

Ancient Villages and Old Towns in Contemporary Chinese Society

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Abstract

After the baptism of reform and opening-up, rapid economic growth, and urbanization, contemporary China has gradually separated from the traditional local social state and developed into a real modern society. At the same time, since the 1990s, there has been a strong and universal nostalgic atmosphere in Chinese society. The past agricultural cultural tradition and local social form have become the object carrier of Chinese people's homesickness. It is against this background that ancient villages and old towns all over the country have received extensive attention. There are various trends such as the "cultural heritage" of ancient villages and old towns or their development as tourism resources. This paper intends to make a brief comment on the significance of the "rediscovery" of ancient villages and old towns in Contemporary Chinese society and the historical and cultural values given to them. On this basis, this paper analyzes the main problems faced by ancient villages and old towns under the current trend of new rural construction movement and Tourism industry development, and deeply discusses that ancient villages and old towns are also modern villages and towns, their objectification has various effects on the daily life of residents.

Key words: Contemporary Chinese society, Urbanization, Ancient villages and old towns, Nostalgia, Cultural heritage, Folklorism

要旨

現代中国は改革開放、経済高度成長および都市化などを相次いで経験した結果、すでに伝統的郷土社会からまさに現代社会への発展を実現したと言える。それと同時に、1990年代より中国社会において、普遍的なレトロ・懐古趣味がブームとして現れ、過去の農耕文化の伝統や郷土社会は一般民衆のノスタルジア情緒の対象となった。このような時代の流れのなか、全国各地域の古村落や古鎮なども注目されるようになりつつあり、古村落や古鎮を文化遺産として保護する、あるいはそれらを観光資源として開発するなどの様々な動きが活発に展開されている。本稿は、現代中国における古村落と古鎮の「再発見」された意義、古村落と古鎮に付加された歴史や文化的価値などを論説し、現在進行形の「新農村建設運動」や観光開発の文脈における古村落と古鎮の在り方や問題点を整理・分析したうえで、古村落・古鎮を現代社会の村落や町と見なし、それらの客体化により、地元住民の日常生活にどのような影響を与えたかを検証したものである。

キーワード：現代中国、都市化、古村落と古鎮、ノスタルジア、文化遺産化、フォークロリズム

In contemporary China, which has experienced more than 30 years of “reform and opening up” and rapid economic growth, various new social and cultural trends are very active and emerging. All these trends are the results of the gradual accumulation of existing social and cultural changes in contemporary Chinese society. At the same time, they also reflect the new developments and changing directions of contemporary Chinese society and its culture from different aspects. The social upsurge of paying attention to ancient villages and old towns (refers to *gucunzhen* “古村镇” in Chinese) in recent years is one of the countless new social and cultural trends. This paper intends to make preliminary comments on the background of the social upsurge of paying attention to ancient villages and old towns, that is, the development of urbanization, the significance of “rediscovery” of the ancient villages and old towns in contemporary Chinese society, and the historical and cultural values given to these villages and towns. At the same time, it will also analyze the problems faced by ancient villages and old towns under the current conditions of the new rural construction movement and the tourism development policies and explore the possible changes and mechanisms of the ancient villages and towns as modern villages and towns¹.

1 The Chinese version in title “The Rediscovery of Ancient Villages and Old Towns in Modern Contemporary Chinese Society” (古村镇在当代中国社会的“再发现”) was originally published in *Journal of Wenzhou University* (温州大学学报), 2009, 22 (5): 3–11.

Urbanization and the rediscovery of ancient villages and old towns

Chinese academic circles in the field such as sociology, cultural anthropology, folklore, geography, arts, socio-economic history, architectural history, cultural history, have paid attention to villages or towns for a long time. In this regard, the most famous and influential research in this field must be the works of “The Economy of Jiangcun Village” by Professor Fei Xiaotong. Scholars have paid attention to villages or towns, mainly because villages and towns have always been regarded as a typical unit of grass-roots communities in Chinese society. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of villages and towns naturally means an analysis of the most basic part of Chinese society or culture. Fei Xiaotong once pointed out that the grass-roots community units of the so-called “earthbound China” are villages where one’s clan or family lives (Fei 1985: 4). Therefore, to study the changes in modern or contemporary Chinese society, “the village community” often spontaneously becomes the most important object for researchers (See Zhang 2005 and Mao 2000).

Although the emerging “hot topic” of ancient villages and old towns may not be directly related to the above academic concerns, there is no doubt that the continuous investigation and research of the academic community has indeed contributed to this upsurge of ancient villages and old towns. Since about the 1990s, a social upsurge of paying attention to the ancient villages and towns has sprung up in some economically developed areas along the southeast coast of China, first in the Yangtze River Delta and the Zhujiang River Delta, and then all over the country. In fact, the values and charm of the ancient villages and old towns have experienced a process of continuous “rediscovery” by the whole society.

