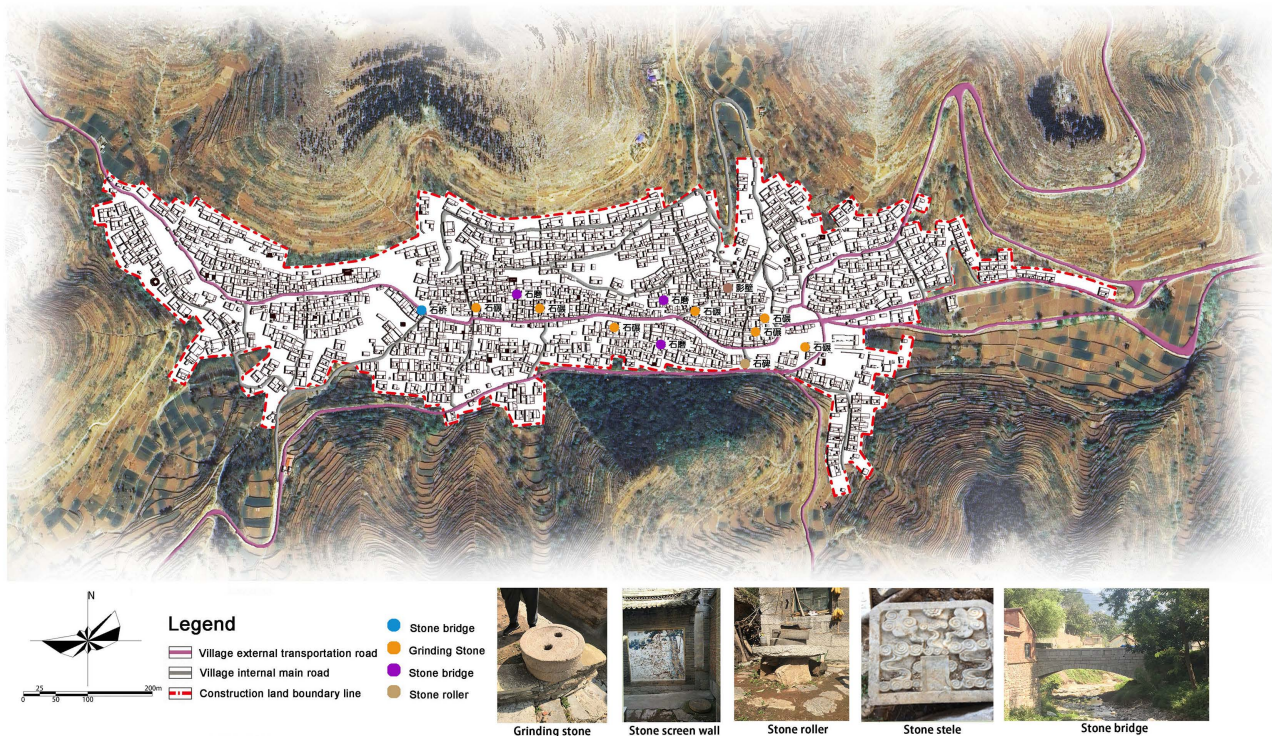


Figure 5. Distribution map of heritage resources.

- The Qi Great Wall

It has stretched across the hills south of Shixia for over two thousand years, enduring the test of time and remaining largely intact. Three segments of the wall were relatively well-preserved. The segment of the Qi Great Wall adjacent to Shixia's southern side is part of the third section, specifically the stretch from the Changchengling 长城岭 to Xiangyuguan 相峪关. This section played a crucial role in the ancient defense system of the Qi 齐 and Chu 楚 regions, attesting to its historical significance (Cui, 2019).

- Ancient Street

Within Shixia, numerous traditional streets and alleys traverse the village. Stone houses on both sides of these streets are arranged in an orderly manner. The paving stones for the roads are locally sourced from the nearby mountains. Due to the erosion from rain and the wear caused by carts and footsteps, some stone paths have acquired a semi-smooth texture. As the skeletal network of the village layout and a historical witness to its development, ancient streets constitute a paramount element in the composition of traditional villages.

