



The local mediation of rural cultural governance: Problematization, asymmetry, and displaced agency in China's rural cultural revitalization

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how rural cultural revitalization in China is shaped through the local implementation of national policy, development agendas, and commercial investment. Rather than viewing national policy as a uniform force, it explores how policy goals related to cultural protection, public cultural services, and rural development are translated into local projects. The study combines critical discourse analysis of major national policy documents issued between 2021 and 2024 with a documentary case study of Gongcheng in southern China. The findings show that national policy frames rural culture through interconnected logics of protection, improvement, and development. These policy orientations provide a flexible framework that local governments can adapt through tourism promotion, investment attraction, and wellness-related initiatives. In Gongcheng, cultural resources such as ethnic traditions, food culture, ecological landscapes, and health-related knowledge have increasingly been incorporated into development strategies and market-oriented projects. While these initiatives can enhance cultural visibility, infrastructure, and economic opportunities, they may also create unequal access to cultural decision-making, representation, and economic benefits. The paper argues that the key challenge of rural cultural revitalization lies in how policy is mediated through local governance and state–market arrangements. It concludes that more inclusive approaches are needed to strengthen local participation, improve benefit-sharing, and support rural communities as active contributors to cultural development.

1. Introduction

Since the launch of China's Rural revitalization Strategy in 2017, culture has become an increasingly visible dimension of rural policy and development. The Rural revitalization Strategic Plan (2018–2022) located the flourishing of rural culture within the wider revitalization agenda, connecting the protection of traditional and ethnic cultural resources with public cultural provision, local participation, talent development, and the renewal of rural cultural markets. In this article, rural cultural revitalization (xiangcun wenhua zhenxing, 乡村文化振兴) refers to the policy and development field through which cultural resources, practices, spaces, and forms of provision are brought into rural revitalization. Rural culture refers more specifically to the heterogeneous practices, forms of knowledge, social relations, and place-based meanings through which village life is sustained and represented.

These practices enter policy through shifting categories of heritage, public service, cultural industry, tourism, and development. The central analytical question concerns how these categories shape cultural value and how rural residents are positioned within the projects that follow from them.

Existing scholarship has examined rural cultural revitalization through heritage conservation, tourism development, public cultural provision, creative reconstruction, and forms of local participation (Shen and Chou, 2022; Lu and Qian, 2023; Xue and Cao, 2024; Zeng and Mu, 2024; Qian et al., 2025). This research shows that culture can expand local visibility, support livelihood activity, and sustain place-based social relations (Shen and Chou, 2022; Lu and Qian, 2023; Xue and Cao, 2024). It also demonstrates that cultural development is shaped by uneven access to infrastructure, external investment, and administrative support, particularly where heritage, tourism, and

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cultural provision are incorporated into wider development strategies (Verdini and Xin, 2024; Luo, 2025; Zhao and Zhu, 2025). What remains less clear is how these different dimensions are assembled within local development processes. The key issue concerns the translation of broad policy objectives into specific county-level agendas, where cultural resources are selectively valued, projectized, and connected to forms of investment and public representation (Oakes, 2013; Xu et al., 2013; Qian et al., 2017).

This article situates rural cultural revitalization within scholarship on rural restructuring. Rural restructuring concerns the reorganization of rural life through changing relations among land, labour, institutions, local economies, and development strategies (Long et al., 2012; Long and Liu, 2016; Marsden et al., 2023). Cultural governance forms part of this process when cultural practices and place-based resources are drawn into planning, funding, and project development. This perspective directs attention to the institutional processes through which national policy objectives acquire locally differentiated forms. National frameworks establish a broad field of policy priorities, while county-level authorities, commercial actors, and professional intermediaries assemble these priorities through development pathways. In the context of rural cultural revitalization, this process determines which cultural practices become visible as development resources, which forms of provision gain institutional support, and how cultural value is connected to projects, investment, and public representation.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the local mediation of rural cultural revitalization through a critical discourse analysis of key national policy documents issued between 2021 and 2024 and a longitudinal documentary case study of Gongcheng in southern China. The policy analysis examines how national frameworks articulate the relationship among cultural protection, public cultural provision, social improvement, and rural development. The Gongcheng case follows the local translation of these priorities through county-level planning, tourism promotion, wellness development, project-based investment, and village-level participation. Gongcheng serves as a critical case because its development trajectory brings ecological agriculture, ethnic cultural resources, household tourism, and large-scale wellness projects into the same local field of governance. The analysis traces how cultural revitalization is assembled across changing development phases and how these arrangements shape cultural representation, project organization, and local participation.

The study asks how national rural cultural revitalization policy articulates the relationship among cultural protection, public cultural provision, and development; how these objectives are selectively translated through county-level governance and state-market arrangements in Gongcheng; and how such arrangements organise villagers' access to cultural representation, project decision-making, and economic benefit. By conceptualizing rural cultural revitalization as a culturally mediated dimension of rural restructuring, the article shows how a multi-objective policy framework becomes concentrated development projects. It thereby identifies the institutional processes through which cultural resources become project-ready, public recognition becomes unevenly distributed, and local participation acquires differentiated positions within cultural development.

2. Literature review

In rural studies, long-term transformations in rural areas are commonly conceptualized through the lens of rural restructuring (Wilson, 1995; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Nelson, 2001; Woods, 2004; Marsden et al., 2023). Rural restructuring refers to the uneven reorganization of rural social relations, economic activities, spatial arrangements, institutions, and everyday life under interconnected processes of agricultural change, urbanization, market integration, mobility, and state intervention. Woods (2009), for example, highlights the declining economic centrality of agriculture, the expansion of service activities, and intensified rural-urban mobility as important

dimensions of this transformation. This framework is particularly relevant to rural China, where market reform and rapid urbanization have generated not a linear transition but differentiated trajectories of rural change across regions, localities, and social groups.

Since the late twentieth century, rural restructuring in China has extended beyond shifts in agricultural production or land use. It has involved changes in demographic composition, employment, community organization, lifestyles, accessibility, local industries, and the organization of production, living, and ecological spaces (Long et al., 2012; Long and Liu, 2016). Its consequences are also spatially uneven. Research has documented substantial regional variation in rural development trajectories and persistent forms of uneven urban-rural development, even where rural incomes and infrastructure have improved (Li et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2013). These differentiated outcomes are shaped not only by market processes, but also by changing state priorities, policy instruments, and local development strategies that influence how rural resources, spaces, and livelihoods are valued and reorganized (Long and Woods, 2011; Long et al., 2012; Long and Liu, 2016).

