

Cultural Inheritance and Protection of Traditional Villages: A Perspective of Philosophy and Cultural Values

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Abstract: Our research investigated cultural inheritance and protection in two traditional villages, Hongcun and Xidi, within Anhui Province, China. We employed a mixed methods approach, combining a case study analysis, surveys with villagers, and semi-structured interviews. The case study analysis revealed well-preserved architectural styles reflecting the Ming and Qing dynasties, showcasing the unique heritage of the Hui people. Villagers continue to observe traditional festivals, crafts, and agricultural methods, highlighting the ongoing transmission of cultural practices across generations. The traditional village layout, with shared courtyards and communal spaces, fosters a strong sense of community, a value deeply ingrained in Chinese culture (collectivism). The presence of ancestral halls further emphasizes the importance of honouring ancestors and preserving family history, aligning with Confucian philosophy's emphasis on filial piety. The villages' UNESCO World Heritage status signifies international recognition of their cultural significance and fosters collaboration in their preservation. A recurring theme was the importance of intergenerational transmission of knowledge and practices, echoing Confucian ideals of education and respect for elders. The concept of community participation emerged as crucial for effective cultural preservation, aligning with the philosophical concept of collective responsibility. Our research highlights the importance of cultural heritage in these villages and the challenges faced in ensuring its continuity.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Village; Cultural Values; Philosophy; Hongcun; Xidi; Cultural Heritage; UNESCO

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional villages represent distinct spatial units within China. Characterized by a long history of continuous habitation and agricultural production these villages have served as repositories of rich cultural heritage (Lu & Ahmad, 2023; Xu et al., 2024). This heritage encompasses tangible elements like traditional architecture and production techniques, alongside intangible aspects such as spiritual concepts and social customs. As a consequence, traditional villages hold significant value as both carriers and witnesses to the evolution of China's rural society and agricultural practices. Notably, the terminology used to describe these settlements has

undergone a shift. Previously referred to as "ancient villages," the official designation was formally changed to "traditional villages" in 2012 (Meijuan, 2023). This change reflects the ongoing development and dynamic nature of these communities. The rapid pace of urbanization in China has presented a complex challenge for the preservation of traditional villages. This process, alongside lagging rural development, environmental degradation, and rural depopulation, has garnered significant attention from scholars across various disciplines, including ethnology, sociology, and architecture (Bian et al., 2022). The national focus on rural revitalization has brought renewed emphasis to village development; however, this effort presents its own set of difficulties.

The concept of "cultural ecology" originated with American anthropologist Steward (Village et al., 2019) and was later elaborated upon the interconnectedness of cultures, natural environments, and human settlements within a broader system. Cultural ecology goes beyond a simple merging of ecology and culture; it utilizes ecological principles to examine the interplay between humans, their cultural practices, and the natural world, ultimately revealing the adaptive strategies developed by societies in response to their environment (Dai et al., 2019). Domestic scholars have begun to integrate this concept with other disciplines to explore new approaches to historical and cultural preservation. For instance, Professor Tianqi Huang's concept of "type-cultural species diversity" introduces cultural ecology into the protection of ancient cities, offering a novel framework for managing such spaces.

Cultural ecology and ethnoecology advocate for a holistic perspective, viewing ethnic minority villages as complex systems where tangible and intangible cultural elements are intricately interwoven (Wang, 2020). This approach recognizes the significance of both physical and non-physical aspects of the cultural landscape. Effectively addressing the challenges faced by these villages requires a comprehensive and systematic analysis. Therefore, safeguarding and revitalizing these villages necessitates a focus not only on protecting historical structures but also on ensuring the continuity of the villagers' living patterns, work practices, and traditional religious beliefs. Disregarding these intangible aspects risks transforming vibrant cultural communities into mere architectural relics devoid of their soul (Wang, 2020). Only by protecting both tangible and intangible cultural elements, such as production methods, customs, and traditional lifestyles, can the overall ecological and cultural integrity of these villages be preserved.

In recognition of the cultural significance of traditional villages,

collaborative efforts were undertaken by China's Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, Ministry of Culture, and other relevant departments. These efforts resulted in the issuance of a "Notice on the Survey of Traditional Villages" (Gao, 2023; Yao, 2021). This document established a definition for traditional villages, identifying them as settlements with a rich legacy of traditional resources and possessing specific historical, cultural, scientific, artistic, social, and economic value. Further solidifying their importance, a national initiative saw the publication of six batches of the "List of Chinese Traditional Villages" between 2012 and 2022 (Qi et al., 2023). This recognition program identified a total of 8,957 villages as national-level traditional villages, granting them corresponding legal status and a designated ranking within the national framework.