Many trends are thought closely related to this so-called “rediscovery” of ancient villages and towns in this paper. For example, the practice of “seeking the root” and “collecting folk songs and tales” conducted by a large number of artists and the so-called “intellectuals”, the gradual reassessment of the value of local architectural tradition, the gradual resurgence and revival of grass-roots or folk culture, the continuous emergence of books, pictures or publications related to ancient villages and old towns, the continuous focus of various mass media (including the emerging Internet media) on ancient villages and towns, the widespread popularity of local or ancient village and old town style documentaries, the naming and recognition of “historical and cultural areas” and “famous historical and cultural villages (towns)” by local governments at all levels, the spread of nostalgia in the whole society, and the sudden emergence of “self-help tourism” in ancient villages and old towns (recently, a large number of self-help tourism manuals or guides with pictures and texts have been published), the

emergence of new suburban “farmhouse fun” and “pastoral travel” tourism modes, especially the movement of rescuing and protecting “intangible cultural heritage” that vigorously carried out throughout the country in recent years. All these trends show that the upsurge of ancient villages and old towns is indeed a very eye-catching cultural development trend that cannot be ignored in contemporary Chinese society. However, because its profound influence far exceeds the margin of academia at present, it is difficult for us to give it a simple and clear definition.

Since the May 4th Movement in the early 20th century, in the cultural and intellectual circles of Chinese society, a discourse system has gradually formed that denies “traditional culture” and regards it as an obstacle to “modernization”, so it is regarded as the object of revolution. Even the “Cultural Revolution,” to a certain extent, can also be seen as the most radical round of social practice that aimed to abolish “tradition.” The influence of this discourse is very far-reaching, and it continues to exist even today. For example, it takes the “Chinese traditional everyday life world” based on villages as the object of criticism, and believes that it is “heavy”, “closed” and “narrow-minded,” so it also needs to be “changed (or transformed)” (Yang 2005: 11, 93, 236). However, the ancient villages and towns that once gave people the impression of “feudalism” and “backwardness,” or even became the targets in the revolution of “destroying the four old things, and establishing the four new things” as the material carrier of “negative” value, and their folk local cultures have become rare cultural wealth and the objects of rescue and protection day by day, under the new era background. They have become resources available for development, landscapes that are worth to be carried forward. It is not overemphasized to say that the transformation is earth-shaking.

It is still difficult for us to make a detailed description and accurate analysis of the various social factors and cultural trends surging behind the “upsurge” of paying attention to the ancient villages and old towns across the country, but there is no doubt that it is indeed after the initial success of reform and opening up, the sustained high-speed economic growth, the realization of food and clothing and initial prosperity, and the increase of people’s leisure time, the leisure lifestyle of civil society is gradually established (see Zheng ed. 1996: 309–312), the national self-esteem and cultural self-confidence of all citizens are unprecedentedly high, and the process of globalization promotes the unprecedented activities of international cultural exchanges. The current social and cultural trend of the “upsurge” of paying attention to ancient villages and old towns can basically be summarized by the “cultural consciousness” promoted by Fei Xiaotong. In other words, the universal “rediscovery” of the value and charm of ancient villages and old towns in contemporary Chinese society can also be regarded as one of the important aspects of the great process of the great “cultural consciousness” by the

whole society.

The “cultural consciousness” suggested by Fei Xiaotong primarily refers to the situation that people who live in a certain culture and have “self-knowledge” of their culture, understand its origins, formation process, characteristics, and future development trend. Fei Xiaotong also points out that “cultural consciousness” does not mean any sense of “return to the ancient”, rather than the so-called “self-knowledge,” is mainly to strengthen the independent ability of cultural transformation, so as to obtain the independent status of one’s own culture (Fei 1998) when deciding to adapt to the new environment and new era. Because the “rediscovery” of ancient villages and old towns means that Chinese society has a new understanding of the “root” of its own traditional culture, that is, the “local community” based on the villages and towns under the background of the new era, it is quite appropriate to understand it from the perspective of “cultural consciousness”.

Ancient villages and old towns are often considered as a newly emerged type of “destination” of tourism and sightseeing, which is accompanied with superficial, utilitarian, and economic motives within the development of tourism. A variety of tourist development projects taking ancient villages and old towns as basic resources and also taking them as destinations have been emerging one after another. These projects include, “the ethnic style tourism village,” “folk culture village,” “folk tourism village²,” “famous historical and cultural town (village),” and “key cultural relics protection units.” They have indeed contributed a lot of motivation for the whole society to pay attention to the social upsurge of ancient villages and old towns. From the upsurge of large-scale development of ancient villages and old towns tourism, we can see all kinds of new cultural dynamics brought about by economic reform and social development in contemporary China. The grassroots local governments where ancient villages and old towns are located often regard the development of ancient villages and old towns as an important path to enhance local popularity, enhance local competitiveness, and shape, construct, or even promote the characteristics of local economy and culture.