This article understands rural cultural revitalization as a culturally mediated form of rural restructuring. It becomes part of restructuring when local practices, heritage, public cultural services, ecological resources, and place-based identities are reclassified, funded, and integrated into development projects. Cultural governance is thus a mechanism of restructuring, shaping what counts as valuable rural culture, which activities receive support, how cultural resources connect to tourism and wellness, and how authority and benefits are distributed. This perspective highlights variation in how cultural, developmental, and governance objectives are combined in specific contexts. It focuses on how rural culture is made governable and investable through institutional arrangements, and how these reshape the roles of local households, village organizations, government agencies, investors, and cultural professionals.

2.1. Understanding rural revitalization in China

China's rural-urban divide has been shaped by long-term processes of uneven development, demographic change, labour mobility, and shifting state priorities. Fei Xiaotong's account of China's rural rootedness remains useful in highlighting the historical centrality of agrarian life to Chinese society (Fei, 1992; Barbalet, 2021). However, contemporary rural China is marked less by a simple opposition between a backward countryside and a modern city than by differentiated processes of urbanization, market integration, and institutional transformation across localities. These processes have generated uneven access to resources, public services, and development opportunities, while also producing diverse forms of rural adaptation and reorganization (Chen and Pow, 2024).

Post-reform economic growth expanded opportunities while also contributing to uneven regional and urban-rural development, including labour outmigration and unequal access to public resources (Yang and Cai, 2000; Knight et al., 2006; Oi, 2014). These longer-term conditions form an important background to contemporary rural revitalization. They do not, however, predetermine how cultural, economic, ecological, and governance objectives are combined in localities. Since 2017, rural revitalization has been articulated as a comprehensive agenda encompassing industrial, talent, cultural, ecological, and organizational revitalization, rather than as a programme in which cultural development is formally subordinate to economic growth.

To situate China's rural-urban divide within a broader theoretical vocabulary rather than treating it as a purely national or exceptional phenomenon, this article draws on Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (Williams and Hunt, 1973), which conceptualizes the divide as both a material and an ideological construct. Tracing English literary and cultural representations from the sixteenth century onward, Williams shows how the countryside is simultaneously romanticized and marginalized. It is celebrated as a space of harmony and nostalgia yet

remains structurally subordinated to urban capital and economic power. Williams challenges this pastoral myth by insisting that the rural is never self-contained but historically entangled with capitalist expansion, labour migration, and economic extraction. This critical lens is instructive for analyzing China's rural cultural revitalization, where rural life is frequently aestheticized and commodified for external audiences while top-down governance arrangements persist, reinforcing rather than dismantling urban rural inequalities (Löwy and Sayre, 2018).

Much like British nostalgic construction of rural life, contemporary Chinese cultural policies emphasize heritage preservation and aestheticized rural tourism, often designed for urban consumption rather than rural empowerment (Shen and Chou, 2022; Xue and Cao, 2024). This results in a double marginalization: on the one hand, rural spaces are celebrated as symbols of national heritage, but on the other, they are subjected to bureaucratic governance, market-driven interventions, and cultural extraction. The following section reviews research on rural cultural revitalization as a field in which public cultural provision, heritage protection, cultural industries, tourism development, and local participation are brought together through different governance arrangements. It focuses on how these objectives may be combined, prioritized, and mediated in local development processes, and on how participation, decision-making authority, and benefit-sharing vary across projects and localities.

2.2. State-driven rural cultural revitalization strategy (RCRS)

Since the launch of the Rural Revitalization Strategy in 2017, Chinese policymakers have linked rural development to infrastructure improvement, industrial development, public services, ecological protection, cultural revitalization, and organizational capacity-building (Chen, 2020; Zhou and Gu, 2025). Cultural revitalization is one component of this broader policy agenda and may involve heritage protection, spiritual civilization, public cultural provision, cultural industries, tourism, and local cultural capacity-building. These objectives are not necessarily organized in a fixed hierarchy. Their relative importance may vary across local development settings, depending on local priorities, available resources, institutional capacity, and the forms of partnership established between government agencies, village organizations, and external actors.

A growing body of scholarship nevertheless identifies tensions in the implementation of culture-led rural development. Xue and Cao (2024), for example, show that art-led reconstruction can create new spaces for villagers to articulate cultural identity while also linking local culture to tourism, branding, and external forms of cultural valuation. Such projects may generate visibility and income, but their consequences depend on who defines cultural value, who controls project design and operation, and how benefits are distributed. Research on urban-rural resource relations similarly suggests that external investment and market connections can create new opportunities while also producing uneven forms of dependence and bargaining power (Kelly-Reif and Wing, 2016; Xia et al., 2023).

Beyond cultural commodification, the symbolic integration of rural areas into the national economy does not translate into economic autonomy for local communities. Zeng and Mu (2024) examine how state-sponsored cultural infrastructure, such as independent bookstores and public libraries, reinforces rather than dismantles urban-rural disparities. These projects claim to bridge cultural gaps but instead create curated spaces of urban nostalgia, where rural residents remain excluded from cultural consumption processes. This dynamic aligns with Raymond Williams's (1975) critique of the rural idyll in western societies, in which rural life is constructed as a symbolic and aesthetic object for urban consumption rather than as an active site of cultural production (Bell, 2006; Shucksmith, 2018).

Another structural limitation of state-driven revitalization is the persistence of bureaucratic inefficiencies and rigid governance structures, which limit community-driven development (Zhou, 2012). For

example, Zeng and Li (2022) critiques the Book Quota System, a remnant of socialist-era cultural governance, as an example of how centralized bureaucratic oversight inhibits local cultural entrepreneurship. Rather than fostering organic cultural ecosystems, the state's regulatory grip limits rural communities' ability to autonomously shape their cultural and creative economies. This regulatory control has contributed to the rise of informal cultural markets, where non-state actors circumvent rigid policies to develop alternative economic networks. However, rather than representing true grassroots empowerment, these informal markets often exist in precarious legal conditions, reinforcing rural actors' reliance on state-sanctioned economic frameworks.