Living inheritance necessitates productive approaches to safeguard intangible cultural heritage within villages. Many elements of this heritage are already finding expression in popular trends related to clothing, food, housing, travel, and daily life. This demonstrates the enduring vitality of ethnic minority village cultures in the face of contemporary influences (Song et al., 2019). Productive protection offers a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, it allows "intangible cultural heritage" projects to generate economic benefits, ensuring their viability in the market. Secondly, by incorporating these elements into new products accessible to a wider audience, they become integrated into the everyday lives of the general public. However, effective living inheritance necessitates integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary approaches. Shifting production methods and lifestyles have inevitably impacted the customs of ethnic minority villages. Successful strategies will embrace new technologies and ideas while safeguarding the core cultural essence (Li et al., 2016). This can lead to innovative creations that build upon tradition, transforming elements into new forms through ongoing adaptation.

Traditional Chinese villages are shaped by a complex interplay of environmental, cultural, and social factors (Nie et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2023). The natural environment, encompassing elements like mountains, water, landforms, climate, and flora and fauna, plays a crucial role. The selection of village sites often reflects an emphasis on harmonious co-existence with nature, as evidenced by the water villages of Jiangnan, the villages nestled within the unique landscapes of Huizhou, and the cave dwellings of the northwest region, all adapting to their specific surroundings. Traditional villages hold immense value, encompassing tangible and intangible cultural heritage with historical, cultural, scientific,

artistic, social, and economic significance. However, the forces of globalization, modernization, and rapid urbanization pose a growing threat to their very existence, sparking international concern (Xu & Wang, 2021). In recognition of their importance, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre acknowledged rural landscapes as "continuous cultural landscapes" within their operational guidelines in 1992. Furthermore, the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) adopted the "Principles Concerning Rural Landscape as Heritage" in 2017, emphasizing the universality and inherent value of these landscapes as tangible and cultural resources (Scazzosi, 2017). As such, rural landscapes are increasingly recognized as a crucial component of human heritage and a prevalent form of continuous cultural landscape.

1.1 Rationale and Objective

Traditional villages embody a rich diversity of cultural heritage, encompassing tangible and intangible elements. However, globalization, modernization, and urbanization pose a growing threat to their existence. This study explores the philosophical underpinnings and cultural values associated with traditional villages, aiming to develop a framework for their effective inheritance and protection.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Area

Our study investigated cultural inheritance and protection in two traditional villages nestled within Anhui Province, China. The first village, Hongcun Village (Hongcun Wenzhuang), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is renowned for its meticulously preserved ancient architecture dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties. This village serves as a prime example of a place where traditional Hui culture and architectural styles continue to thrive. The second village, Xidi Village (Xidi Zhen), also has a UNESCO World Heritage status and captivates visitors with its well-preserved collection of ancient dwellings, ancestral halls, and pavilions, all reflecting the unique architectural heritage of the Hui merchants.

2.2 Case Study Analysis

Our case study analysis focused on two traditional villages within Anhui Province, China: Hongcun Village and Xidi Village. The study examined various aspects of cultural inheritance and protection in these villages. This

included exploring the well-preserved architectural styles reflecting the legacy of the Hui people, the traditional cultural practices that continue to be observed by the villagers, and the existing efforts undertaken to safeguard this heritage. A particular focus was placed on understanding the cultural values embedded in the villages, such as the sense of community fostered by the traditional architecture and the significance of ancestral halls in preserving family history.

2.3 Surveys

We administered a standardized survey designed to gauge villagers' attitudes and practices related to cultural heritage. The survey, conducted through an online platform with a user guide, was distributed to 56 participants – 28 from each village – after obtaining their informed consent via a detailed information sheet. The survey instrument consisted of 15 questions, employing a combination of multiple-choice options and Likert scale responses. These questions were based on topics such as villagers' sense of belonging to their village, their participation in traditional activities, and their views on the impact of modernization on their cultural heritage. With an average completion time of approximately 20 minutes, the survey yielded a high response rate, with 53 completed surveys returned out of the 56 distributed.

2.4 Interviews

We complemented the survey with semi-structured interviews, allowing for in-depth exploration of villagers' perspectives. These interviews, conducted in focus group settings with 10 participants each from both villages, utilized open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses. The discussions, lasting approximately 35 to 40 minutes each, centered on themes related to cultural heritage preservation, including challenges faced, the importance of traditional practices, and potential strategies for ensuring cultural continuity.