According to a survey data provided by the China Association for the promotion of village and community development, as of November 2007, there were more than 8,000 administrative villages with a GDP of more than 100 million RMB *yuan*. Among these administrative villages, in addition to their distinctive planting and breeding industry, ecological village construction, agricultural, industrial, and commercial

2 As for “the ethnic style tourism village (民族风情旅游村)” and “folk tourism village (民俗旅游村),” see Xu (2006: 64–74).

enterprise groups, and suburban economy, the “ancient village culture development” is also regarded as an economic development model. Here, as to the so-called “cultural development” of ancient villages and old towns, the most common way is to develop tourism and related service industries. If tourism is considered as a universal cultural consumption after the increase of citizens’ leisure time, ancient villages and old towns naturally become the object of this cultural consumption.

In China, it is an indisputable fact that in recent years, there is rapid and large-scale urbanization and development of urban lifestyle. Although there are barriers between urban and rural areas, such as the household registration system and income gap, many traditional rural lifestyles are gradually declining in the southeast coastal areas where the economy is relatively developed. At the same time, there are following events as the large-scale development of township enterprises, the continuous construction of “small-town construction,” the all-around flowering of urbanization, and the construction of “new socialist countryside” underway. They have made or are making profound changes in the appearance of villages and towns all over the country day by day³. The traditional rural community (local society), which once reflected the basic structure of Chinese society, has begun to disintegrate, and it is gradually leaving us behind. However, in the modern economic construction based on the theory of “eliminating the old and making way for the new,” those ancient villages and towns that retain traces of the traditional way of life and the pace of life are still leisurely and soothing from the external world. On the one hand, they disintegrate, wither and disappear rapidly, and become increasingly scarce; on the other hand, their values have gradually been concerned and valued by the whole society.

That is to say, all the contents contained in the traditional production and way of life (a natural division of labor, self-sufficiency, and self-contained systems), the value system and concept of Confucian of “farming and reading” culture (agro-business, Confucianism merchant and agro-Confucianism) deeply rooted in the soil of China’s agricultural culture, the harmonious living space and cultural landscape between heaven and human (Liu 1998), the quiet and peaceful local conditions and life attitude of folk houses, and the rural environment and rural life forms closely related to the aesthetics of *fengshui*, ultimately, which are almost forgotten by Chinese people, are constantly rediscovered and confirmed under the background of the general trend of Chinese society towards urbanization, and have been recognized by the person of

3 Such well-known villages as Huaxi village (华西村), Xiangyang village (向阳村) and Jiangcun village (江村). Most of them can be regarded as examples of “modernization” in which the traditional style of the village no longer exists. As for Xiangyang village, see Chang and Feng (2001: 12–13).

insight at all levels and the general public.

Interestingly, such kinds of “discoveries” often need stimulation from the perspective of “outsiders” who have insight, such as the discovery of Lijiang by the American scholar Joseph Rock, the discovery of Japanese “palm style folk house” by German architect Bruno Stewart, and more recently, the discovery of Zhouzhuang’s “beauty” by painter Chen Yifei and the “treasure” of Dangjia village in Shaanxi Province by Japanese architect Aoki Masao (Li 2002: 13). Further examples include the discovery of ancient villages like Tan Wenxi village and Longxiu village in Xintian County (Li 2002: 13), and the discovery of ancient villages by the Hunan Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau’s investigation team of “Hunan Discovery Tour” not long before. At present, such discoveries or rediscoveries seem to be continuing and deepening all over China.

The “rediscovery” of the value of ancient villages and old towns has fundamentally reshaped the positive image of the common people’s daily life tradition based on these villages and towns. Therefore, the charm and the value of ancient villages and old towns, as well as the sunset but infinitely beautiful local culture and its traditional way of life represented by them, are increasingly deeply lingered and cherished by people and are increasingly considered as the cultural “hometown” of the whole country and nation or the source of its continuous flow, which has become more and more relying on historical and cultural traditions, and the basis for building a new national culture. Especially after Lijiang (Dayan town), Pingyao and other ancient cities (towns), and Hongcun, Xidi and other ancient villages have been successively declared by the state to be included in the world heritage list, ancient villages and old towns are considered to be China’s most significant cultural heritage⁴.

