

Research on the Mechanism of Cultural Heritage Activation under the Community-Driven Model—Taking South China as an Example

Shujie Peng

*Business School, Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK
shujie430@gmail.com*

Abstract. In the context of China's rapid urbanization, top-down approaches to cultural heritage protection often fails to maintain authenticity and community vitality. This study examines the community-driven model as an alternative paradigm, focusing on South China cases (Mei Zilin, Liu Gengtang, etc.). Through qualitative methods, this paper analyzes how community participation shifts from symbolic consultation to substantive co-governance; the collaborative mechanism of multiple subjects in the inheritance of cultural memory; the reproduction path of activating space in the material, functional and symbolic dimensions; and core structural challenges. The results prove that the co-creation mechanism combining institutional empowerment with local knowledge translation can stimulate the endogenous momentum of the community and achieve the sustainable rejuvenation of cultural heritage. However, it is necessary to resolve the tension between the protection of historical authenticity and the adaptability to contemporary development, and overcome technology gaps and cultural commercialization risks. This model balances heritage protection and community development, but its successful implementation depends on a deep understanding of local social structures and cultural contexts and the design of adaptive mechanisms.

Keywords: Cultural heritage revitalization, collaborative co-creation, cultural memory, spatial reproduction, architectural protection

1. Introduction

In the process of rapid urbanization in China, urban and rural cultural heritage is facing the dual crisis of material decline and cultural rupture. Traditional top-down protection models (such as government-led or commercial development) often ignore community subjectivity and make it difficult to maintain cultural authenticity and social vitality. In this regard, the concept of “community participation” advocated by UNESCO has promoted the shift in the heritage protection paradigm from “doing it for the community” to “doing it by the community”. The community-driven model has become an important breakthrough in balancing historical inheritance and contemporary development by empowering local residents and exploring sustainable paths for the activation of cultural heritage. Existing research mostly focuses on the restoration technology of

physical space, but rarely analyzes how communities achieve endogenous activation through cultural memory transmission and collaborative co-creation.

In recent years, local practices that have emerged in South China (such as Hong Kong's "light intervention" model) have provided an empirical basis for theoretical innovation, but their mechanisms have not yet been systematically deconstructed. Based on the above background and gaps, this paper focuses on the following core issues: (1) Participation in deep transformation and Collaborative and co-creation mechanism: How communities shift from formal participation (consultation) to substantive decision-making (decision-making/implementation/ management) through power restructuring and multi-stakeholder (villagers, scholars, students, NGOs) collaboration. How does this collaboration build local identity and achieve the transmission and innovation of cultural memory? (2) Space reproduction path: After the activation of traditional spaces (ancestral halls), how can their physical, functional, and meaningful spaces be reconstructed? How to balance the survival of historical memories with the needs of contemporary communities? (3) Challenge identification: What are the main structural challenges faced by the community-driven model? This study focuses on typical cases of collaborative restoration in South China (Meizilin, Dadongshan) and memory transformation (Shawan Ancestral Hall, Jiushuikeng), and mainly uses qualitative research. Case analysis, news interviews, and collecting data from news interview texts and notes. Analyzing the above issues aims to reveal the activation mechanism under the "human-place-memory" interaction and provide theoretical reference for policy design.

2. Theoretical framework

Existing cultural heritage activation models can be divided into three categories: government-led models (relying on administrative resources but easily ignoring community demands), market-driven models (focusing on commercial values and easily leading to over-development), and expert-authoritative models (emphasizing technical restoration but weakening social participation), their common flaw is that they regard the community as a passive recipient rather than an active subject. In this regard, UNESCO proposed the concept of "community empowerment" and advocated the transformation from consultative participation (such as information notification) to collaborative governance—this shift requires theoretical support. This paper constructs an integrative analytical framework that blends collaborative-governance theory with power-distribution analysis among multiple actors. It mobilizes Asman's cultural-memory lens—critiquing static preservation through the Shawan Project—and Lefebvre's triadic dialectic of spatial production, exemplified by the Jiushuikeng Project, while grounding the discussion empirically in the Meizilin Project.