2.5 Data Analysis

Our data analysis employed a mixed methods approach. Quantitative data from the surveys was analysed using GraphPad Prism version 9.5.1, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$. Descriptive statistics were generated, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages. Qualitative data from the interviews underwent a rigorous coding and thematic analysis process to identify recurring themes and

patterns within the participants' responses.

3. RESULTS

In terms of demographics, the survey included 33 male participants (62.3%) and 20 female participants (37.7%). The educational background of the participants revealed a relatively balanced distribution, with 22 individuals (41.5%) holding a high school diploma or lower, and 31 participants (58.5%) possessing a college degree or higher qualification (see Figure 1).

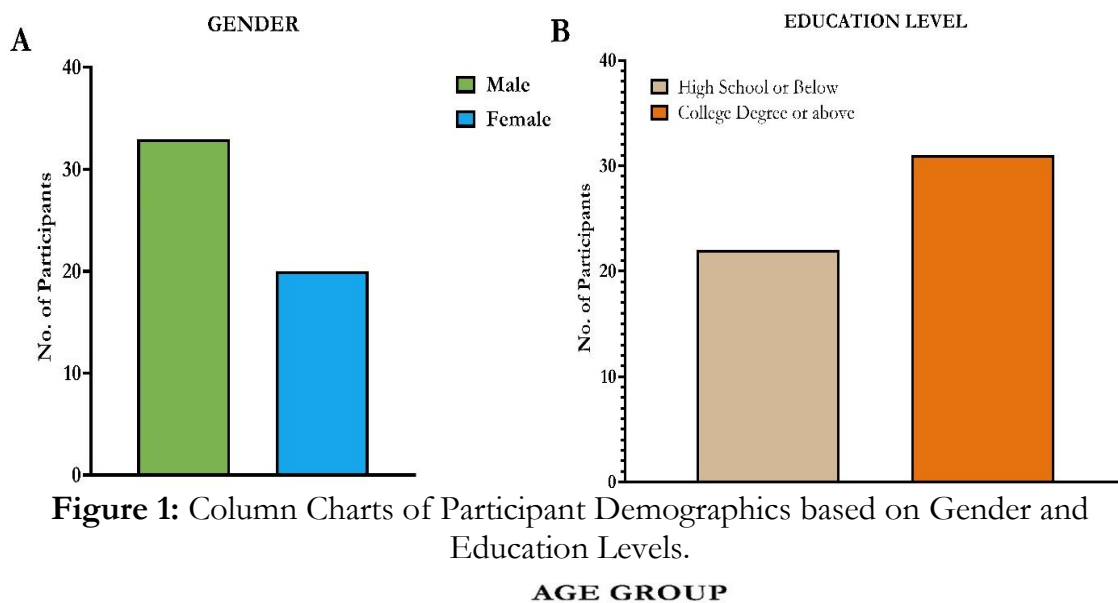


Figure 1: Column Charts of Participant Demographics based on Gender and Education Levels.