On the one hand, in the secular sense, ancient villages and old towns are increasingly becoming the cultural consumption object of tourism, the “ready source of money” of local governments where ancient villages and old towns are located, and cultural facilities or social installation for the urban citizens or prospective citizens to alleviate the pressure of social competition, relieve anxiety, obtain spiritual conform, reflect on the exquisite feeling of the ancient time, change the pace of life, and “recharge” and “refuel (cheer up).” On the other hand, in the sense of “cultural consciousness” and “cultural inheritance,” ancient villages and old towns are not only the specimen

4 According to the news from Xinhua News Agency reported by Beijing Evening News (北京晚报) on November 8, 2007, 15 natural villages with unique landscape, cultural diversity and artistic aesthetics, such as Huangtandong village in Yueqing City, Zhejiang Province and Chengyang Eight Village (known as “Chengyang Bazhai” (程阳八寨)) in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, have been selected into the first batch of “Chinese Landscape Villages”.

and resources of the traditional culture of the motherland, but also the carriers of the historical memory of the local community. At the same time, they are also the place or space where “tradition” and “history” may be regenerated, reappeared, and re-experienced.

New rural construction and protection of ancient villages and old towns

The Chinese government has long faced severe “three rural issues” (rural areas, agriculture, and farmers), and a new round of efforts to solve the three issues is the current “new socialist rural construction.” The government has long been committed to promoting the development of small towns and urban planning and construction. At the same time, the Ministry of Construction, the State Administration of Cultural Relics, and some local governments have jointly issued many relevant laws and policies to protect a large number of “famous historical and cultural cities,” as well as “famous historical and cultural towns and villages” that have just been recognized. To some extent, this shows that the social and cultural movement of paying attention to and “rediscovering” ancient villages and old towns is actually the intervention and promotion of national administration. The more profound reasons behind it reflect the close and complex relationship between economic construction, modernization development, and the protection of traditional cultural heritage. Up to now, two batches of 44 famous historical and cultural towns and 36 famous historical and cultural villages were announced by the Ministry of Industry and economic construction and the State Administration of Cultural Relics in 2003 and 2005.

There are also many other famous historical and cultural towns and villages that were confirmed by local governments at all levels and included in their protection list (Fang and Xue and Xiong eds. 2006: 28–40). It should be said that they are an important part of the national cultural heritage protection system. The government has set some basic conditions when identifying famous historical and cultural villages and towns. Ancient villages and towns that can be recognized as “famous historical and cultural towns or villages” by the state often have rich architectural heritage, historical relics, and historic sites or traditional culture, and they can fully reflect the traditional style, local characteristics, and national customs of a certain historical period. Some also preserve many traditional buildings built during the Republic of China period or before. Moreover, the basic features of the whole community are well preserved and are considered to have high historical, cultural, artistic, and scientific values. Those famous historical and cultural villages and towns have played an important role in promoting the social and economic development of the whole country or region in a

certain historical period and have an important impact on the whole country or a region. For instance, some villages or towns, as land and water transportation hubs, were once famous distribution centers for passengers, cargo flows and material follows; some have been major construction projects in the history, which have significant benefits for protecting the safety of people's lives and property, and protecting or improving the ecological environments, and such significant benefits contribute to today. In addition, there have been major historical events in the history of the Chinese revolution. In history, there have been major campaigns to resist foreign invasions, or have been stationed as the headquarters of the campaign in some villages or towns. They have embodied the classical theory of Chinese traditional site selection and planning layout, or reflected Chinese classical construction methods and exquisite construction skills. They can also more intensively reflect the characteristics customs and ethnic characteristics of traditional architectural technology of old towns or villages in some particular areas. In short, ancient villages and old towns identified as "famous historical and cultural towns and villages" by the country are often rich in architectural heritage, historical and cultural relics or traditional culture that can often reflect a more comprehensive traditional style, local characteristics, and ethnic customs in one historical period, some of them may keep some traditional building groups which were built in the period of the regime of the Kuomintang Party during the early 20th century or even a previous era. And the basic style and features of the entire community are still in good preservation and are thought to have high historical, cultural, artistic, and scientific values. Obviously, "history" is the basic foundation for the establishment of ancient villages and old towns. At present, most of the famous historical and cultural villages or towns recognized by the provinces and municipalities in southern Changjiang delta do have a long and profound historical deposition and background (Liu 1987).

However, the so-called "ancient villages and old towns" in this paper, besides the above "famous historical and cultural villages and towns" recognized by the state, also generally refer to a large number of villages and towns that have not yet been recognized by the governments, although at the same time, they have above historical and cultural values to varying degrees. This author believes that the so-called historical and cultural value should not be limited to their value for a particular region or the country, but it should also include the community residents living in ancient villages and towns. In addition to the representative significance for the historical traditions and cultural features of a certain period, a certain ethnic group, or a country and region, there is another layer of meaning, that is, their historical and cultural significance for the residents of the villages and towns. For example, Zhuge Bagua (the Eight Trigrams) village in Lanxi City, Zhejiang Province was listed as a "famous historical and