- Ancient Wells

With a river flowing through the village, the perennial stream from the mountains converges into a brook, flowing west to east through Shixia. The abundant local water resources are harnessed by ancient wells scattered throughout the village. These wells, constructed with locally quarried stones, exhibit a simple and antique form, embodying distinctive characteristics of mountainous village culture.

- Ancient Temples

Shixia boasts the renowned landscapes of “Ten Miles, Three Sì 寺” and “Three Miles, Five Miào 庙”. “Ten Miles, Three Sì” refers to the temples within a ten-mile stretch from east to west, including Xinglong Temple 兴隆寺 nestled in Daqing Mountain 大青山, Baoguo Temple 报国寺 at the entrance of Shixia, and Baiyun Temple 白云寺 at the foot of Jiuding Mountain 九顶山. Meanwhile, “Three Miles, Five Miào” indicates five temples within a three-mile radius, namely Zhenwu Temple 真武庙, Longwang Temple 龙王庙, Leishen Temple 雷神庙, Shanshen Temple 山神庙, and Guandi Temple 关帝庙. Among them, Xinglong Temple, initially established during the Tang Dynasty’s Kaiyuan era 唐朝开元年间 and restored in the 41st year of Kangxi’s reign 康熙四十一年 (1702 AD), holds the highest prestige (see **Figure 6**).

- Stone Rollers and Grinding Stones

These stone products were scattered throughout the village, maintaining a well-preserved state. Despite the widespread use of mechanical devices for electrically powered grain grinding, in the streets and alleys of Shixia, one can still observe villagers using the traditional stone rollers and grinding stones for grain processing. Villagers, gathered in small groups and engage in laborious work beside the stone roller, presenting a scene of the diligent and simple life of mountainous villagers.

- Ancient Workshops

Long-standing cultural heritage has shaped Shixia into a complete model of social life in the mountainous region, covering various aspects of daily life. Old workshops, including blacksmiths, carpentry shops, grocery stores, traditional Chinese medicine shops, weaving shops, paper crafts shops, lime kilns, oil mills, dyeing workshops, and liquor distilleries, are scattered throughout the village. Many of these workshops still retain their original craftsmanship processes, constituting significant intangible cultural heritage resources for the local community.



Figure 6. Photos of ancient temples in shixia.

- Zhangqiu Bangzi Opera

Bangzi Opera, also known as Bangzi Tune, is one of the most widely spread vocal systems in traditional Chinese Han opera 汉族戏曲. It includes Shandong Bangzi 山东梆子, Hebei Bangzi 河北梆子, Huaibei Bangzi 湖北梆子, and others. Zhangqiu Bangzi is a typical representative of Shandong Bangzi Opera and is an important intangible cultural heritage in Shandong. Shixia, as the birthplace and inheritance site of Zhangqiu Bangzi Opera, has not received sufficient attention and recognition until recently. After the RHRA, the inheritors of Zhangqiu Bangzi Opera returned to the village to revitalize theatrical development. Today, it has become a cultural emblem of Shixia.

4. Development Constraints

The Information Age has transformed people's lifestyles, leading to a gradual loss of the original functions of the spatial layout and infrastructure of traditional villages. Like many other traditional villages, Shixia has faced challenges such as population outflow, natural decay, and obsolete building functions. A significant number of traditional dwellings have been altered, resulting in the widespread phenomenon of new constructions disrupting the overall village ambience. These issues collectively serve as impediments and constraints to the development of Shixia (see **Table 1**). RHRA has provided a pivotal opportunity for transformation in Shixia. Supported by this initiative, the village has gained attention from the media and government, securing financial assistance. Over the past five years, based on its abundant heritage resources, through renovation and revitalization efforts, Shixia has evolved from a backward hillside village into a culturally distinctive destination attracting tens of thousands of domestic and international visitors annually. The per capita GDP has tripled, and the younger generation has returned to their hometown, becoming the driving force behind rural revitalization.

5. Conservation and Activation Strategies

5.1. Key Conservation Points

The focal points of rural heritage conservation encompass not only the historical buildings and street layouts of traditional villages but also the natural environment, such as unique mountainous terrain, farmland, forests, orchards, etc. Protective planning, based on the situation and resource assessment of Shixia, proposes comprehensive protection strategies for the village. The conservation targets for Shixia's rural heritage include natural and cultural resources, village morphology, street layouts, traditional architecture, historical environmental elements, intangible cultural heritage, etc. (see **Table 2**).