Furthermore, while infrastructure investments have increased, long-term investment in human capital remains insufficient. Rozelle and Hell (2020) critique rural development policies for prioritizing hard infrastructure (roads, tourism projects, and urban-rural integration plans) over soft infrastructure (education, digital literacy, and skills training). This emphasis on physical connectivity over knowledge-based empowerment reproduces a pattern in which rural areas serve as labor reserves for urban markets, rather than developing self-sustaining economic models. Without strategic investment in education and digital inclusion, rural revitalization remains structurally dependent on urban economies, further exacerbating rural marginalization.

Tourism has become an important development instrument in many rural revitalization initiatives. Existing research suggests that it can generate income, visibility, and opportunities for household-based entrepreneurship, while its longer-term outcomes depend on ownership structures, village organization, external investment, operational responsibilities, and benefit-sharing arrangements (Gao and Wu, 2017; Ying and Zhou, 2007; Shen and Chou, 2022). Tourism should therefore be understood neither as inherently empowering nor as inherently extractive, but as a development arrangement whose effects depend on the institutional terms through which cultural resources, labour, investment, and local participation are organized.

Existing studies show that rural cultural revitalization does not generate uniform outcomes. Its effects depend on how public cultural provision, heritage protection, tourism, cultural industries, external investment, and local organizational capacity are combined within governance arrangements. However, existing research often examines these dimensions separately or frames outcomes in binary terms of empowerment and exclusion. Less attention has been paid to how plural national policy objectives are selectively translated into county-level development strategies, and how such processes reshape cultural representation, project organization, participation, decision-making authority, and benefit-sharing. This article addresses this gap through a policy discourse analysis and a longitudinal case study of Gongcheng.

2.3. The question of local agency: between adaptation and resistance

While state-led policies dominate China's rural revitalization efforts, grassroots actors are not merely passive recipients but engage in strategic negotiations, navigating, modifying, and at times appropriating and negotiating these policies (Han, 2020; He and Zhang, 2022; Lang et al., 2024). However, rather than constituting an autonomous counterforce, grassroots agency operates within the constraints of state-defined frameworks, raising critical questions about the extent to which local initiatives truly challenge urban-centric governance or merely function as state-sanctioned modifications of top-down revitalization agendas (Li et al., 2016; Lu and Qian, 2023).

Rather than rejecting state policies outright, many rural communities engage in adaptive agency, selectively incorporating policy frameworks while subtly reshaping them. Xue and Cao (2024) provide a case study of the Yangdeng Art Cooperative in Guizhou, where villagers like Linghu use artistic production not only as an expression of cultural identity but as a means of negotiating visibility within the state's rural branding projects. While this challenges the narrative of rural passivity,

it also raises questions about whether such projects expand local autonomy or primarily serve state objectives of tourism-driven cultural commodification. Similarly, Wang (2018) examines socially engaged art projects, where urban artists collaborate with rural communities to foster civic spaces. However, rather than operating as independent grassroots movements, these projects often rely on urban funding, government recognition, and elite cultural networks, reflecting the structural dependencies that shape local agency.

Despite these examples of cultural negotiation, significant barriers to genuine grassroots empowerment persist. Ye et al. (2022) argue that rural communities remain structurally constrained by policy regulations, financial dependence, and digital divides, limiting their ability to develop self-sustaining cultural economies. Similarly, Chen and Kong (2022) critique the assumption that local agency alone can overcome systemic inequalities, emphasizing that without redistributive policies or structural changes in governance, grassroots efforts risk being absorbed into state-driven narratives of revitalization rather than offering alternative models of development.

The complexities of grassroots agency become particularly evident in strategic adaptations, where rural actors work within state-sanctioned boundaries while subtly modifying policies to fit local needs. Shen and Chou (2022) documented how Xiamei's tea tourism industry successfully blends traditional practices with modern marketing strategies, leveraging state discourse on cultural tourism while maintaining elements of local control. However, the extent to which this adaptation constitutes genuine autonomy remains debatable—does this represent a reclaiming of rural agency, or does it reinforce rural dependency on state policies and urban markets?

Ultimately, existing scholarships have produced important insights into rural heritage, public cultural services, cultural tourism, creative reconstruction, and local participation. However, three limitations remain. First, these dimensions are often examined separately, with less attention to how heritage, public provision, cultural industries, and place-based development are jointly governed. Second, studies tend to focus either on national policy discourse or on individual local projects, leaving the mediating processes through which multiple policy objectives are selectively translated into county-level development strategies underexplored. Third, local participation is frequently assessed through binary categories of empowerment and exclusion, obscuring variation in cultural representation, decision-making authority, operational roles, and benefit-sharing across different project types and stages of development. This article addresses these gaps by examining how national policy objectives are selectively translated through local development arrangements in Gongcheng, and how these processes revalue cultural resources, organise projects, and reshape forms of local participation.

3. Data and method

This study adopts a qualitative research design combining Critical Discourse Analysis of national policy texts with a longitudinal, document-based case study of Gongcheng, a Yao autonomous county in Guangxi, southern China. The study examines rural cultural revitalization as a process of local mediation through which cultural practices, ecological resources, public cultural provision, and development priorities are brought into changing arrangements of planning, project development, and investment. Its analytical focus lies in the institutional processes through which broad policy categories acquire concrete local forms and reorganize the positions available to rural residents within cultural development.

The national policy analysis centres on four authoritative documents issued between 2021 and 2024: the Rural revitalization Promotion Law (National People's Congress, 2021), the Opinions on Promoting Cultural Industry Empowerment for Rural Revitalization (Ministry of Culture and Tourism/Ministry of Education/Ministry of Natural Resources/Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs/National Rural Revitalisation Administration and National Development and Reform Commission,

2022), and the Central No. 1 Documents issued in 2023 and 2024 (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2023; 2024). These texts were selected because they occupy different institutional positions within the rural revitalization field. The Law establishes a legal framework for rural revitalization; the 2022 Opinions articulate a sectoral agenda for connecting cultural industries to rural development; and the annual Central No. 1 Documents establish and update national priorities across agriculture, rural governance, public provision, and development. Together, they provide a focused corpus for examining how rural culture is positioned in relation to protection, social improvement, public cultural provision, development, and farmer participation.