cultural village” in Lanxi City in 1992, and as a special case of the overall protection of the country’s first ancient village, in 1996 it became “China national key cultural relic protection unit,” and then was also commended as one of the “top 10 ancient villages in China” by the media. It should be said that the villagers (claiming to be the descendants of Zhuge Kongming) cherish their history, their practice of gradually protecting their ancient village from “spontaneous” activities to “consciousness” actions, the encouragement, attention, and recognition of the local government and the momentum and exaggeration of the media are reasons for the increasing popularity of the village and finally recognized by the government. Another example is Yao village, which locates in Lanxi City as well. Though it is not as famous as the Zhuge Bagua village, nor has it been recognized by the government, and the outside world does not seem to know much about it. In this author’s opinion, Yao village can still be said to be an ancient village, because it also meets or is close to meeting some of the conditions of the above historical and cultural values. At the same time, according to this author’s investigation and research, Yao village is still a world full of the folk significance of various characters, symbols, and physical symbolism (Zhou 2000, 2005). In my opinion, in addition to the representative significance of the historical tradition and culture style and features of a particular ethnic, nation, or region in a certain period, there is another aspect of the ancient village significance, that is, the great “historical” and “cultural” significance for the residents of the villages and towns. For the residents in Yao village, the history of their village is closely related to the realities of their lives. If they cherish the traditional culture of the village, it would be protected entirely by the ancient villages. As some scholars point out (Liu 2007), as for the definitions of “famous historical and cultural villages and towns,” more attention has been paid to their materialized forms, that is, tangible aspects, such as architectural complexes, monuments, cultural relics, and historic sites. While on the other hand, for the “intangible cultural heritage” rooted in ancient villages and old towns or famous historical and cultural villages and towns, that is, their cultural landscapes, folk customs, traditional festival ceremonies, performing arts, oral culture, and so on, is less concerned. The transformation of ancient villages and old towns in terms of hardware such as “repairing the old as before (new)” is mostly to rebuild a livable space that is more in line with the idea of Chinese culture. However, in terms of “software,” it is much more difficult to rescue, explore and protect intangible cultures such as folk culture, cultural landscape and local customs than those material cultural relics that can be directly put into the museum. On February 8th, 2006, the State Council issued “the Notice on Strengthening the Protection of Cultural Heritage.” In the notice, the requirements of the “famous historical and cultural villages and towns” that are in

the process of urbanization is involved. And, it pointed out that “the historical and cultural environment should be effectively protected and the protection of the excellent local architectures and other cultural heritages should be regarded as an important part of urban development strategy.” The so-called “historical and cultural environment” mentioned here contains some factors of “intangible culture,” which could be roughly equivalent to “cultural space” (or “cultural place” in translation) defined by the UNESCO “Convention for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage.” And it is also closed to the concepts of “cultural landscape” and “historical style area” often used in academic circles.

The “cultural landscape” is a man-made landscape that people intentionally or unintentionally superimpose or infiltrate on the natural landscape. It is a comprehensive whole composed of a variety of complex elements, which can reflect the fundamental economic, cultural, and living conditions of the local people where the ancient villages and towns are located. For example, Qiantong Village, an ancient village in Ninghai County, Zhengjiang Province, was assessed as a provincial tourism town in 1998. In 1999, it was confirmed as a “historical and cultural reserve” by the provincial government. In 2001, it was again identified as a “famous historical and cultural town” by Zhejiang Province. Its value as an ancient village or town is considered to be a relatively complete continuation of the space and scene of ancient life. Like the ancient village of Qiandong, many ancient villages and towns have their cultural values, which is largely due to their miniature or sample form that preserves the overall spatial image, cultural landscape, life world, and clan cultural inheritance in China’s rural social life to a great extent. In some places in southern China, there is a good folk custom of “there are pavilions every three miles and tea pavilions every five miles along the road.” Those road pavilions that intersperse in the green mountains, clean rivers, countryside, and by the path are certainly important aspects of the local ancient village landscape (Lyu 2004). For other examples, as the dry land terraces in Dazhai, Shanxi in the north, and the rice terraces in the mountainous areas of Hani, Yunnan in the southwest, they are typical “cultural landscapes” around the villages. The environment surrounding ancient villages and old towns is not only a natural environment but also an artificial nature. It is a social and cultural environment formed in history. Therefore, in order to protect the ancient villages and old towns well, we should certainly protect the cultural landscapes surrounding them at the same time. Now we stress the protection of “historical and cultural environment.” It means that the protection of “famous historical and cultural villages and old towns and ancient villages and old towns” should not only emphasize the protection of these architecture complexes and cultural relics, but also the protection of the environment, ecology, atmosphere and landscapes surrounding the

whole ancient villages and old towns (Yang 2002). All the architecture, environment, and landscape of most ancient villages and old towns have almost been historicized and humanized. At the same time, most of them have stepped into the life later period of the evolutionary history of “settlement.” It is particularly important and very difficult to protect such cultural landscapes. It is true to the historical districts or streets of the cities in urban areas, as well as in most ancient villages and old towns. In the practice of small-town construction and ancient villages and old towns protection, it is relatively easy to protect the isolated and specific ancient architecture complex or material relics, while the integrated style and “cultural landscapes” of ancient villages and old towns are easy to be damaged. How to protect the cultural landscapes and cultural space of ancient villages and old towns is a big problem that is easy to be ignored in the construction movement of small towns and new rural construction. It is just the case that happened to Tongli Town that the arch bridge was torn down in the construction we mentioned above.