Encouraging and supporting organic and sustainable agricultural practices aims to prevent land and water resource pollution and maintain soil quality. Additionally, water resources play a crucial role in the sustainable development of Shixia. Throughout the implementation of protective planning, the village com-

mittee has strengthened the management of the Shixia River watercourse and the banks on both sides. Detailed plans have been devised to protect water sources, ensure the rational use of water resources, and prevent water pollution.

Table 1. Constraints and solutions in development of shixia.

Problem Type	Cause Analysis	Problem Evaluation	Solution Path
Overall Appearance	Spontaneous construction with new methods and materials	Hinders better continuity of traditional appearance	Establish protection zones, implement review for additional constructions
	Public spaces with open drains, pits, and overgrown weeds	Affects the overall appearance of the traditional village	Plant more greenery, redesign public spaces, strengthen the restoration of the village's ecosystem
	Large area of hardened roads in the village	Disrupts the spatial layout of the traditional village	Replace pavement materials, plant trees and shrubs
Infrastructure	Existing infrastructure and living environment cannot meet the growing needs of modern life	Contradiction between modern lifestyle and traditional spatial functions	Respect residents' customs, advocate for the inheritance of traditional craftsmanship
	Narrow village roads and crowded buildings	Infrastructure cannot meet the village's fire protection needs	Replan village roads based on residents' needs
Traditional Buildings	Poor quality, outdated function, various degrees of damage, and natural aging	Poor building airtightness, lack of insulation and moisture-proof measures, poor environmental hygiene	Strengthen the structure, add moisture-proof and insulation layers, restore the original facade
	Lack of funds and technical support for residents	Unable to choose relocation or carry out renovations; the single function of the building cannot meet modern life needs	Develop cultural tourism and ecological agriculture to increase villagers' income; provide subsidies to residents for the transformation of traditional houses
Intangible Cultural Heritage	Lack of inheritors of intangible cultural heritage	Intangible cultural heritage faces the risk of being lost and disappearing	Invite drama literary figures to join the "Rural Heritage Revitalization Action", regularly conduct themed activities for intangible cultural heritage to enhance the cultural influence of Shixi

Table 2. Overview of preservation elements in shixia.

Preservation Elements	Description
Environmental Resources	Farmland, streams, mountains, forests, orchards within the village area
Village Morphology	Mainly along Shunhe Street, presenting an east-west oriented belt-like distribution of street and alley spatial patterns; historical traces of the evolution of the village's spatial layout
Traditional Buildings	Baoguo Temple, Longwang Temple, Zhenwu Temple, Baiyun Temple, Guandi Temple, Xinglong Temple and traditional residential architectures
Historical Elements	Ancient roads, ancient trees, ancient wells, horse tethering stones, stone rollers, stone bridges, shadow walls, grinding stones
Intangible Cultural Heritage	Jinan Zhangqiu Bangzi Opera, traditional handicrafts

In terms of village morphology and traditional architecture, RHRA has undertaken a conservation-oriented planning initiative encompassing all historical buildings, streets, landscapes, and community configurations within the territorial scope of Shixia. Particularly along both banks of the Shixia River, the area with the highest concentration of historical structures, RHRA designates this region as a primary conservation zone. Rigorous controls are imposed on the architectural styles of newly added structures in this zone, with restrictions on their height (see **Figure 7**).

For historical buildings that have incurred damage, professional architects and preservation experts have been invited to engage in restoration and protection efforts, aiming to preserve the original appearance and structure to the greatest extent possible. Additionally, local residents are encouraged to inherit the traditional stone construction style when constructing new residences, employing seasoned artisans well-versed in traditional building techniques. RHRA has revitalized idle courtyards around Yujia Alley through collective village repurchase, compensating with a modest amount of cash. The reclaimed historical spaces have been transformed into landscaped recreational areas, enhancing the living environment and enriching the cultural and recreational lives of the surrounding residents. RHRA also encourages active participation from village communities in conservation efforts. Villagers can contribute to planning, restore historical buildings, and maintain public spaces.