The policy corpus was situated within a wider archive of national and local materials covering the longer development of rural cultural policy and the local trajectory of Gongcheng. At the local level, the study draws on county development plans, government work reports, tourism and wellness strategies, cultural promotion materials, village renovation documents, project announcements, investment-related records, and official rectification materials. These documents were collected where they addressed the development of ecological agriculture, cultural tourism, ethnic heritage, wellness industries, village renovation, public cultural provision, or major investment projects. Publicly available media reports, academic studies, project publicity materials, and tourism reports were also used to reconstruct the chronology of local development and to triangulate official accounts.

Gongcheng was selected because its development trajectory makes visible changing relations between locally embedded cultural resources and county-level development agendas. The county's earlier ecological agricultural model was organized through household production and linked farming, energy use, and environmental improvement. From the early 2000s, this ecological base was increasingly connected to tourism through peach blossom and moon-persimmon festivals, oil tea culture, Yao medicine, and household-based hospitality. The expansion of high-speed rail access and the designation of Gongcheng as a longevity destination further strengthened the local framing of culture and ecology as wellness resources. Since the late 2010s, these resources have entered a more explicitly project-based development strategy, in which tourism promotion, spatial renovation, health-related branding, and large-scale investment were brought together within a wider wellness agenda. This historical trajectory makes Gongcheng analytically valuable because it reveals how rural culture can move from household-centered production and small-scale tourism towards forms of development organized through planning, external investment, and professional expertise.

Supplementary field-based materials were collected in Gongcheng, particularly in Hongyan Village, between December 2023 and July 2024. Initial field observations of household accommodation, catering, tourism activity, village renovation, and seasonal visitor flows were undertaken between December 2023 and January 2024. Follow-up interviews with village-level actors and local tourism participants were conducted in July 2024. Hongyan Village offers a village-level perspective on the relationship between agricultural production, heritage renovation, festival tourism, and household-based participation. Its tourism management arrangements also illuminate how visitor distribution, local business opportunities, labour shortages, and heritage maintenance are organized in practice. The field-based materials therefore provide situated evidence of the forms of participation available to village households and the practical conditions through which local cultural development is sustained (see Table 1).

The analysis proceeded through two connected stages. First, the national policy corpus was examined through Critical Discourse Analysis, following Fairclough's (1995) distinction between textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. The analysis identified recurrent terms, evaluative formulations, policy categories, and subject positions associated with cultural protection, public cultural provision, social improvement, industrial empowerment, digitalisation, and farmer

Table 1
Documentary and Field-Based Materials used in the Study.

Material category	Scope and main sources	Analytical role
Core national policy corpus	Four authoritative national documents issued between 2021 and 2024: the Rural Revitalization Promotion Law, the 2022 Opinions on Promoting Cultural Industry Empowerment for Rural Revitalization, and the 2023 and 2024 Central No. 1 Documents.	Provides the focused CDA corpus for examining how rural culture is framed through protection, public cultural provision, social improvement, development, and farmer participation.
Local policy and official documentary materials	County development plans, government work reports, tourism and wellness strategies, cultural promotion materials, village renovation documents, project announcements, investment-related records, and official rectification materials.	Traces how national policy priorities are selected, reframed, and operationalized through Gongcheng's county-level development agenda and project arrangements.
Secondary textual materials	Academic studies, dissertations, national and local media reports, project publicity materials, tourism reports, and heritage materials.	Reconstructs Gongcheng's longitudinal development trajectory and triangulates official claims concerning tourism, wellness development, cultural resources, and project implementation.
Supplementary field-based materials	Initial field observations in Hongyan Village, December 2023 to January 2024; follow-up interviews with village-level actors and local tourism participants in July 2024.	Provides situated evidence on household tourism, village organization, festival activity, labour constraints, heritage maintenance, and the practical conditions of local cultural development.

Note. The four national policy documents constitute the core CDA corpus. Field-based materials were used to contextualise and triangulate the documentary case study rather than as a representative interview dataset.

participation. Attention was directed towards the ways in which rural culture was named, valued, and connected to wider agendas of governance and development. Second, the Gongcheng materials were organized chronologically to trace how national policy categories entered county-level development strategies across changing phases of ecological agriculture, household-based tourism, wellness-oriented branding, and project-based investment. County plans, project documents, publicity materials, media reports, interviews, and field observations were read against the categories identified in the national policy corpus. This procedure follows the movement from policy category to local development priority, to project form, and finally to the positions available to rural residents within implementation, operation, and benefit-sharing. Third, the national and local materials were compared iteratively to identify three mechanisms of culturally mediated rural restructuring. Problematization refers to the process through which rural culture becomes governable through protection, improvement, and development. Asymmetry concerns the selective elevation of practices that can be rendered visible and incorporated into tourism, wellness, or investment projects. Displaced agency refers to the differentiated positions through which villagers participate in cultural development while authority over cultural representation, project design, operation, and value circulation is concentrated within administrative, commercial, and professional networks.

4. Findings

4.1. The problematization of rural culture

This section examines how rural cultural revitalization renders rural culture identifiable and governable through the linked logics of protection, improvement, and development. Problematization refers to the process through which locally embedded practices become available for institutional intervention. It involves placing cultural practices, forms of knowledge, and village spaces within categories that allow them to be documented, renovated, promoted, or incorporated into development projects. Rural culture is therefore not approached as a self-contained inheritance. It is increasingly understood through policy categories that connect it to public cultural provision, rural civilization, heritage protection, and local development.

The national policy corpus constructs the countryside as a space of insufficiency awaiting intervention. In the Rural Revitalization Promotion Law, culture is situated within a framework that brings public provision, agricultural heritage, and cultural industry into a common field of rural renewal. The 2022 Opinions and the 2023 and 2024 Central No. 1 Documents extend this framing by linking cultural revitalization to the remaking of rural social life and developmental capacity. Rural areas are thereby rendered intelligible through a modernising optic: not merely as sites of existing cultural practice, but as spaces whose conditions must be adjusted in accordance with norms of order, civility, and developmental adequacy. This framing recognises rural culture through a deficit-oriented grammar in which selected traditions become worthy of protection precisely as rural life is placed under pressure to become more legible, orderly, and developmentally productive.