It is based on the notion of “sustainable development” that we integrate the cultural heritage of ancient villages and old towns as resources into the urbanization development strategy. As the sightseeing object and the window to show the scene of ancient villages and old towns to sightseers, the cultural heritage could be direct means of economic development for most ancient villages and old towns. In recent years, the tourist rush in ancient villages and old towns oriented to local economic and cultural development is popular, and only in the south of the Yangtze River, “Ten Top Ancient Towns in the Water Region” are highly praised by folk and media. Today, for many of the ancient villages and old towns like Wuzhen, Zhouzhuang, Tongli, Xitang, Zhuge Bagua Village, Qiantong, Anchang, Likeng, Yangliuqing, Nuanquan Village and Dangjia Village, developing tourism is an important way for them, and they highly depend on tourism resources. However, it must be pointed out that in modern China where economic profit is seen as the “irony rule”, the tourism industry which has taken ancient villages and old towns as development resources and over-exploited the resources has embodied various potential crises to the protection of the ancient villages and old towns and the sustainable development.

The document “Several Suggestions on Promoting the Construction of Socialist New Rural Areas” issued by the State Council in 2006 proposes that village governance should highlight four aspects, namely, “rural characteristics, local and ethnic characteristics, and protecting ancient villages and residences with historical and cultural values. That means that the protection of ancient villages is certainly involved in the topic of new rural construction. In Wuyuan County, Jiangxi Province, protecting ancient villages and constructing new rural areas, in a sense, covers two important

aspects of the same work. So far, it is said that in this county, there have been 12 ancient villages awarded as “Chinese Folk Cultural Villages,” and another 10 ancient villages have become “Famous Historical Cultural Village” in Jiangxi Province, of which Likeng Village has also been awarded as the national “Famous Historical and Cultural Village.” These achievements are not only taken by the local government of Wuyuan County as an honor but also have greatly improved the reputation and competitive power of the area substantially. However, ever since a long time ago, historical blocks, ancient towns, and villages all over the country have indeed suffered from being torn down positively or passively demolishing, changing the old style and rapidly changing into a modernized urban scene. People are eager to have modernized life, meanwhile many local grass-roots governments and villages and town cadres are good at using the “image projects” and “political achievement projects,” so that they simplified the four goals of “production development, living standard improvement, rural civilization, the clean and tidy profile of village appearance and democratic management” for the new rural construction movement merely as “clean village.” The tendency of further large-scale demolition and construction is not entirely impossible. As a result, blind innovation and further removal of cultural heritage in China may occur. In this regard, it is indeed necessary to be vigilant.

What should be pointed out more definitely is, apart from those concrete buildings and remained relics and the cultural landscape surrounding ancient villages and old towns, the lifestyle of the residents in ancient villages or old towns, the living culture and various folk traditions inherited among the local people, within the values and charm of the ancient village and old town, it can even be said that the value and charm of them should be paid more attention to. At present, it is more important to realize that in the New Rural Construction Movement, we need not only to protect ancient villages and old towns and their cultural landscapes, but also, to some extent, need to pay attention to the inheritance of folk culture. That is because the folk culture is not only the lifestyle of the people in the ancient villages or old towns but also the source and origin for the development of the ancient villages or old towns and even local development under specific conditions.

The daily life of ancient villages and old towns and folklorism

This author believes that the current understanding of ancient villages and old towns usually has two different aspects. One is the ancient villages and old towns in the vision of tourists who come to visit, and the other is the ancient villages and old towns recognized by the residents of ancient villages and old towns who physically live in

them. Here, the former feels curious and nostalgic about ancient villages and towns, while the latter feels kind about ancient villages and towns, but they often turn a blind eye and even need the stimulation of external vision to arouse the reflection of local people (Liang 1992). Generally speaking, the former has a lot of romantic misreading and imagination about ancient villages and old towns. For instance, they regard ancient villages and towns as a “paradise” or a world where they can “live poetically.” They envy the local people for the feeling of “the whole village living in the painting” or “others in the peach blossom garden.” While the latter is to more effectively understand the various practical difficulties and existing problems faced by ancient villages and old towns. Obviously, the difference here not only involves the aesthetic contradiction between residential users and visitors but also has a deeper difference between them.

