

THE REVIVAL AND CONTINUITY OF LINGNAN ANCIENT VILLAGES THROUGH THE CASE OF DEYUNJU

Wei Tang

School of Tourism and Historical Culture, Zhaoqing College, Zhaoqing 526061, Guangdong, China.

Abstract: In the contemporary landscape of rapid urbanization and modernization, traditional rural settlements frequently confront a binary dilemma: succumbing to standardization amidst urban expansion or undergoing cultural commodification through aggressive commercialization. Deyunjia, situated in Bijiang Village (Beijiao Town, Shunde District, Foshan), presents a compelling empirical model of sustainable rural heritage activation. By organically integrating traditional Cantonese gastronomy, adaptive micro-renovation of historic built environments, and living cultural memory, Deyunjia functions not merely as a renowned culinary establishment, but as a dynamic locus for cultural self-awareness, living heritage transmission, and adaptive conservation. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from critical heritage studies and cultural geography, this paper examines how Deyunjia facilitates the re-articulation of local identity and sense of place. It demonstrates that embedding intangible cultural heritage specifically culinary arts and everyday customs into contemporary socioeconomic cycles fosters an endogenous mechanism for heritage preservation. The study illuminates a viable paradigm for rural revitalization where commercial viability and cultural authenticity operate in symbiosis rather than opposition.

Keywords: Lingnan traditional villages; Cultural consciousness; Living heritage transmission; Micro-renovation; Sense of place; Culinary intangible heritage

1 INTRODUCTION

Against the background of rapid urbanization and modernization, traditional rural settlements worldwide and across China in particular—frequently encounter a existential paradox. On one end of the spectrum, historic villages are gradually engulfed by the relentless expansion of concrete infrastructure, descending into homogenous, standardized urban spaces stripped of local architectural character. On the other end, under the surge of excessive commercial tourism development, rural settlements are often evacuated of their authentic cultural soul, reduced to superficial, staged heritage sites designed solely for tourist consumption[1-2]. In this context, Deyunjia, situated in the historic Bijiang Village of Beijiao Town, Shunde District, Foshan, offers an intriguing and vibrant empirical model. Positioned at the intersection of traditional Lingnan gastronomy, historic settlement activation, and the collective memory of the Cantonese water-town landscape, Deyunjia represents much more than an acclaimed regional eatery. It functions as an active field site for observing how indigenous Lingnan culture achieves critical self-awareness, living continuity, and sustainable protection. Examined through the analytical lenses of critical heritage studies and cultural geography, Deyunjia's trajectory reveals profound insights into cultural consciousness, intergenerational transmission, and adaptive heritage governance, illustrating the vast prospects and resilience of rural space within modern society.

2 REDISCOVERING LOCAL VALUES FROM ANCIENT VILLAGE LANES

Cultural consciousness refers to people's understanding of their own culture within a specific historical and cultural context, including awareness of its origins, formation processes, characteristics, and future development directions[3]. For a long time, the Lingnan water-town landscape, including grey-brick houses, wok-ear walls, ancient wells, narrow lanes, and everyday Cantonese cuisine, was often regarded as ordinary scenery of daily life and was even misinterpreted in certain periods as a symbol of backwardness that should be replaced by modern civilization. The establishment and development of Deyunju represents a transformation from passively accepting modernization to actively discovering local cultural values, based on strong cultural awareness and confidence.

2.1 Contemporary Rediscovery of Local Aesthetic Values and Spatial Philosophy

Rather than following a real-estate development logic that involves demolition and reconstruction, or creating standardized imitation ancient architecture, the creators of Deyunju turned their attention to historic residences, abandoned silkworm houses, and narrow village alleys shaped by time. Through a renewed appreciation of grey bricks, oyster-shell walls, banyan trees, and other natural and architectural elements, Deyunju transformed neglected and even deteriorated rural heritage into cultural carriers with unique aesthetic value. This transformation challenges the dominance of Western modernist architectural concepts over rural spaces and demonstrates a deep recognition of Lingnan architectural language, climate adaptation, and water-town living philosophy. Every brick and tile in the ancient village is no longer regarded as obsolete material awaiting removal but as a spiritual symbol embodying historical memory and local identity.