In Gongcheng, this modernising grammar was translated through the gradual construction of a wellness-oriented development strategy. County authorities assembled national policy priorities into a local narrative in which ethnic culture, ecological conditions, and agricultural life were reimagined as evidence of longevity and healthy rural living. Yao medicine, oil tea, moon persimmons, and the rural landscape were drawn into this frame as resources whose value could be demonstrated through their capacity to signify health, authenticity, and environmental quality. Village renovation became part of the same process, aligning the visual and spatial order of rural life with the promise of a distinctive wellness destination. Cultural resources were thereby recast as assets through which Gongcheng could make itself legible to external visitors, investment networks, and health-oriented consumption.

The protection dimension of this process can be seen in the formal identification of local knowledge. Gongcheng possesses a substantial body of Yao medical practice, much of which had long been sustained through local healers and household-based forms of care. In 2015, the county government established a survey group to investigate Yao medicinal resources and therapeutic practices. This initiative made dispersed knowledge visible to administrative institutions. Local medicinal plants, healing techniques, and practitioners could now be documented within an official framework and connected to subsequent plans for preservation and wellness development.

The survey did more than preserve pre-existing practices. It also changed the institutional status of local knowledge. What had previously circulated through everyday relations, practical experience, and locally embedded forms of expertise was increasingly treated as a resource that could be recorded, assessed, and incorporated into wider development initiatives. The process did not remove Yao medicine from local life. Yet it situated this knowledge within a new field of policy attention, where its value could be linked to cultural recognition, health-related branding, and local economic development.

A similar shift can be observed in the growing public visibility of Gongcheng oil tea. Oil tea had long been part of everyday culinary and social life, particularly within households and village communities. Its subsequent framing as a heritage-related practice introduced another

layer of meaning. The establishment of the Gongcheng Oil Tea Cultural Festival in 2011, together with the growth of oil-tea-related restaurants and visitor experiences, connected a local food practice to the county's expanding wellness narrative. Oil tea did not cease to function as a familiar social practice. However, it increasingly became intelligible through the language of health, heritage, and destination promotion.

This process of recognition is central to problematization. Protection brings practices into view by designating them as objects of preservation and promotion, while also fixing the institutional conditions under which they can count as culture in the first place. Local practices become more readily supportable once they can be named, documented, and translated into official categories. Their value is consequently recast through forms that can circulate beyond the village, including heritage discourse, tourism promotion, and wellness branding.

Problematization also operated through the improvement of village space. Environmental rectification and village renovation were promoted as ways to improve sanitation, safety, and living conditions. In Gongcheng, "Three Clean-ups and Three Demolitions" initiatives targeted waste, drainage problems, temporary structures, abandoned buildings, and unauthorised signage. These measures responded to practical concerns associated with environmental conditions and infrastructure. They also introduced new standards through which particular spatial arrangements could be evaluated.

Village renovation further encouraged a more standardized visual language. Tiled roofs, sloping rooflines, and architectural details associated with Yao cultural identity were promoted as part of an improved rural landscape. Such interventions could strengthen the public visibility of local heritage and make villages more attractive to visitors. At the same time, they altered the way domestic and productive space was understood. Rural households often rely on flexible spatial arrangements that combine residence with farming, storage, livestock keeping, and seasonal labour. These arrangements may appear disorderly when assessed primarily through the visual expectations of renovation or tourism development, even though they remain functional within everyday rural life.

The point is not that renovation simply erased local practice, nor that residents necessarily rejected these interventions. Rather, improvement operated through classification. It created a distinction between spatial forms that could be incorporated into the image of a healthy and culturally distinctive countryside, and those that appeared inconsistent with that image. Rural culture was therefore governed not only through the preservation of recognized traditions. It was also shaped through the remaking of the physical environment in which everyday life took place.

The development dimension extended this process by connecting culture to tourism and wellness. Gongcheng's earlier ecological agricultural model was largely organized around household production. From the 1980s, the local "breeding–biogas–planting" model addressed energy shortages and environmental degradation through a system that linked farming practice to ecological improvement. This model later became part of the material foundation for Gongcheng's reputation as an ecologically attractive and healthy place.

As transport access improved and tourism expanded, this ecological foundation was gradually connected to a different developmental narrative. The Peach Blossom Festival and Moon Persimmon Festival, first organized in the early 2000s, transformed agricultural landscapes into visitor attractions. During the following decade, oil tea and Yao medicine became more explicitly associated with health-oriented tourism. The designation of Gongcheng as a "Longevity County" strengthened this trajectory by linking local culture and ecology to a wider idea of wellness. By the late 2010s, rural hospitality, cultural heritage, agricultural landscapes, and health-related consumption had become increasingly integrated within the county's development strategy.

This transition changed the terms through which agriculture, culture, and ecology were valued. Moon persimmons, for example, were no longer treated only as a seasonal crop. They also became part of a

cultural landscape that could attract visitors and support village-level tourism. As the president of Hongyan Village Tourism Management Association explained, "Our village mainly relies on moon persimmons to develop tourism. During the annual Moon Persimmon Festival, there are not enough rooms. When visitor numbers are too high, we distribute them among households according to quotas" (ZJL, personal communication, July 25, 2024). This account shows how agricultural production became connected to accommodation, visitor circulation, and local tourism coordination.

Problematization, then, involved a revaluation process through which rural practices acquired new institutional meanings. Protection made certain forms of knowledge visible. Improvement reshaped the conditions under which village space could appear orderly and culturally distinctive. Development connected local resources to tourism and wellness projects.

In this sense, problematization constitutes a mechanism of culturally mediated rural restructuring. It changes the relationship between local knowledge, village space, household production, and development planning by altering the categories through which they are recognized and acted upon. Rural restructuring is therefore not limited to shifts in land use or employment. It also unfolds through the institutional reclassification of rural culture itself. In Gongcheng, this process made culture increasingly legible as an object of policy and local development. The following section examines how this expanded visibility generated uneven forms of recognition across cultural practices, villages, and project arrangements.