As mentioned above, the significance of the rediscovery of ancient villages and old towns in contemporary Chinese society in various ways should first be understood in the context of the irreversible urbanization process, that is, in the overall pattern of social and cultural changes in China, including ancient villages and old towns. The ancient villages and old towns are endowed with high values and charm, which must be more and more prominent in this background and pattern. In this author’s opinion, the external world from which ancient villages and towns and tourists come is in two extremes, or a relationship of conflict, confrontation, and mutual complement. On many occasions, it is just because of the existence of their continuous “paradise” lifestyle (or imaged picture), ancient villages and old towns possess the characteristics of “modernity” or even some “postmodernity.” The principle and logic of the slow daily rhythm and life culture in ancient villages and old towns are often considered (or misunderstood) to be completely different from the principle of the market economy that prevails and leads to the crossflow of material desires in the external world. In short, ancient villages and old towns are non-daily spaces of urban people. It is considered to have the non-daily nature that tourists from the city are willing to visit.

Though it must be pointed out that ancient villages and towns are also a part of modern and contemporary Chinese society. The word “ancient” or “old” for the ancient villages and old towns is used mainly because it is considered a substance that carries a part of the history of communities, regions, ethnic groups, or even countries, or because it also retains more historical relics and word-of-mouth memories of villages or township communities. But even so, ancient villages and old towns can and should be modern villages and towns at the same time. Although many local architecture experts may list a large number of advantages for ancient villages and old towns and the architectures within them, in fact, the residents who actually live there often complain about the inconvenience of transportation, natural lighting, electric lighting, sanitation (toilet,

sewer), sound insulation, privacy, and community services. The residents of ancient villages and old towns, especially their younger generations, are also very eager for an urban and modern life like the external world, which involves not only the material level but also, emotional, and spiritual needs. Continuously introduced new concepts and information, behaviors, and lifestyles will gradually promote the appearance of ancient villages or old towns to change quietly, and will, meanwhile, continuously promote the trend of dilution or dilution of their regional or ethnic characteristics. The life of residents in ancient villages and old towns has always been in change. The residents there also have the right to pursue a modern lifestyle and develop their own culture.

There is a concept of a so-called “protection” that attempting to prevent these changes and try to “freeze” residents’ lives and make them fixed together with ancient villages or old towns and at a certain moment in the “past” and “protect them,” but it is as difficult as seeking fish from trees. Obviously, it is sure enough that the protection of ancient villages and old towns will also face the problem of the relationship between “man and culture” raised by Fei Xiaotong (Fei 1998). In other words, it is difficult for the residents of ancient villages and old towns to be “protected” together with those ancient buildings. Most tourists and foreigners hope the ancient villages or old towns and their inhabitants to maintain an old traditional living and cultural state, so as to find sustenance for their feeling of nostalgia in it. Then, how should they respect the development wishes of the local people? The tense or uncoordinated relationship between them does occur from time to time. For example, the influx of tourists who came to Zhouzhuang Town in Jiangsu Province to look for “quietness” has turned the ancient town into a lively market, so that some people ironically say that it feels like an ancient town only when there are few tourists in the morning and evening. In Dayan Town, Lijiang, Yunnan Province, in order to obtain the benefits of renting local houses and avoid the harassment of tourists, residents continue to move out in succession, which even led to the trend of “vacancy” of the ancient town and the “big escape” of residents (Zong 2002: 29–30). Xitang, an ancient town in Zhejiang Province, has won various titles (such as “historical and cultural reserve,” “top ten historical and cultural town,” “national civilized town” and “AAAA tourist scenic spot”). It was considered by the UNESCO experts a good example for its preservation of traditional life scenes. However, it has also caused some people’s dissatisfaction because its protection regulations are against and limit residents’ actual life. Such paradoxes have occurred and are occurring all over the country. It is not simply caused by the “over” exploitation of tourism resources in the ancient villages and old towns, but also caused by more deep reasons behind.

On many tourist development occasions, the residents of ancient villages and old towns need to provide the “cultural menus” to their new tourists for “discovery.” In this process, they may keep rediscovering or re-explaining the historical tradition of their villages or towns to meet the needs for cultural consumption from the extended world. In the process of protection and development of ancient villages and old towns, on the one hand, people talk about their “original flavor” with relish, describe their “original ecology”, and always take pains to beautify the life rhythm of “working when sunrise and resting when sunset” in ancient villages and old towns. On the other hand, ancient villages and old towns are continuously being changed by large-scale hardware transformation at the same time, so as to meet the pursuit of residents for modern life and provide a variety of convenience for tourists. For instance, in almost all parts of Jiangsu and Zhejiang province, the comprehensive management aimed at protecting the style of ancient villages and old towns and improving the quality of the living standards for residents, such as river dredging, ancient bridge maintenance, street, and lane landscape renovation, shop façade renovation, improvement of water supply and drainage system and public toilets, burying “three electricity” (electric power, telecommunications, cable TV) access to the ground, and road traffic improvement have reshaped the style and features of ancient villages and old towns to varying degrees, or optimized the structural layout and function of ancient villages and old towns. The purposes of the comprehensive management are to exhibit not only suitable for opening to tourists and displaying some folk culture or local customs, but also meet the modern life of residents in ancient villages and towns and their needs for development.