2.2 Artistic Expression of Everyday Life and Reconstruction of Identity

Deyunju challenges the conventional idea that culture must be preserved in museums or elevated above ordinary life. It systematically organizes, refines, and recreates traditional Shunde water-town lifestyles, including living by the water, gathering around the stove, emphasizing seasonal ingredients, and adapting culinary techniques to local materials. This transformation of ordinary daily practices reflects the practical rationality of Guangfu Culture, which values authenticity rather than extravagance and remains rooted in local life. It also represents Bijiang residents' renewed acceptance and confident expression of their own way of life. Within Deyunju's spatial design, everyday water-town experiences acquire ritual significance and cultural depth, allowing both visitors and local residents to experience the unique charm, dignity, and confidence of Lingnan life.

2.3 Awakening of Local Agency and Reconstruction of Sense of Place

The highest level of cultural consciousness lies in the awakening of local agency[4]. Deyunju is not a passive invasion by external capital but an endogenous exploration deeply rooted in the cultural soil of Bijiang, Shunde. Through long-term operation and evolution, Deyunju has cultivated a strong and distinctive sense of place. The memories of older generations of Shunde residents and the renewed recognition of local culture among younger generations converge and are elevated within this unique spatial setting. This reconstruction of place attachment effectively resists the homogenization of local characteristics under globalization and provides a psychological foundation for maintaining the distinctiveness of Guangfu Culture in contemporary society.

3 KEEPING INTANGIBLE HERITAGE AND FOLK TRADITIONS ALIVE THROUGH EVERYDAY LIFE

When culture becomes separated from human participation and everyday practice, it can easily be reduced to a lifeless symbol lacking vitality. The most effective approach to cultural inheritance is to seamlessly integrate traditional cultural elements into contemporary production, daily life, and economic circulation, allowing them to maintain self-sustaining capacity, intergenerational transmission, and continuous renewal in modern society[5].

3.1 Material Embodiment of Culinary Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Intergenerational Continuity of Embodied Knowledge

As a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, Shunde's culinary culture is not merely about satisfying taste preferences; its essence lies in sophisticated culinary techniques and profound respect for nature. At Deyunju, signature dishes such as boneless fish, Bijiang roasted goose, and double-layer milk custard not only satisfy diners' palates but also embody the intangible cultural heritage values of Guangfu cuisine, including adapting to natural conditions and applying techniques according to ingredients. The preparation of boneless fish relies heavily on chefs' tacit knowledge and embodied skills. Through subtle perceptions of knife pressure and fingertip sensations, experienced chefs remove complex intermuscular bones that cannot be fully replaced by machines. This bodily knowledge is inherited through apprenticeship and oral instruction in Deyunju's busy kitchens. By transforming intangible culinary techniques into accessible consumer products, Deyunju provides culinary heritage practitioners with stable professional opportunities and social recognition, enabling traditional skills to achieve self-sustaining development and continued vitality within the market economy.

3.2 Dynamic Spatial Immersion and the Construction of Memory Connections

Inheritance involves not only the reproduction of specific skills but also the reconstruction and re-experience of traditional cultural contexts. Deyunju integrates dining experiences deeply into the historical and cultural landscape of the ancient village. Visitors walk through quiet stone-paved lanes, cross high wooden thresholds, and dine beneath traditional residential structures or under the shade of ancient banyan trees. Older generations rediscover nostalgia and childhood memories here, while younger visitors and tourists experience authentic Lingnan customs through direct participation. This immersive spatial interaction and contextual reconstruction create a cultural communication field that transcends age and geographical boundaries, enabling the memory of Guangfu village culture to circulate naturally through joyful gatherings and culinary experiences.

3.3 Contemporary Transformation of Traditional Customs and Restoration of Rural Cultural Ecology

Beyond the continuation of culinary skills, Deyunju has also become a gathering place for Bijiang folk customs and traditional lifestyles. During festivals, folk cultural displays, seasonal cooking rituals involving traditional ingredients, and dining practices adapted to the water-town environment are actively preserved here. By following the traditional rhythms of culinary culture, Deyunju restores the temporal patterns and ritual atmosphere of historic Bijiang village life. Fragmented folk traditions are reintegrated into a tangible physical space, thereby nurturing the broader rural cultural ecosystem surrounding Bijiang.