4.2. *The asymmetry of rural cultural development*

National policy presents rural cultural revitalization as an expansive agenda, but local implementation necessarily involves selection. As Gongcheng's wellness strategy acquired institutional form, rural culture entered local development through differentiated channels of recognition. The county's effort to build an ecological wellness destination drew cultural resources into a developmental vocabulary centered on longevity, health, and rural experience. Within this vocabulary, oil tea, Yao medicine, moon persimmons, and scenic agricultural landscapes came to occupy a particularly prominent position. Their prominence emerged through their capacity to embody a coherent image of Gongcheng: a place where ethnic culture, ecological quality, and healthy living could be made visible to visitors, investors, and wider policy networks.

This process developed over time. Early tourism initiatives centered on peach blossoms and moon persimmons, bringing agricultural scenery and village life into seasonal visitor circuits. The Oil Tea Cultural Festival, established in 2011, gave a familiar food practice a larger public platform. The county's designation as a "Longevity County" in 2014 subsequently supplied a more comprehensive language through which food, medicine, ecology, and cultural tradition could be connected. By the late 2010s, county development increasingly organized these elements through the framework of wellness. The strategy of building an ecological health city and promoting tourism, culture, and circulation created an institutional setting in which cultural value could be demonstrated through its connection to healthy consumption and destination development.

The forms through which cultural practices acquired recognition shaped the value they could assume within local development. Yao medicine entered an institutional field through surveys and planning processes that connected therapeutic knowledge to wellness provision and commercial development. Moon persimmons acquired a different public life as their agricultural significance was extended through festival settings, visitor routes, and the visual language of rural branding. These shifts expanded the circulation of local practices while also recasting them through formats that could be rendered visible, standardized, and promoted beyond the village.

Recognition consequently operated through a selective economy of

visibility. Cultural practices gained institutional traction when they could be made to carry the signs of wellness, local distinction, or destination value. This enabled county authorities to fold rural culture into a developmental narrative oriented towards tourism and ecological improvement. Visitor flows, festival publicity, branded products, and renovated landscapes became the media through which cultural value could be demonstrated within planning and project evaluation. Cultural recognition was therefore tied to the conditions of circulation and display, through which some practices became more readily available for development while others remained embedded in less visible forms of rural social life.

Hongyan Village shows how selective recognition acquires a spatial and material form. Its moon-persimmon orchards have become a prominent image within Gongcheng's rural tourism economy, especially during the harvest season, when the landscape is rendered as a scene of abundance and rural authenticity. The annual Moon Persimmon Festival extends this visibility by drawing visitors into the village and connecting the orchards to household accommodation, food provision, and the sale of agricultural products. Through this process, moon persimmons have come to carry meanings that exceed their role within agricultural production. They operate as a visual medium through which the village can be represented, promoted, and inserted into wider circuits of tourism. Hongyan's place within the county's development strategy therefore rests on the capacity of its agricultural landscape to produce a form of rurality that can be circulated through destination publicity and cultural branding.

Hongyan's tourism economy is sustained through forms of village-level coordination that follow the seasonal rhythm of persimmon production. During the harvest period, the orchards become the centre of an intensified local economy in which cultivation is drawn into the provision of accommodation and food for visitors. Field materials collected in Hongyan show that this convergence gives the village a temporary density of activity such as fruit processing, guest house work, and festival preparation become closely interwoven. Once the harvest recedes, visitor numbers decline and the economic promise associated with the festival becomes harder to sustain. Households return to a more unstable arrangement in which cultivation is supplemented by casual service work or employment elsewhere (field observations, December 2023–January 2024).

This temporal structure shapes who can participate in tourism and on what terms. Families with accessible houses or the resources to receive guests are better positioned to benefit during the peak season, while the labour required to maintain orchards, guesthouses, and household life extends well beyond the period of tourist demand. The apparent vitality of the Moon Persimmon Festival therefore rests on a more uneven infrastructure of household labour, one that moves between agricultural work and visitor service in response to seasonal demand. Promotional representations of rural revitalization foreground the concentrated spectacle of the harvest, while the intermittent and uncertain conditions through which households sustain that spectacle remain less visible.

Hongyan's visibility also brings into view the uneven capacity available for the cultural work that sustains tourism. The village's older housing stock has undergone gradual repair since the early 2000s, and this built environment forms part of the visual setting through which moon-persimmon tourism is promoted. Heritage renovation has depended on a small group of local workers who combined repair work with agricultural livelihoods. Available evidence indicates that this work relied on limited labour and ageing practical expertise. When specialised skills were required, especially in relation to traditional brick and tile production, local workers sought assistance from craftspeople in other villages. The maintenance of heritage space therefore depended on fragile networks of labour and technical knowledge, even as renovated buildings became visible signs of rural cultural value (Wei, 2025).

Festival organization reveals a further layer of this uneven cultural economy. The Moon Persimmon Festival concentrates demand within a short period, drawing visitors into the village and intensifying the need

for accommodation, food provision, transport, and event support. The scale of this temporary influx exceeds the labour available within Hongyan itself. Local organisers therefore rely on workers from surrounding villages, extending the festival's operational reach across a wider rural area. The celebratory image of a vibrant cultural event is sustained through this less visible infrastructure of coordination and short-term labour. The work that enables the festival to function remains tied to insecure and time-limited forms of participation.

Seasonality deepens this dependence. Moon persimmons attract visitors most strongly during the autumn and winter harvest, when the orchards can be presented as a distinctive rural landscape. Visitor numbers recede in spring and summer, reducing stays and narrowing the scope for household tourism. Research on Hongyan links this annual fluctuation to continued labour outmigration, as persimmon cultivation and seasonal visitor activity provide limited grounds for stable employment among younger residents (Zhou and Xue, 2024). Hongyan's tourism prominence is therefore sustained alongside patterns of mobility that affect the transmission of practical skills, the availability of local labour, and the continuity of village-based cultural life.

The contrast with nearby Mensi Village brings the spatial dimension of this asymmetry into sharper view. Mensi is shaped by similar patterns of labour outmigration and demographic change, although its cultural life enters the county's development landscape through a different set of conditions. Wedding customs, funeral rituals, and festival performances have become harder to sustain as local participation declines. Some of these practices now depend on external teams or assistance from neighbouring villages. Their significance remains embedded in kinship relations, ritual obligations, and shared memories of village life, forms of value that carry limited visibility within the tourism and wellness framework.