Sometimes we even have to distinguish between sightseeing areas and living areas. For instance, in Anchang, a “famous historical and cultural town” in Zhejiang Province, its “street river” is developed as a tourist area to be separated from people’s life and production. In order to distinguish the development mode of Anchang ancient town from other water towns such as Zhouzhuang, a special “Private Adviser (Shi Ye) Museum” has been built to further highlight and emphasize the characteristics of local culture (Chen 2007: 59–65). However, the method of creating a new area can certainly protect ancient villages and towns from the erosion of the wave of emerging urban buildings, but it also cut off the daily lives of residents. Because when the local folk customs and other intangible cultures are also developed as resources, the residents of ancient villages and towns are given the role and responsibility of performing them at any time. When they return to ancient villages and old towns from the new area to show or explain their “life” in the past to tourists, it seems they are not residents but just as the staffs working in any tourist attraction or scenic spots. When they become the

exhibitors and performers of their own life at the same time, it means that their original everyday lifestyle has been changed fundamentally.

Whether it is protection or development, ancient village or old town, above all, it is a modern living community, and then secondly, it is a scenic spot that tourists can enter. In this regard, if we put the incidental before the fundamental, it will bring damage, which deviates from its original intention of being “rediscovered.” Especially in contemporary China with the economic benefits as the “iron rule,” if ancient villages and towns are directly overexploited as “cultural resources,” it may lead to various crises affecting the protection and sustainable development of ancient villages and towns. Displaying the style of ancient villages and towns to foreign tourists is now one of the cultural heritages of most ancient villages and towns and can directly become one of the paths of economic development resources. In recent years, the tourism of ancient villages and towns guided by local economic and cultural development is hot. Only in the south of the Yangtze River, there are the so-called “top ten water towns” widely pursued by the people and the media. At present, in Wuzhen, Zhouzhuang, Tongli, Xitang, Zhuge Bagua village, Qiantong, Anchang, Likeng, Yangliuqing, Nuanquan village, Dangjia Village, and many other ancient villages and towns, they mostly seek to develop tourism, but when they market ancient villages and towns as “tourism commodities,” special care must be taken to avoid the harm of the double-edged sword of the market economy to ancient villages and towns.

As mentioned above, since the value and significance of ancient villages and old towns depend on the definition, needs, and expectations of the external world, to a certain extent, it seems that it should maintain the traditional way of life and become a non-daily life world in the eyes of external people. And in the case when it cannot maintain or have that non-daily nature, its community residents have to learn how to show or display the way of life in the form of performance. It is in this kind of cultural display that various trends of “folklorism” will inevitably appear, and then a series of changes will take place in the daily life, cultural concepts, and even social structure of its residents (Zhou 2000). The so-called “folklorism” here mainly refers to the way or state in which the traditional folk culture or its elements could survive in modern society and contemporary society. Those elements that have been identified as traditional folk customs can be artificially combined at random or “grafted” into various scenes of modern and contemporary life after breaking away from the original “context” (such as established time and space) and “vein” (such as special ceremony and festivals). It is like placing a stone mill in the restaurant, setting up a water wheel in the lobby of the hotel, adding new meaning to traditional festivals (such as interpreting the Valentine’s Day as Chinese Valentine’s day), demonstrating local coarse cloth at

fashion shows, opening a local restaurant in the downtown of the city, or opening a coffee shop in a small town of Shuixiang to miss the time of the Republic of China, all those traditional folk elements are considered to convey some meaning and brew a certain local atmosphere and nostalgia, but at the same time, they are all elements of modern or post-modern life.

The technique or state of folklorism will always have a quite active and prominent performance when people take folk culture or local customs as the objective of performance or display. When it displays properly and is gladly accepted by the audience, it will be praised as simple and elegant, or the combination of traditional pastoral songs and modern social fashion. However, when it is otherwise, it will be accused as absolute fabrication, man-made “pseudo folk custom”, and “fake landscape” artificially rigged up. The above two aspects in folklorism are reflected in the protection and development of ancient villages and old towns, that is, the protection and exploitation may be the constructive and protective development, but may also be the irreparable destruction. It is all up to the practice and choice of the inhabitants in their daily life.

(Translated by Qiao Zhou)

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