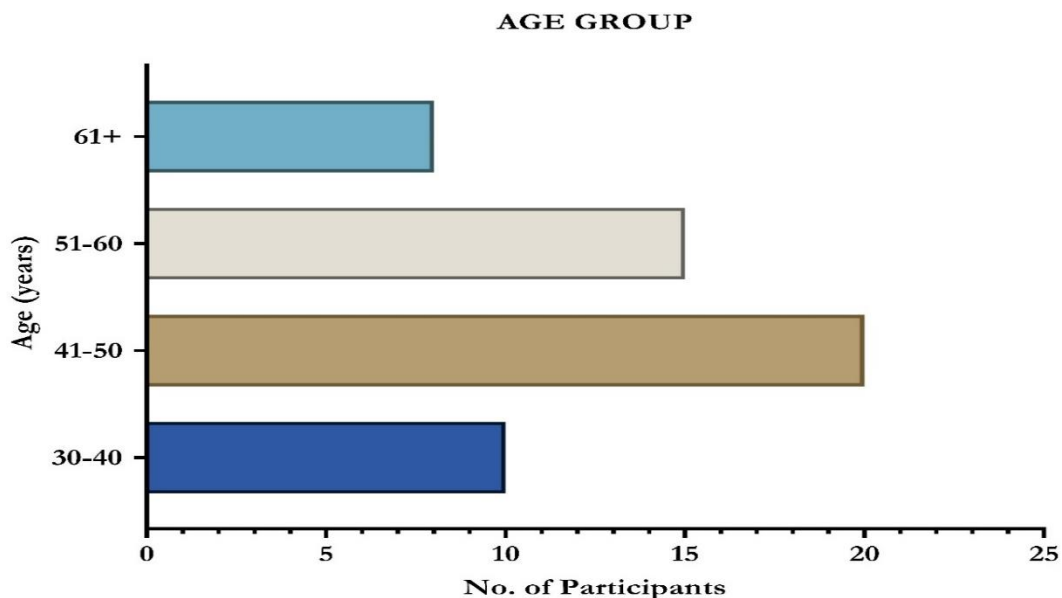


Figure 2: A Scatterplot showing the Distribution of Participants Based on Age.

In Figure 2, the survey participants were distributed across various age groups, with 18.9% falling within the 30–40-year-old range, 37.7% between

41 and 50 years old, 28.3% in the 51–60-year-old category, and the remaining 15.1% being 61 years old or above.

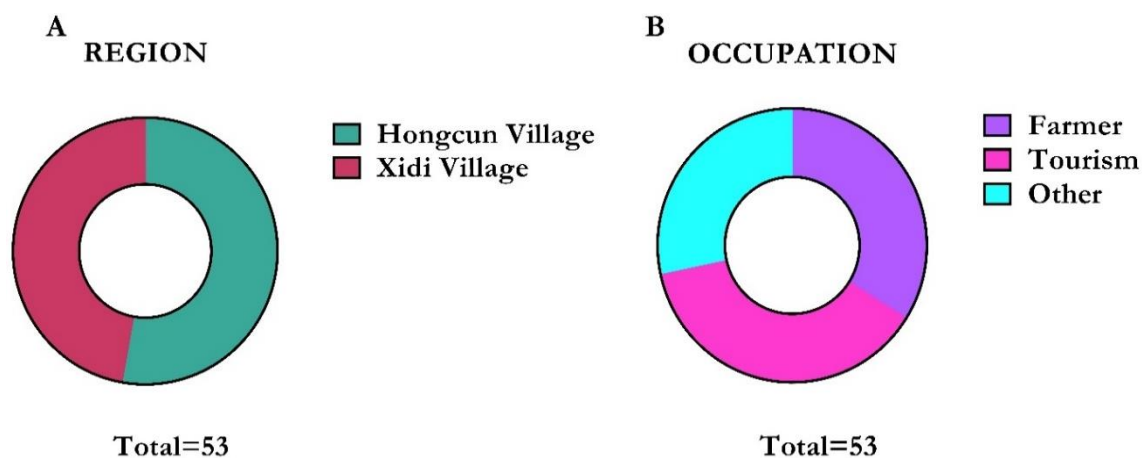


Figure 3: Pie Chart Distribution of Participant Demographics based on Region and Occupation.

In Figure 3, Nearly half (47.2%) of the survey participants hailed from Xidi Village, with the remaining 52.8% residing in Hongcun Village. Regarding occupations, the distribution showed a significant presence in the tourism industry (37.7%), followed by those working in agriculture (33.9%), with the remaining participants (28.4%) employed in various other sectors.