Hongyan and Mensi consequently occupy unequal positions within Gongcheng's cultural economy. Hongyan's moon-persimmon orchards can be rendered as a scenic resource and circulated through tourism publicity, while Mensi's ritual practices remain tied to the slower temporalities of everyday social reproduction. This difference shapes each village's capacity to enter the project forms through which local development is organized. Cultural practices that can attract visitors or furnish a recognizable image of place acquire clearer routes towards institutional support. Practices sustained through ritual participation and local obligation encounter a more uncertain relation to the county's wellness agenda.

In Gongcheng, asymmetry operates through a selective regime of recognition in which cultural resources acquire institutional value when they can be rendered through destination appeal and consumer experience. This process redistributes visibility, labour, and organizational capacity across villages. Resources that enter wellness branding and tourism projects gain a clearer place within county planning, while the work that sustains cultural life remains less securely recognized. Heritage maintenance, festival preparation, practical knowledge, and village sociability provide the conditions through which visible cultural assets endure, although their contribution rarely registers through the metrics of tourism performance or project achievement. The following section examines how villagers participate within these arrangements and how authority over project design, investment, and long-term value circulation is distributed across administrative, commercial, and village-level actors.

4.3. Displaced agency: differentiated participation and uneven authority

Agency in Gongcheng's cultural development becomes most visible in the practical organization of tourism at the village level. In Hongyan, the annual Moon Persimmon Festival brings a concentrated flow of visitors into a village where accommodation is largely provided through household-run guesthouses. As the president of the Hongyan Village Tourism Management Association explained, "Our village mainly relies on moon persimmons to develop tourism. During the annual Moon

Persimmon Festival, there are not enough rooms. When visitor numbers are too high, we distribute them among households according to quotas" (ZJL, personal communication, July 25, 2024). The arrangement indicates that villagers participate in more than the provision of rooms or meals. Through the association, they coordinate access to visitors and organise the circulation of opportunities across households during the peak season.

The quota system gives village-level organization a material role within the tourism economy. Visitor allocation requires information about available rooms, household capacity, and the timing of arrivals. It also establishes a collective mechanism through which demand can be dispersed beyond the most visible guesthouses. This form of coordination does not eliminate differences among households, since location, housing conditions, family labour, and prior investment continue to shape who can receive guests and convert visits into income. It nevertheless demonstrates that local participation has an organizational dimension. Village residents engage tourism through practices of coordination that mediate the distribution of opportunities within an economy structured around their agricultural landscape.

This form of participation has historical roots in Gongcheng's earlier development trajectory. Ecological agriculture and subsequent household tourism placed cultural-economic activity close to family production. Persimmon cultivation, food preparation, domestic space, and hospitality could be combined through household decisions. Families could open small restaurants, receive visitors, or sell local products alongside agricultural work. Their relation to cultural development was therefore relatively direct: land, houses, labour, and local knowledge formed the immediate basis through which tourism income could be generated.

Such arrangements gave households a practical degree of control over how they entered the local tourism economy. They could decide whether to participate, how much domestic space to convert for visitors, and how to combine tourism with cultivation. Their capacity remained shaped by government promotion, visitor demand, and uneven access to resources. The institutional location of agency nonetheless remained close to the village. Decisions concerning everyday operation were tied to household labour and local association-based coordination.

The expansion of wellness development altered this institutional geography. As cultural and ecological resources became connected to large-scale projects, authority increasingly depended on forms of planning and capital mobilization that operated beyond the household economy. Major developments required project approval, financial coordination, technical expertise, and long-term asset management. These processes drew authority towards county-level administrative institutions, external enterprises, and professional networks. The cultural resources associated with Gongcheng's wellness identity remained locally grounded, while the capacity to define project scale and organise investment moved into a different institutional field.

The Yao-Han Longevity City illustrates this shift particularly clearly. Conceived as part of Gongcheng's wider wellness agenda, the project linked health services, residential development, tourism, and cultural branding within a large-scale construction model. Public investigation and rectification materials later revealed that the project's planning and financing had been concentrated within a narrow administrative-commercial nexus. Its scale exceeded the conditions of household tourism and village-level coordination that characterized earlier forms of development. Decisions surrounding project initiation, capital allocation, and subsequent asset management were made through institutional channels located beyond village organizations and local households.

The later difficulties surrounding the project demonstrate why this relocation of authority matters. Publicly available rectification materials describe stalled construction, underused buildings, outstanding obligations, and a subsequent effort to reactivate idle assets through county-level intervention. These developments should not be treated as representative of every wellness project in Gongcheng. They nevertheless

show how the risks of large-scale development can become embedded in local governance once feasibility assessments, financial arrangements, and project decisions are concentrated within a limited set of administrative and commercial actors. The village remains connected to the cultural landscape on which the wider development narrative depends, while the strategic decisions that shape investment and asset circulation occur elsewhere.

Displaced agency refers to this uneven distribution of influence across the stages of cultural development. Village households and local associations retain important capacities within tourism operations. They coordinate visitors, maintain guesthouses, cultivate orchards, and organise the practical conditions through which cultural tourism takes place. Their authority is strongest where development remains tied to household production and village-level coordination. Larger projects shift the centre of decision-making towards institutions that command planning authority, financial resources, and professional expertise. The difference concerns the institutional location from which actors can shape development priorities, rather than a simple contrast between active villagers and passive communities.

Hongyan's tourism association provides an important counterpoint to accounts that reduce rural residents to cultural performers or service labour. Its visitor-allocation mechanism demonstrates a local capacity to negotiate access to tourism opportunities. The association does not define the county's wider tourism strategy, determine the scale of external investment, or control the conditions through which Gongcheng is promoted as a wellness destination. Its role lies in organising participation within the opportunities made available by that wider framework. This is a meaningful form of agency, although it operates at a different scale from the authority exercised through planning, investment, and project design.

The differentiation between household participation and strategic authority also shapes the distribution of value. The quota arrangement can widen access to visitors during the festival period, while the ability to benefit remains tied to material conditions at the household level. Families with suitable rooms, accessible locations, or sufficient labour can participate more readily in tourism-related income. Other households may remain connected to the festival through cultivation, temporary work, or informal support without entering the more profitable parts of the visitor economy. Agency therefore develops unevenly within the village itself, mediated by housing, labour capacity, and the ability to convert local resources into service provision.