4 RURAL RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH LIVING HERITAGE PRESERVATION AND MICRO-RENEWAL

In the conservation of ancient villages, static and closed preservation approaches often result in community decline, cultural discontinuity, and heavy financial burdens, while uncontrolled development can easily damage the historical and cultural fabric of these settlements[6]. Deyunju's major contribution to cultural conservation lies in its practice of a rural revitalization model based on living heritage preservation and micro-renewal.

4.1 Protecting Historical Fabric and Spatial Integrity through Micro-Renewal

Unlike conventional commercial development models based on large-scale demolition and reconstruction, Deyunju adopts a gradual micro-renewal strategy characterized by preserving the old while restoring and integrating new elements in harmony with historical styles. It maximizes the retention of the village's original street patterns, water systems, and architectural structures. The restoration of old houses does not erase traces left by time; moss on grey bricks and weathered marks on wooden doors are carefully preserved. This low-intervention conservation approach not only minimizes damage to ecological environments and historical resources but also maintains the historical information and cultural foundations of the ancient village, achieving a valuable dynamic balance between heritage landscapes and contemporary commercial functions.

4.2 Community Coexistence Mechanisms and the Introduction of Economic Vitality

Cultural conservation is not merely a matter of architectural restoration or the preservation of physical heritage. Its fundamental goal lies in retaining people, sustaining communities, and promoting comprehensive rural revitalization. By leasing unused village houses and abandoned silkworm-rearing facilities, Deyunju transformed previously neglected and even deteriorating rural properties into economically productive assets, while providing local residents with employment opportunities and entrepreneurial possibilities. Indigenous residents are able to share the economic benefits generated by cultural preservation and rural tourism without leaving their homeland, creating a positive ecosystem in which enterprises, villages, and residents coexist and prosper. This endogenous economic vitality fundamentally addresses the challenges of insufficient conservation funding and population decline in traditional villages, injecting continuous internal momentum into heritage preservation.

4.3 Dynamic Adaptation and Functional Reconstruction of Rural Cultural Heritage

With social development and modernization, the original residential and productive functions of traditional rural architecture inevitably decline. The successful experience of Deyunju lies in its dynamic adjustment and transformation of architectural functions. Historic houses have been converted into distinctive restaurants, unused residential buildings have become cultural exhibition spaces and leisure tea areas, and previously private courtyards have been transformed into open public cultural spaces. This functional reconstruction not only extends the physical lifespan of historic buildings but also provides them with cultural and economic functions that respond to contemporary social needs, enabling rural cultural heritage to reconnect with modern urban systems.

5 A CONTEMPORARY PARADIGM FOR THE REVIVAL OF LINGNAN RURAL CULTURE

The exploration of Deyunju has transcended the boundaries of ordinary commercial dining. It represents a cultural practice integrating humanistic values, social responsibility, and business intelligence, offering valuable insights for rural cultural revitalization and ancient village conservation across China.

5.1 Moving Beyond the Binary Opposition between Culture and Commerce

For a long time, academic discussions and heritage conservation practices have often positioned cultural preservation and commercial development as fundamentally opposing forces. The case of Deyunju demonstrates that commerce is not necessarily a destroyer of culture. When guided by appropriate cultural values and conservation principles, rational commercial operations can become catalysts and guardians of cultural preservation. Commercial activities can provide financial support for heritage conservation, while cultural significance can provide businesses with deeper meaning and identity. The two can therefore form a mutually beneficial cycle[7].

5.2 Building a Living Cultural Ecosystem Centered on People

Authentic cultural preservation must ultimately focus on improving people's quality of life and fulfilling their spiritual needs[8]. Deyunju has preserved not only the brick and stone structures of the ancient village but also revitalized interpersonal interactions, everyday rituals, and the vitality of local life. The establishment of this people-centered living cultural ecosystem transforms rural areas from static historical remains into vibrant spiritual homes filled with human warmth.