5.2. Activation Strategies

- Comprehensive Conservation Planning

Guided by the challenges facing Shixia's conservation and development, RHRA has identified potential construction expansion areas, greening to be supplemented area, and vehicle obstacle zone (see **Figure 8**). The village's development structure is categorized as "One Core, One Axis, One Belt, and Five Zones".

One Core: Focuses on the transformation of the village's overall aesthetic using the stone construction style as the core. It aims to reshape the distinctive characteristics of the traditional mountainous settlement in central Shandong, highlighting the unique qualities of the ancient village and enhancing the recognizability of Shixia's architectural aesthetics.

One Axis: Defines the main axis of village development, leveraging the east-west directional village development axis formed by the main traffic arteries. It sequentially connects historical and new village areas, serving as the primary axis for the outward expansion of the village's core space.

One Belt: Designates a riverside landscape belt, with the Shixia River as its primary component. This aims to reshape the cultural and natural landscapes on both sides of the river, creating a core scenic belt for the village. It also plans essential vehicular and pedestrian routes for tourism within this belt.

Five Zones: Redefines functional areas across the entire Shixia, including a Traditional Aesthetic Tourism Zone, Intangible Cultural Heritage Display Zone,

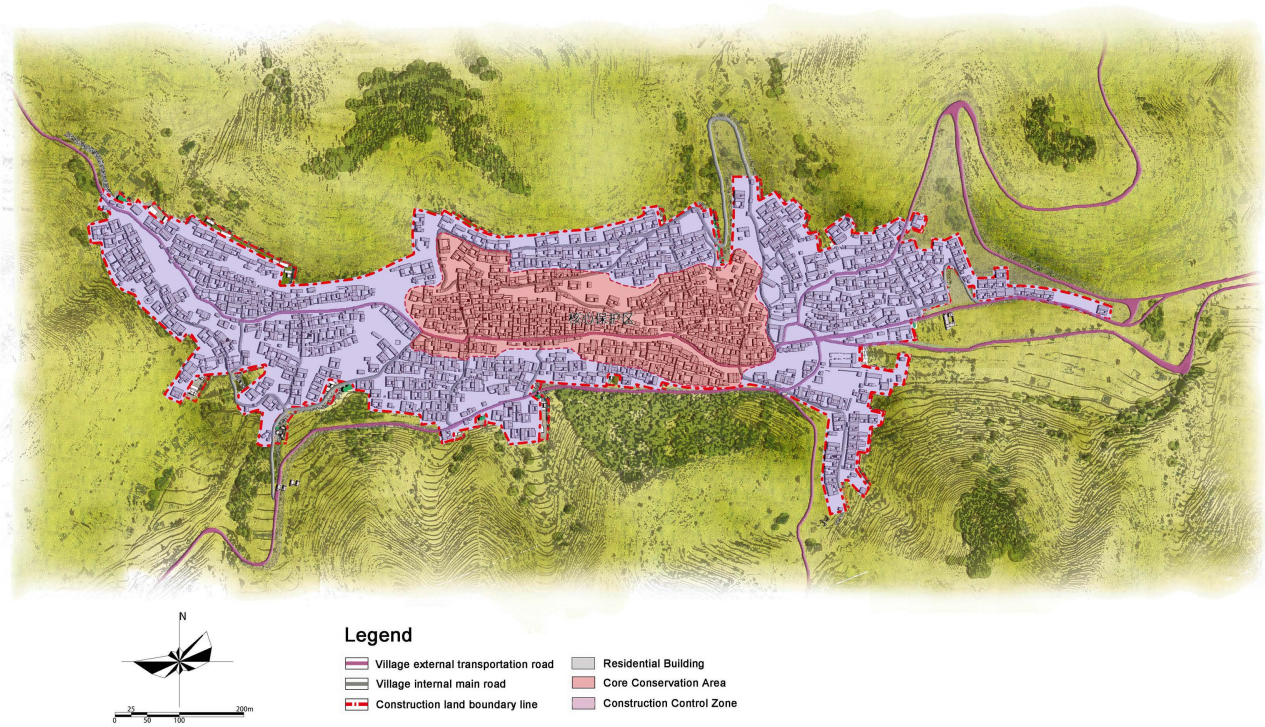


Figure 7. Schematic map of protected area division.