3. Analysis of case mechanisms of community-driven activation in South China

3.1. Collaborative repair model

3.1.1. Meizi forest rehabilitation plan

The Hong Kong Meizilin Project faces the cultural fault crisis of Hakka villages and promotes space reproduction based on the principles of "local materials, light construction, and co-creation and participation": as shown in Figure 1, villagers use traditional rammed earth techniques to repair the walls of old houses [1]; abandoned village houses were transformed community cooperatives and education bases, realizing economic and educational functions embedded; through the "Germination Festival" event, villagers and artists jointly created soil sculptures and Hakka folk song

performances, transforming farming rituals into collective memories that attract 15,000 people a year, confirming the transformation of cultural memories from “solid preservation” to “dynamic transmission” [2]. The project’s institutional breakthrough lies in villagers wielding a collective “one-vote veto” to fend off commercial takeover of their public housing, and scholars granted non-professional communities technical decision-making power through knowledge translation, forming a closed loop of “knowledge-power-resources” [3].



Figure 1. Reconstruction of rammed earth wall

3.1.2. Dadongshan Lantouying

The Dadongshan project builds a scientific and technological empowerment system in response to the 60% damage rate of stone houses and the ecological crisis [4], such as residents drawing risk areas based on disaster memories in 1962, and AR equipment superimposing historical images from the 1940s, extending spatial production to virtual and realistic dimensions, but 75% of middle-aged and elderly villagers can only operate basic AR functions, highlighting the limitations of community independent technical capabilities [5].

Compared with Meizilin’s plan, although the two share the core of “collaborative governance”, Laitou Camp replaces Meizilin’s interpersonal network (workshop) with technology intermediaries (digital platforms), extending space production to the virtual-reality dimension; its nature conservation priority is also different from Meizilin’s economic-educational embedding, reflecting that community-driven needs dynamically adjust between technological adaptability and power balance when facing different scenarios (mountains/villages).

3.2. Memory reproduction paths: contemporary transformation of traditional spaces

3.2.1. Shawan Liugentang

Different from the economic-educational embedding path of Meizilin, Shawan Liugeng Hall serves as a model for the activation of Guangfu Ancestral Hall, focusing on the living maintenance and innovative transformation of clan memories. Shawan Ancestral Hall adopts a spatial hierarchical strategy. The main hall strictly follows clan sacrifices to maintain “archival memory” [2], the side hall is transformed into a cultural tourism space. This “core-edge” spatial division of labor not only retains the sanctity of sacrificial rituals, but also activates public cultural production through functional expansion. The key innovation is to transform the “silver gift” into a tourism festival. Tourists touching the engraved silver plate made 78% aware of the tradition of respecting the elderly [6]. Shawan continues clan memory with ritual symbol innovation, which is different from

Meizilin’s spatial function reset; its “board-led” decision-making model (tribe voting to distribute income) is also different from Meizilin’s “one-vote veto”, reflecting the different power structure foundations of clandestine communities and immigrant villages, and providing localization for collaborative governance theory is a practical case.

3.2.2. Jiushuikeng Chengong Temple

Different from the “Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition” path of Shawan Liugentang, Jiushuikeng Chengong Temple innovatively uses artistic intervention to activate abandoned ancestral halls, facing the cultural memory fault of industrialized villages. 70% of the roof structure of the Ancestral Hall has collapsed [7], the artist's district was activated through triple transformation: the physical space retains the oyster shell wall; the representation space uses 300 overseas Chinese batches to create light and shadow walls to transform individual narratives; the experience space is reconnected with electronic collage maps through the “Memory Workshop” [8]. The core of the success lies in the artist’s simplification of the academic history of overseas Chinese hometowns into a comic strip, “The Story of Jinshan Tourists”, to realize knowledge translation. Villagers donated family cultural relics (such as luggage from abroad in 1920) to realize the artistic concept into a collective memory carrier, and finally formed a "sanctity-publicity" balance between the ancestral worship area and the art classroom in the main hall.