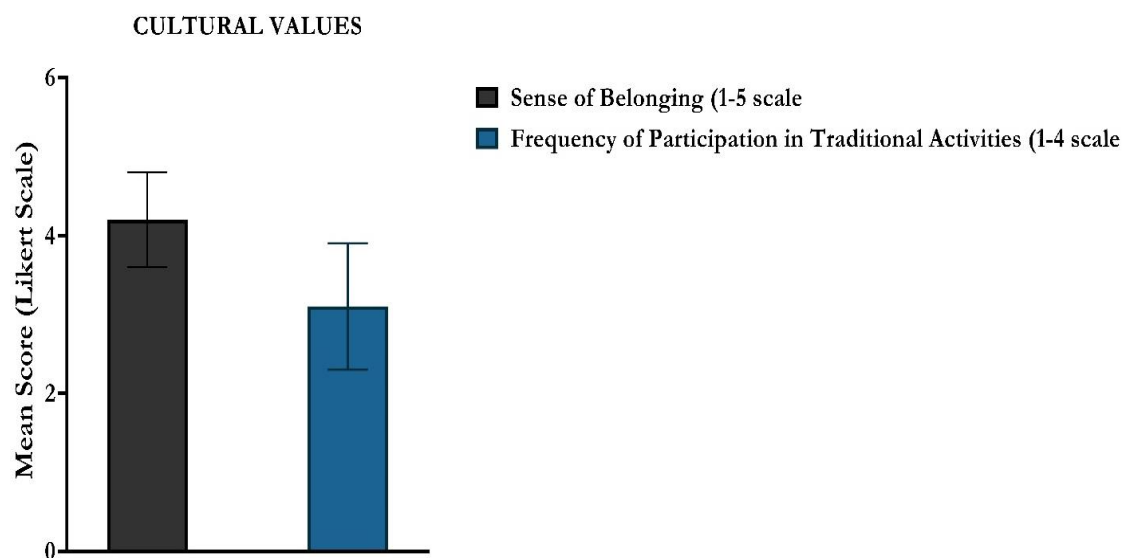


Figure 4: Descriptive Statistics of Sense of Belonging and Participation in Traditional Activities

In Figure 4, the survey results revealed a generally strong sense of belonging among villagers, with an average score of 4.2 on a 5-point scale (SD = 0.6, Min = 3, Max = 5). Similarly, participation in traditional activities occurred at least somewhat regularly, with a mean frequency of 3.1 on a 4-point scale (SD = 0.8, Min = 1, Max = 4).

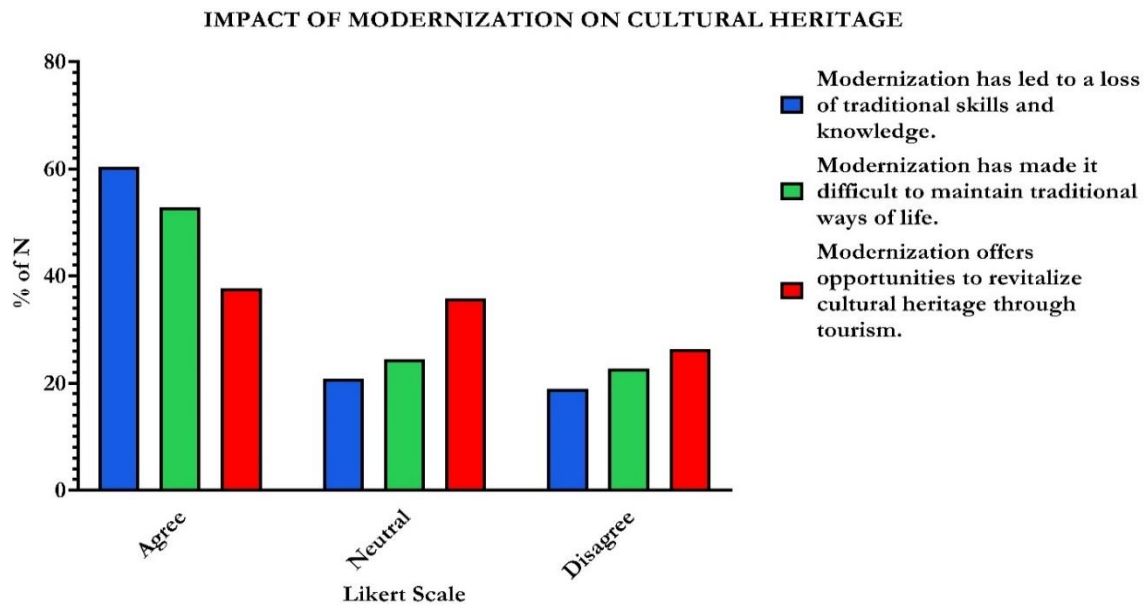


Figure 5: Perceptions of Modernization's Impact on Cultural Heritage

In Figure 5, perceptions regarding modernization's impact on cultural heritage were mixed. A majority of participants (60.4%) agreed that modernization has led to a loss of traditional skills and knowledge, with a similar proportion (52.8%) believing it has made it difficult to maintain traditional ways of life. However, a significant portion (37.7%) also saw potential for cultural revitalization through tourism brought about by modernization.