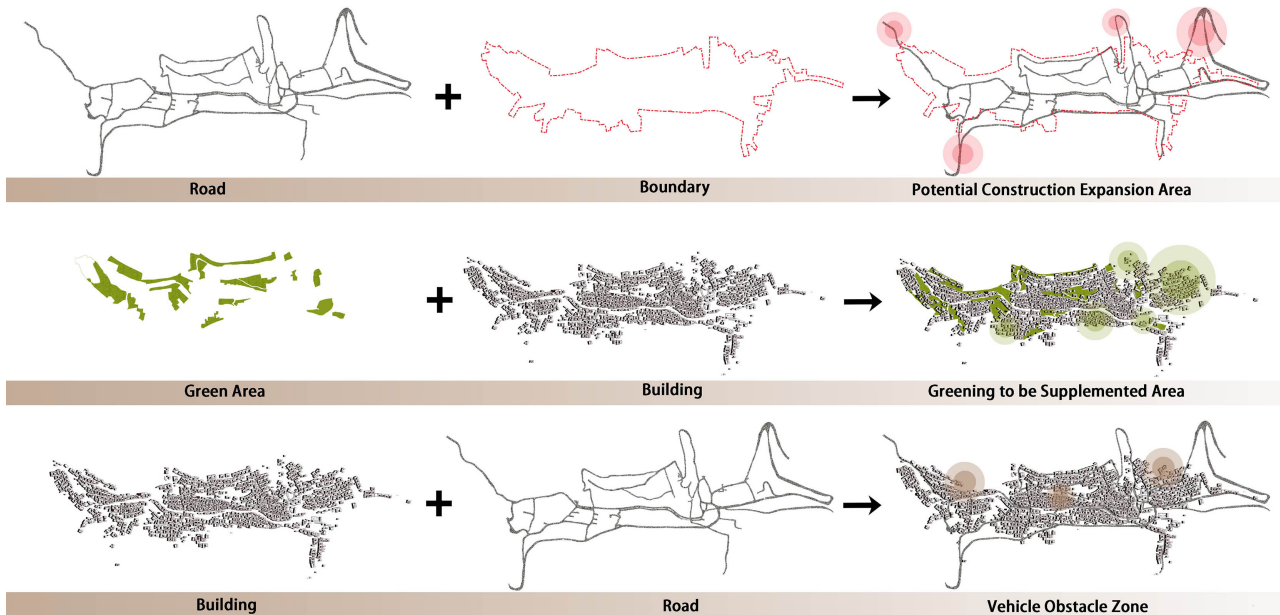


Figure 8. Development plan of shixia.

General Aesthetic Residential Zone, Distinctive Planting Experience Zone, and a Visitor Transfer Zone.

Apart from these, there is a comprehensive overhaul and planning for village roads, public spaces, water supply and drainage systems, power and telecommunications, environmental sanitation, seismic resilience, and firefighting systems. The first step of the RHRA focuses on the overall planning and transformation

of the village's physical environment, providing a prerequisite and guarantee for subsequent cultural revival and economic activation actions.

- Cultivating the Cultural Symbol of Bangzi Opera

RHAH invited the president of the Drama Literature Society for multiple research visits to Shixia. The aim was to revitalize rural culture by promoting the traditional Bangzi Opera of Zhangqiu and creating a cultural emblem. The strategy proposed was to “empower rural revitalization through drama”. In May 2019, the first phase of the “Zhangqiu Bangzi Opera Museum” was completed with three exhibition halls, showcasing detailed cultural archives of Bangzi Opera, including its history, performance styles, scripts, props, and music. This ensured accurate documentation and preservation of cultural elements, serving both as a resource for scholarly study and an attraction for tourists, achieving a harmonious blend of culture and tourism.

Building upon this cultural emblem, since 2019, Shixia has consistently organized the “Bannian” Rural Revitalization Drama Festival for five consecutive years, exhibiting the charm of Bangzi Opera to attract audiences and visitors. The effective integration of “intangible cultural heritage + cultural tourism” has rejuvenated the provincial-level intangible cultural heritage of Zhangqiu Bangzi Opera. “Bannian” is a traditional custom in Shixia, occurring from the 20th day of the sixth lunar month each year, where villagers gather to enjoy opera. This event not only showcases the allure of Bangzi Opera but also brings together the elder and younger generations, fostering cultural identity by providing an opportunity for the younger generation, often working away from home, to connect with the endangered traditional opera.