The successful practice of Deyunju in Shunde, demonstrates that the vitality of tradition is hidden precisely within ordinary daily life and the warmth of everyday experiences[9]. Through strong cultural consciousness, it rediscovered

the potential values of the Lingnan water-town landscape; through an authentic culinary environment, it enabled the living transmission of intangible heritage skills and folk traditions; and through a micro-renewal model based on coexistence, it opened new pathways for rural cultural conservation. Deyunju has preserved not only the culinary memories and architectural landscapes of the ancient village but also provided a highly dynamic example of how Guangfu Culture can repair and reshape itself under the pressures of modernization. As long as traditional culture receives appropriate contemporary expressions, market mechanisms, and spatial carriers, the enduring heritage of Lingnan culture can continue to flourish with renewed vitality and creativity[10].

6 CONCLUSION

In an era defined by accelerated urbanization and the homogenization of spatial identity, the trajectory of Deyunju in Bijiang Village offers a poignant re-examination of rural heritage governance. Rather than succumbing to the binary impasse of static museumification or predatory commercial commodification, Deyunju demonstrates that traditional culture achieves its most resilient vitality when embedded directly within the rhythms of everyday life. By harmonizing culinary intangible heritage with adaptive spatial micro-renovations, this empirical model successfully reconstructs a sense of place while securing an endogenous mechanism for economic self-sustainability.

Ultimately, the significance of Deyunju extends far beyond its localized success as a gastronomic destination. It serves as a profound testament to the power of cultural consciousness and community-centric symbiosis. By valuing human interactions, somatic craftsmanship, and temporal traditions alongside the preservation of built vernacular architecture, Deyunju reframes historic villages not as fossilized artifacts of a bygone era, but as dynamic, living cultural ecosystems. This research reveals that market forces and authentic heritage conservation need not stand in mutual exclusion. When guided by strong cultural values, sensitive spatial stewardship, and genuine community inclusion, commercial enterprise can act as an empowering catalyst for heritage transmission. As historic settlements worldwide grapple with modernization, the living preservation model exemplified by Deyunju illuminates a viable, sustainable path forward—proving that when traditional culture is afforded contemporary relevance and appropriate spatial expression, it remains an irreplaceable anchor for local identity and social cohesion in modern society.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

FUNDING

Interim Findings of the 2025 Guangdong Provincial Education Science Planning Project: Identification of Key Elements, Value Exploration, and Revitalization Pathways for Lingnan Ancestral Hall Educational Customs (2025GXJK0154). Interim findings from the 2024 Ministry of Education University-Enterprise Collaborative Education Project (2023122914639).

REFERENCES

- [1] MacCannell D. Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1973, 79(3): 589–603.
- [2] Hewison R. *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*. Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1987.
- [3] Mu H, Zhang YY. The three dimensions of logic in constructing the spirit of educators from the perspective of cultural self-awareness. *Journal of the Chinese Society of Education*, 2026(6): 46–52.
- [4] Li XT. Philosophical foundation and civilizational significance of “cultural subjectivity”. *Journal of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2026, 39(4): 19–27.
- [5] Liu CL. Research on the ecological protection and heritage transmission of intangible cultural heritage in Inner Mongolia. China Social Sciences Press, 2023.
- [6] Liu L. Research on the generation of rural landscapes from the perspective of cultural lineage: A case study of Daitou ancient village in the Nanxi River Basin. China Academy of Art, 2025.
- [7] Sun Z. The living transmission and innovative development of intangible cultural heritage driven by new quality productive forces. *Journal of Guangxi Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2025, 47(4): 103–110.
- [8] Deng BJ, Ruan HD. The moral legitimacy of “investing in people” from the perspective of Marx and Engels’ virtue ethics. *Theoretical Exploration*: 1–10.
- [9] Bai JJ. An analysis of the identity shifts, emotions, and behaviors of “people, craftsmen, and masters” in the context of Dunhuang’s intangible cultural heritage. *China Newspaper for Nationalities*, 2024(22): 25–27.
- [10] Xinhua News Agency. Decoding urban models of cultural self-confidence. Xinhua Publishing House, 2023.