Table 1: Challenges Faced in Cultural Heritage Preservation

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Cultural Value/Philosophical Perspective
Loss of Traditional Skills and Knowledge	"There are fewer young people interested in learning the old ways of building houses. This knowledge is disappearing with the elders."	Value of Transmission: Traditional skills are seen as a vital part of cultural heritage, passed down through generations. (Connects to Confucian philosophy's emphasis on filial piety and respect for tradition)
Economic Pressures and Out-migration	"Many young people leave the village for work in the cities. This weakens the community spirit and makes it harder to maintain traditional practices."	Value of Community: A strong sense of community is seen as essential for preserving cultural heritage. (Connects to the philosophical concept of collectivism often found in Chinese culture)
Impact of Tourism	"Tourism brings income, but it can also lead to the commodification of traditions and a disconnect from their original meaning."	Value of Authenticity: Cultural practices are valued for their intrinsic meaning and connection to the past, not just as tourist attractions. (Connects to the philosophical concept of maintaining the integrity and purpose of traditions)

In Table 1, Interviews highlighted challenges like vanishing skills ("*There are fewer young people interested...*"), weakened community ("*Many young people leave...*"), and potential drawbacks of tourism ("*Tourism brings income...*"). These connect to values like knowledge transmission (Confucianism), community spirit (collectivism), and preserving cultural authenticity.

Table 2: Importance of Traditional Practices

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Cultural Value/Philosophical Perspective
Connection to Ancestors and History	"Celebrating traditional festivals keeps us connected to our ancestors and reminds us of where we come from."	Value of Ancestral Veneration: Traditional practices are seen as a way to honour ancestors and maintain a connection to the past. (Connects to Confucian philosophy's emphasis on filial piety and respect for one's heritage)
Sense of Identity and Place	"Our traditional clothing and architecture are unique to our village. They make us who we are and give us a sense of belonging."	Value of Cultural Identity: Traditional practices are seen as a source of cultural identity and a way to connect to a specific place. (Connects to the philosophical concept of cultural distinctiveness and the importance of preserving traditions that define a community)
Maintaining Harmony with Nature	"Our traditional farming methods are sustainable and respectful of the land. They are important for maintaining balance in our environment."	Value of Ecological Harmony: Traditional practices are seen as fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. (Connects to Daoist philosophy's emphasis on living in balance with the natural world)

In Table 2, Interviews revealed cultural values that underpin traditions. Celebrating festivals honours ancestors (filial piety), while unique village practices like clothing and architecture create a sense of identity and belonging. Traditional farming methods, viewed as respectful to nature, connect to Daoist philosophy's emphasis on ecological harmony.

Table 3(a): Strategies for Ensuring Cultural Continuity

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Cultural Value/Philosophical Perspective
Education and Transmission Programs	"We need programs to teach younger generations traditional skills and the importance of our heritage."	Value of Intergenerational Transmission: Cultural knowledge and practices are best preserved through active transmission from elders to youth. (Connects to Confucian philosophy's emphasis on education and respect for elders)

Table 3(b): Strategies for Ensuring Cultural Continuity

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Cultural Value/Philosophical Perspective
Community-Based Initiatives	"The village council should involve the community in decision-making about tourism and cultural preservation."	Value of Community Participation: Cultural preservation is most effective when the community feels involved and invested in the process. (Connects to the philosophical concept of collective responsibility for maintaining traditions)
Sustainable Tourism Development	"Tourism can be a force for good if it's managed responsibly and respects our culture."	Value of Sustainable Practices: Cultural heritage preservation should be balanced with economic development, ensuring the long-term viability of both. (Connects to the philosophical concept of finding a harmonious balance between different needs)

In Table 3, Interviews proposed solutions like educational programs to transmit traditions (*"We need programs..."*), involving the community in decision-making (*"The village council..."*), and sustainable tourism development (*"Tourism can be a force..."*). These connect to values of intergenerational knowledge transfer (Confucianism), community participation, and achieving a balance between cultural preservation and economic benefits.

Table 4: (a) Cultural Inheritance and Protection in Hongcun and Xidi Villages (Case Study Analysis)

Aspect	Description	Cultural Value/Philosophical Perspective
Architectural Heritage	Both villages boast well-preserved Ming and Qing dynasty architecture showcasing the unique style of the Hui people.	Value of Historical Continuity: The architecture serves as a tangible link to the past and a reminder of the Hui legacy. (Connects to the philosophical concept of respecting history and tradition)
Traditional Practices	Villagers continue to observe traditional festivals, crafts, and agricultural methods.	Value of Transmission and Continuity: These practices represent a living tradition passed down through generations. (Connects to Confucian philosophy's emphasis on filial piety and the importance of preserving cultural heritage)
Sense of Community	The traditional layout of the villages, with shared courtyards and communal spaces, fosters a strong sense of community.	Value of Collectivism: Community spirit is seen as essential for maintaining traditions and cultural identity. (Connects to the philosophical concept of collectivism often found in Chinese culture)

Table 4: (b) Cultural Inheritance and Protection in Hongcun and Xidi Villages (Case Study Analysis)