Moreover, Shixia, as a typical case of rural revitalization, has hosted several award ceremonies for the China Drama Literature Society's “Drama China” awards, establishing itself as a permanent venue for these awards. This has attracted numerous cultural workers from beyond the mountains, undoubtedly bringing more opportunities to the village. In recent years, Shixia has collaborated with multiple cultural companies, introducing culturally or tourism-oriented events with a fashionable theme, attracting over 400,000 visitors.

- Introducing Ecological Agriculture

The rural revitalization strategy of Shixia not only focuses on the creation of cultural tourism intellectual property (IP) but also introduces ecological agriculture, providing the village with inexhaustible momentum for sustainable development. Through comprehensive village planning, the distribution of supporting facilities has been continuously optimized, attracting outstanding talents to return to their hometowns and start businesses. This has led to the establishment of cultural and tourism companies, agricultural product development companies, and the organization and integration of the entire village population into cooperative operations.

For instance, Shandong Kant Agricultural Products Co., Ltd. has contracted 3000 acres of barren hills in Shixia, establishing the Shixia Vegetable Base and Black Pig Breeding Base. Transforming a thousand acres of barren hills into an

ecological agricultural base revitalized the land, benefiting the local residents by increasing income. The company collaborated with Jinan Nanshan Yipin Agricultural Development Co., Ltd. to establish a millet and miscellaneous grain planting base, constructing a standardized large-scale production and processing workshop. This upgraded the industrial chain, enhancing the added value of agricultural products.

Furthermore, the village committee actively conducts training and educational activities related to ecological agriculture, encouraging villagers to adopt eco-friendly agricultural practices such as organic farming and integrated cultivation of rice and fish ponds. This initiative aims to reduce the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. The introduction of ecological agriculture in Shixia stimulates collective income growth and enriches the local population. Leveraging the intangible cultural heritage industrial park of Bangzi Opera, locally distinctive rural products and farmhouse restaurants have gained popularity, marking a splendid transformation for the ancient mountain village on the path of rural revitalization.

6. Conclusion

Over time, the conservation and revitalization of rural heritage have confronted numerous challenges. Issues such as economic resource shortages, widening urban-rural disparities, the impact of social transformations, and threats from natural disasters have significantly compounded the difficulties in heritage preservation. Factors including population decline, the developmental pressures of modern agriculture, and the evolution of cultural identity have also profoundly influenced the inheritance and development of rural heritage. Case studies in rural heritage conservation serve to enhance our understanding of the heritage and cultural values intrinsic to rural areas, offering guidance for the harmonization of diverse interests in the process of rural social development, thereby mitigating obstacles to rural revitalization.

Under the impetus of RHAH, Shixia has undergone a remarkable transformation from a backward hillside village to an ecological and cultural village in just five years. This process, while intricate, has proven to be successful. Its success is not only evident in the realm of cultural heritage preservation but, more importantly, it manifests as a sustainable model for rural social development. Diverging from the relocation-oriented conservation models applied to many traditional villages in Shandong Province, Shixia's local residents did not face forced displacement from their original dwellings due to tourism development. Instead, they actively participated in the entire village renovation process and found their place in the new social roles the village embraced.

The annual cultural events and the introduction of ecological agriculture not only provided substantial income sources for local villagers but, more significantly, attracted the younger generation who had left the mountain village back to their roots. This is particularly crucial for mountainous villages grappling