Table 1 systematically crystallizes the core divergence between the two trajectories. Jiushuikeng is to break through the traditional power framework through decentralized creation and empower marginal narratives, such as the history of overseas Chinese workers at the bottom [8], while the Shawan model is still limited by the path dependence of the clan structure [9]. It reflects differences in power structure.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of Jiushuikeng and Shawan models

Comparative dimension	Jiushuikeng (Art Intervention)	Shawan (Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition)
Dominant mechanism	Artist translation villagers content supply	Clan Council Decision
Memory carrier	materialized individual narrative	ritualized collective symbol
Conflict mediation	Participatory creation	income distribution

4. Key mechanisms and challenges for community-driven activation

4.1. Mechanism

Based on the empirical analysis of South China cases, the core of community-driven activation lies in the collaborative innovation of power redistribution and knowledge translation. At the power level, Meizilin’s “one-vote veto” is essentially an institutional innovation in community land control. Both pass legal mechanisms to transfer spatial decision-making power from external entities to endogenous communities. Liugentang achieved economic empowerment by voting by the “Clan Council” to allocate 65% of intangible cultural heritage benefits. The two jointly subverted the traditional “expert-government” decision-making monopoly [9].

The knowledge translation mechanism bridges the gap between majors and communities, such as simplifying earthquake codes into dialect chants (Meizilin) [3], transforming overseas Chinese hometown history into comics (Jiushuikeng) [8], and improving participation in technical decision-making and cultural awareness. The interaction of the dual mechanisms produces triple effects. The

first is decision-making empowerment to resist capital erosion (such as Meizilin vetoes commercialization), the second is knowledge reduction and expansion of participation (rammed earth chants increase the participation rate of the elderly by 40%), and the last is cultural reproduction. Balancing tradition and innovation (Shawan income maintains the sacrificial function).

4.2. Challenges

Although the community-driven model has shown significant results in empowering residents and activating space and cultural memory, community-driven models face three major structural challenges. Firstly, in terms of the intergenerational technological divide, Meizilin's alpine earthquake resistance relies on professional testing by scholars. Similarly, 75% of middle-aged and elderly villagers in Litou Camp can only operate basic AR functions, and the platform relies on youth teams for maintenance, resulting in the decision to close the ancestral worship path and forcing them to compromise on the restricted appointment system [5], exposing the structural limitations of the community's independent technical capabilities [10]. This phenomenon confirms the constraints of "knowledge asymmetry" in collaborative governance theory on equal participation, and highlights the compatibility contradiction between low-tech translation and high-tech applications. Second, the commercialization of cultural memory is another core challenge. Shawan Liugentang transformed the "silver ceremony" within the clan into a tourist festival [6]. MacCannell criticized "tourist settings often construct staged authenticity—a performance that replaces genuine cultural symbols with commercial replicas" [11], such as the replacement of ancestral silverware with replica handicrafts. Although the council defended "revenue feeding back repairs", 32% of young people within the clan believed that excessive performance weakens sanctity. This contradiction highlights the core challenge of living protection: ancestral halls as a "memory field" [12].

4.3. Solutions

Aiming at the challenges faced by the community-driven model, three-level collaborative solutions are proposed.

4.3.1. Technology

At the technical level, the key is to improve adaptability through low-tech-high-tech collaborative strategies. To bridge the generational divide between the Meizilin and Dadongshan initiatives, we deploy a tiered "technical toolkit." The digital platform, for instance, is split into a basic-operation layer and a decision-support layer, while digital-empowerment workshops for elders boost inclusivity [5]. Simultaneously, in order to better facilitate villagers' understanding, professional knowledge is translated into local dialects, and graphic manuals and bilingual operation videos are introduced to make it easier to understand [3], ensuring that technical decision-making truly settles in the community.

4.3.2. Cultural subjectivity

In terms of maintaining cultural subjectivity, it is necessary to balance protection and activation through institutional innovation: learn from the experience of Shawan's spatial stratification to establish a "double red line of cultural authenticity" and clearly delineate the "preservation area"

(Strictly protect core functions, such as sacrifices) and “innovation experimental areas” (allowing moderate performances); simultaneously implement the democratization reform of income distribution, establish a transparent publicity system, and review commercialization plans by a third-party cultural ethics committee [12] to curb the erosion of cultural authenticity by excessive stage performances.

4.3.3. Cultivate community autonomy and control capabilities

In terms of sustainability capabilities of the community, the focus is on building a long-term collaboration network, promoting mechanisms similar to the “Warm South Development Partner” in Nansha District [13], transforming external experts into long-term technical partners, and avoiding fault risks by extending the village cycle and implementing “village curator” training; Simultaneously establish a “community memory bank” to promote cross-generational knowledge transfer, form a virtuous cycle of independent renewal of cultural memory.