Aspect	Description	Cultural Value/Philosophical Perspective
Ancestral Halls	The presence of ancestral halls signifies the importance of honouring ancestors and preserving family history.	Value of Ancestral Veneration: Ancestral halls represent the connection to past generations and the importance of filial piety. (Connects to Confucian philosophy's emphasis on respecting and honouring one's ancestors)
Existing Preservation Efforts	UNESCO World Heritage status brings recognition and resources for protecting the villages.	Value of International Collaboration: Global recognition highlights the importance of cultural heritage and fosters international cooperation for its preservation. (Connects to the concept of shared responsibility for preserving cultural heritage)

In Table 4, examining Hongcun and Xidi villages reveals well-preserved architectural heritage, reflecting the Hui people's legacy (historical continuity). Traditional practices like festivals and crafts showcase cultural transmission (Confucian values). The villages' layout fosters a strong sense of community (collectivism), while ancestral halls highlight the importance of honouring ancestors (filial piety). UNESCO recognition signifies the global importance of cultural heritage and international collaboration in its preservation.

4. DISCUSSION

Our research investigated cultural inheritance and protection in two traditional villages, Hongcun and Xidi, within Anhui Province, China. The case study analysis revealed well-preserved architectural styles reflecting the Hui legacy, alongside ongoing practices like festivals and crafts. These elements, along with the villages' layout fostering a strong sense of community, all point to the cultural values embedded within these villages. Ancestral halls further emphasized the importance of honouring ancestors and preserving family history. Contemporary discussions surrounding traditional villages highlight the critical need for sustainable utilization of their heritage. Striking a balance between protection and development to ensure their long-term viability presents a significant societal challenge. Researchers and policymakers alike recognize the importance of establishing a robust system for sustainable development within these

communities (Chang & Chou, 2011). The concept of sustainability encompasses economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dimensions, demanding a balance between ecological sensitivity, economic viability, and social equity (Dumreicher, 2008). As exemplified by the Pritzker Prize jury's remarks on awarding the honour to Chinese architect Wang Shu, navigating the relationship between tradition and modernity remains a pressing issue. China's current urbanization process has ignited a debate on whether architecture should draw upon its heritage or solely focus on the future.

Previous approaches to traditional village protection have been critiqued for their static focus, often emphasizing preservation through the creation of "museum villages" (Heng et al., 2022). While safeguarding the physical structures is important, such an approach risks neglecting the vibrancy of living communities. Recognizing this limitation, there is a growing emphasis on exploring strategies that promote the sustainable development of traditional villages, ensuring their survival and continued relevance in a changing world. This shift acknowledges that effective preservation must be integrated with the needs and aspirations of village residents, ensuring not just the physical survival of these communities but their ongoing cultural and economic vitality. The inclusion of Xidi Village, Hongcun Village, Kaiping Diaolou Village, and Fujian Tulou Village on the World Cultural Heritage List underscores the international recognition of traditional Chinese village heritage for its contribution to social and historical development. Guangxi, an ethnic minority region bordering China's coastline, exemplifies this significance. Home to twelve ethnic groups with a population exceeding 20 million, Guangxi boasts numerous traditional villages with distinct characteristics and long histories. These villages, distributed across diverse landscapes including mountains, hills, plains, and coastal areas, showcase a rich tapestry of architectural styles exceeding ten distinct forms (Chen et al., 2021; Perc, 2022).

Our survey findings proposed that participants reported a strong sense of belonging to their village and a moderate level of participation in traditional activities. However, a majority also expressed concerns about the loss of traditional skills and the challenges posed by modernization to maintaining traditional ways of life. The study of traditional Chinese villages has undergone a significant development, with protection and utilization emerging as central themes. Previous studies have focused on various aspects, including village depopulation, regional preservation strategies, local cultural significance, revitalization mechanisms, spatial distribution, value recognition, and development implications.

Additionally, significant progress has been made in tourism planning and development within traditional villages. For instance, research by Pang J. explores the impact of evolving public spaces in Guangxi's Zhuang villages on local memory, proposing principles and pathways for village reconstruction (Nicholas et al., 2009). While extensive theoretical research has been conducted on traditional village protection, challenges remain, necessitating further investigation. Early studies primarily focused on the material and intangible cultural aspects of these villages. However, following practical experiences and subsequent setbacks, research trends have shifted towards human-centered approaches that examine the relationship between people and the countryside. This shift has led to a focus on issues like village settlements, governance models, heritage revitalization, resource evaluation, and value recognition. Contemporary research delves into theoretical and policy analysis within the context of new urbanization initiatives, rural revitalization strategies, and urban-rural community development. Consequently, the current research focus has shifted to the sustainable protection and development of traditional villages (Veliz-Cuba et al., 2022).