This unevenness becomes more significant when cultural development is organized through projects that extend beyond village control. Household tourism allows residents to retain a relatively direct connection to the value generated through their own land, homes, and labour. Large-scale wellness projects operate through more distant arrangements of capital, planning, and asset management. Cultural resources may still derive their symbolic value from local life, although the authority to define their future use becomes concentrated at higher institutional scales. The result is a layered structure of participation in which villagers remain essential to the practical production of cultural value while possessing varying levels of influence over the conditions under which that value is formalised and circulated.

Displaced agency therefore names a pattern of differentiated participation rather than the disappearance of rural subjectivity. Village households and associations continue to organise forms of tourism, distribute local opportunities, and connect cultural practices to livelihood activity. Their influence is anchored in the everyday management of cultural-economic life. County authorities, investors, and professional intermediaries exercise greater authority where development depends on project definition, financial coordination, and long-term asset management. Rural agency persists across these arrangements, although its capacity to shape strategic decisions becomes unevenly distributed.

This mechanism forms a further dimension of culturally mediated rural restructuring. It reorganises the relationship between household production, village organization, and county-level development by

relocating authority across institutional scales. The central question concerns the terms through which participation becomes consequential. In Gongcheng, villagers remain central to the labour and local knowledge through which cultural development acquires substance. Their ability to influence project priorities, investment decisions, and long-term value circulation varies according to the institutional arrangements through which rural culture is made productive.

5. Conclusion: local mediation and the conditions of participation in rural cultural revitalization

This study has examined rural cultural revitalization as a field of local mediation. National policy constructs culture through a broad set of objectives that bring heritage protection, public provision, social improvement, and development into a common framework. These objectives create a repertoire through which rural culture can be recognized and acted upon. Their practical significance emerges through county-level translation, where local authorities, commercial actors, and professional intermediaries assemble development pathways. In Gongcheng, this translation took shape through a wellness-oriented strategy that connected ecological agriculture, Yao medicine, oil tea, moon persimmons, and village landscapes to an account of longevity and healthy rural life. Rural culture entered this framework as a source of local distinction and as a resource through which the county could establish a place within wider tourism and investment circuits.

The article contributes to rural restructuring scholarship by locating cultural governance within the institutional transformation of rural life. Rural restructuring unfolds through changes in land use, labour, infrastructure, and settlement patterns. It also develops through classificatory work that determines how local knowledge, village space, and everyday practice become visible within policy. In Gongcheng, cultural practices acquired institutional value when they could be documented as heritage, incorporated into renovation schemes, or mobilised through wellness and tourism development. This process changed the conditions under which rural culture could receive recognition and support. It also changed the terms through which cultural value became available for planning, promotion, and project development.

The three mechanisms identified in this study trace these transformations. Problematization renders rural culture governable through the linked languages of protection, improvement, and development. It places local practices within a modernising grammar that identifies cultural resources as objects of safeguarding while subjecting rural life to standards of order, visual coherence, and developmental adequacy. Asymmetry emerges through the selective recognition of cultural forms that can sustain a county's preferred development trajectory. In Gongcheng, moon persimmons, oil tea, Yao medicine, and ecological landscapes became highly visible because they could be organized through festivals, tourism routes, wellness services, and destination branding. Their prominence rested on the capacity to produce recognizable forms of cultural value. The work required to maintain heritage buildings, sustain ritual practice, reproduce local skills, and support everyday village sociability occupied a less secure institutional position.

Displaced agency concerns the uneven location of influence within these arrangements. Village households and local organizations retain practical capacities to organise tourism and connect cultural resources to livelihood activity. Hongyan Village's tourism association provides a clear example. Its allocation of visitors among household guesthouses demonstrates a locally grounded mechanism for coordinating access to tourism opportunities during the harvest season. This form of organization places villagers within the governance of tourism rather than at its margins. It also reveals the limits of village-level influence. The association operates within a tourism economy whose wider direction is shaped through county planning, destination promotion, and development priorities established beyond the village.

The shift towards larger wellness projects sharpens this difference in institutional scale. Cultural and ecological resources remain locally

grounded, while project definition, financial coordination, and long-term asset management operate through administrative and commercial networks with greater access to capital and professional expertise. The Yao-Han Longevity City illustrates the consequences of this concentration of authority. Its later difficulties drew attention to the distance between ambitious project forms and the locally grounded conditions through which rural cultural value is produced. The case does not stand for every wellness initiative in Gongcheng. It illuminates a wider structural issue: cultural development can depend heavily on village labour, local knowledge, and ecological resources while the authority to define project scale and manage long-term assets is exercised elsewhere.

The question of participation therefore concerns more than formal inclusion in cultural projects. Participation acquires different meanings across institutional scales. Household operators may receive visitors, prepare food, cultivate orchards, or coordinate festival activity through village associations. These practices give residents a meaningful role in the everyday operation of cultural tourism. Their capacity to influence investment priorities, project design, and the future use of cultural resources remains shaped by the institutional arrangements through which development is organized. Agency persists through practical forms of coordination and livelihood-making, while strategic authority becomes unevenly distributed across the county, the market, and the village.

This distinction has implications for how rural cultural revitalization is evaluated. Tourism growth, investment attraction, heritage designation, and visitor flows provide visible measures of achievement. They offer limited insight into the conditions through which cultural practices are sustained over time. A more inclusive approach would be considered whether residents have opportunities to shape cultural interpretation before projects are fixed, whether village organizations can influence the operational terms of development, and whether the labour sustaining cultural life receives durable institutional support. Such an approach would recognize cultural practices whose significance remains rooted in village sociality, care, and everyday reproduction, even when they generate limited value within branding or project-based evaluation.

Gongcheng serves as a situated case of how rural cultural revitalization is mediated through local governance and development strategy. Its significance lies in the way it brings multiple policy objectives into a single county-level framework centered on wellness, tourism, and cultural distinction. The case shows that rural cultural revitalization carries its effects through the institutional conditions under which cultural value is defined, circulated, and retained. The central issue concerns who can translate rural culture into development, who can shape the terms of that translation, and how village communities participate in the arrangements that govern the future of the cultural life on which development depends.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Pengfei Fu: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Yin Zhang:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Tong Wu:** Methodology, Validation. **David Sarpong:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Goerge Ofosu:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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