All in all, the core logic of this plan is to overcome the capability gap with technological adaptability, rely on institutional innovation and design to resist the impact of commercialization on cultural authenticity, and ultimately build a networked long-term enabling system to prevent the community from relying on external inputs.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the essence of community-driven heritage activation is the democratic turn of cultural governance [14], and its core lies in reshaping the vitality of cultural heritage through a collaborative mechanism of local empowerment, memory reconstruction and spatial autonomy. Empirical analysis shows that the realization of community decision-making power needs to match the foundation of social structure—the “one-vote veto” in Meizilin immigrant village and the “council vote” in Shawan clan society jointly prove that effective redistribution of power must be rooted in the community. Endogenous power logic [15], the former uses institutional barriers to resist capital erosion, and the latter reconciles commercial gains and sanctity within the framework of traditional authority. Space reproduction has become a physical carrier of cultural memory: the mirror of the jiushuikeng oyster shell wall reflects the industrial landscape and the AR layered historical image of Dadong Mountain, verifying that “space is a dialectical product of social relations” [16] and promoting memory from static archives (genealogy) to dynamic practices, achieving what Asman described as “the ceremonial rebirth of memory” [17]. However, sustainability relies on triple supports—technological adaptability needs to respond to intergenerational cognitive differences [18], cultural authenticity must be guaranteed through institutional constraints, while collaborative networking needs to break the “departure gap” (for example, the cultivation of “villager curators” requires a period of ≥ 5 years) [19].

However, this study is limited by the regional specificity of the case. There are significant differences between Hong Kong’s policy environment and the mainland. Suggestions for future research: (1) Establish a “Community Empowerment Index” evaluation system (Including dimensions such as decision-making depth and technical inclusiveness); (2) Drawing on [20] Ho’s “institutional assembly” framework, comparing the collaborative logic between the South China cultural heritage empowerment mechanism with the Overseas Chinese Township in southern Fujian and the Hong Kong New Territories Land Trust, and exploring blockchain technology to confirm the sovereignty of villagers’ cultural data; (3) comparing the impact of commercial intervention intensity on memory inheritance in the coffee shop model of overseas Chinese Township in southern

Fujian, and analyzing the “double-edged sword effect” of commercial capital on memory inheritance.

References

- [1] Architecture School, Chinese University of Hong Kong (2024) Technical Report on the Plum Forest Rehabilitation Plan. Available at: <https://bbs.co188.com/thread-10516574-1-1.html>.
- [2] Assmann, J. (2011) *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Chung, H.L. (2025) *Project Plum Grove: Sustainable Rural Revitalization through Collaborative Conservation*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- [4] Hong Kong Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. (2023) *Ecological Survey Report of Lantau Peak*. Hong Kong: AFCD Press.
- [5] Hong Kong Council of Social Service (2023) *Digital Divide Among Elderly in Rural Communities*. Available at: https://www.hkcss.org.hk/e_report/.
- [6] Guangzhou City Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center (2023) *Public Awareness Survey Report on the Shawan Silver Holding Ceremony* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.ihchina.cn/>.
- [7] Panyu District Cultural Relics Protection Center (2023) *Building Damage Assessment Report of Jiushuikeng Chen Gong Temple*. Available at: <http://www.panyu.gov.cn/whj/> (Accessed: 28 June 2025).
- [8] Ou, B. (2024) *Nostalgia Reconstructed: Art Intervention in Qiaoxiang Villages*. Guangzhou: Lingnan Art Press.
- [9] Ansell, C. and Gash, A. (2008) Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4): 543–571.
- [10] Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*, Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [11] MacCannell, D. (1973) Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3): 589–603.
- [12] Nora, P. (1989) Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. *Representations*, 26, 7–24.
- [13] Nansha District Committee Organization Department. (2025) *Practice White Paper on the Partner Mechanism of Warm South Development*. Available at: <https://static.nfnews.com/content/202503/25/c11116531.html>.
- [14] Smith, L. (2019) *Uses of Heritage* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- [15] Ostrom, E. (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press.
- [16] Harvey, D. (2001) *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*. Edinburgh University Press.
- [17] Connerton, P. (1989) *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press.
- [18] Pfeiffer, D. (2012) Technological Apartheid: Colonial Legacies in Digital Heritage, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 18(5): 436–450.
- [19] Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- [20] Ho, P. (2017) Land Trusts and Collective Empowerment in Post-Colonial Asia, *Geoforum*, 85: 129–138.