with severe population decline. The success of Shixia merits increased attention from academia and policymakers. Across China, there are thousands of impoverished, backward, and nearly abandoned small mountain villages similar to Shixia five years ago. Nestled deep in the mountains, these villages bear the historical imprints of Chinese civilization and represent treasures of human wisdom. Hindered by inconvenient transportation, population outflow, and economic decline, these villages are on the brink of extinction, demanding urgent rescue efforts.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Key Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Colleges and Universities in Jiangsu Province, No. 2021SJZDA119, the Theme Case Project of the Ministry of Education, No. ZT-221028801, and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, No.30921012212.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Chen, X. (2009). Review of China's Agricultural and Rural Development: Policy Changes and Current Issues. *China Agricultural Economic Review*, 1, 121-135. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17561370910927390>
- Christmann, T., & Menor, I. O. (2021). A Synthesis and Future Research Directions for Tropical Mountain Ecosystem Restoration. *Scientific Reports*, 11, Article No. 23948. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-03205-y>
- Ciolac, R., Adamov, T. et al. (2019). Agritourism-A Sustainable Development Factor for Improving the 'Health' of Rural Settlements. Case Study Apuseni Mountains Area. *Sustainability*, 11, Article 1467. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11051467>
- Cui, J. G. (2019). The Cultural Charm of the Qi Great Wall. *Builders' Monthly*, 2, 47. (In Chinese)
- Dömeová, L., & Jindrová, A. (2011). Rural Tourism and Its Contribution to the Development of Countryside. *Acta Universitatis Agriculturae et Silviculturae Mendelianae Brunensis*, 59, 59-64. <https://doi.org/10.11118/actaun201159020059>
- Ducros, H. B. (2017). Confronting Sustainable Development in Two Rural Heritage Valorization Models. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 25, 327-343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1206552>
- Evgrafova, L. V., Ismailova, A. Z., & Kalinichev, V. L. (2020). Agrotourism as a Factor of Sustainable Rural Development. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 421, Article 022058. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/421/2/022058>
- Lu, H. Y., & Hu, H. Y. (2017). The Traditional Residence Pattern and Regional Characteristics of the Mountain Region in Central Shandong Province. *Huazhong Architecture*, 4, 76-81. (In Chinese) <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/81/1/012129>
- Makwindi, N., & Ndlovu, J. (2022). Cultural and Heritage Tourism as an Alternative Rural Livelihood Diversification Strategy for Communities Living Adjacent to the Sehlabathebe National Park in Lesotho. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 11, 901-918.

- Ortegón, Y. A. C., & Acosta-Prado, J. C. (2023). Shared Meanings of Socio-Environmental Heritage and Rural Economic Dynamisation: Mediating Effect of Sustainability in Protected Areas. *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, 17, 123-137. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJISD.2023.127976>
- Qin, F., Chen, Y. H., & Li, L. P. (2023). Adaptive Governance Strategies of Traditional Villages in the Context of Rural Revitalization: Taking the Traditional Villages of Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er as an Example. *Urban Development Studies*, 30, 105-113. (In Chinese)
- Qin, Y., Luo, G., Li, Y., Tan, Q., Zheng, C., Yu, M. et al. (2022). Assessment of Sustainable Development of Rural Settlements in Mountainous Areas: A Case Study of the Miaoling Mountains in Southwestern China. *Land*, 11, Article 1666. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land11101666>
- Quintana, D. C., Díaz-Puente, J. M., & Gallego-Moreno, F. (2022). Architectural and Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Social Change in Rural Areas: 10 Years (2009-2019) of Management and Recovery in Huete, a Town of Cuenca, Spain. *Land Use Policy*, 115, Article 106017. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2022.106017>
- Reimer, B., & Bollman, R. D. (2010). Understanding Rural Canada: Implications for Rural Development Policy and Rural Planning Policy. In D. Douglas (Ed.), *Rural Planning and Development in Canada* (pp. 10-52). Nelson Education Ltd.
- Wang, L. F., Wang, Z., & He, Y. (2012). The Renewal Method and Practice for the Mountain Village in the Middle Part of Zhejiang based on Regional Characteristics. *Huazhong Architecture*, 8, 165-168. (In Chinese)
- Wang, X., & Han, F. (2021). Study on the Sustainable Development of Baojiatun Rural Landscape Heritage Community. *Urbanism and Architecture*, 18, 176-183. (In Chinese)
- Zhang, F. (2023). Research on the Design of Cultural and Creative Products in Traditional Villages in the Jixi Mountains Based on the Transformation of Imagery. *Design*, 36, 12-15. (In Chinese)
- Zhou, B., Huo, Y. J., & Dong, W. (2017). Analysis on Architectural Space of Traditional Residential Housing in the Mountain Area of Shandong Province—The Case of Seven Courtyards in Woyunpu Village. *Journal of Shandong Agricultural University (Natural Science Edition)*, 48, 708-711. (In Chinese)