Traditional village planning reflects a deep respect for the natural environment. The selection of residential sites exemplifies this principle. Villages are often nestled within sheltered coves, leveraging the protection offered by mountains. This layout, following the concept of "one bay, one village," optimizes land use and fosters a sense of community. Rooted in the traditional value of "harmony between man and nature," Chinese architecture prioritizes integration with the surrounding landscape (Chen, 2023). This philosophy is evident in the emphasis on "back mountain fields" during site selection, ensuring the preservation of agricultural land and promoting a symbiotic relationship between the built environment and the natural world. By prioritizing the protection of fertile land, villages guarantee their long-term food security and well-being.

Traditional village dwellings exhibit a diverse range of architectural styles, often influenced by local environmental conditions and resource availability. In Wuhe Village, for instance, one-story houses with single-eaved suspended mountain roofs and wooden beam construction are prevalent. These residences typically adopt layouts like the simple "one-shaped" form, the L-shaped plan, or the triple house courtyard (Peifang et al., 2011; Xing, 2022). The basic floor plan usually consists of a central hall, bedrooms, a kitchen, and a livestock enclosure. Open courtyards with earthen embankments in front of the buildings foster a sense of community and good neighbourliness. As a significant cultural expression, vernacular

architecture offers valuable insights into the lives of past inhabitants (Liao, 2020). The Masthead Zhang Residence, a well-preserved example, exemplifies the traditional architectural style of the Qing Dynasty in Sichuan. Declared a provincial-level cultural relic in 2007, this impressive wooden structure boasts six main doors running through a three-story courtyard (Liao, 2020). Design elements like the deep eaves' porch provided thermal insulation by minimizing direct sunlight and maximizing shade, while also promoting natural ventilation through strategically positioned openings. The Zhang Residence's layout, with its central axis and symmetrical organization, reflects a clear and flexible approach to space planning. This well-preserved residence embodies the harmonious integration of traditional architectural principles with the surrounding natural environment.

Folk culture serves as a cornerstone of collective memory and a bridge connecting us to the past (Wydra, 2018). Wuhe Village exemplifies this rich cultural heritage, particularly through its strong tradition of ancestor worship. This practice, observed for over a century, unites the village, primarily composed of the Zhang ethnic group. Each year on the second day of the Lunar New Year, villagers, including those residing elsewhere, gather at the Zhang ancestral dwellings. Ceremonies include singing songs of worship, offering sacrifices to ancestors, and honouring elders within the community. Additionally, educational achievements among younger generations are celebrated. Following the ceremonies, festivities erupt with music, dragon dances, and expressions of gratitude for a bountiful harvest and hope for continued prosperity. The Xiaojie Square further reflects the village's emphasis on filial piety. Built in honour of Jiang Shi, wife of the county magistrate Taijie Zhang, the square commemorates her exemplary devotion to her parents and children, embodying the Confucian ideal of filial piety as the foundation of all virtues.

Interviews with villagers (10 participants per village) provided deeper insights. Themes emerged around the value of transmitting traditional knowledge to younger generations, the importance of community involvement in cultural preservation efforts, and the potential for sustainable tourism development to support cultural heritage. These strategies all connect to the philosophical concepts identified in the case study, such as Confucianism's emphasis on filial piety and respect for tradition, and the collectivist values often found in Chinese culture. Previous studies have employed various methodologies to analyse traditional Chinese villages. Bian et al. utilized geographic information systems, spatial analysis, and mathematical statistics to investigate the

spatial distribution patterns and influencing factors (Bian et al., 2022). This research revealed an uneven distribution across China, characterized by agglomeration patterns, highlighting the complex and diverse nature of these villages. Building on the concept of rural value, Song et al. explored innovative practices for the inheritance and protection of different village types (Song et al., 2021). Their work proposes an integrated, shared, and co-constructive mechanism to facilitate the dynamic inheritance of traditional village value and contribute to rural revitalization efforts.

The multifaceted value of traditional Chinese villages lies in their rich cultural heritage, encompassing diverse dimensions. Scientifically, these villages offer insights into sustainable development practices, reflecting the harmonious integration of human settlements with the natural environment (Di Zhang & Li, 2023; Ren & Xu, 2024). Architecturally, they embody the legacy of local building traditions, serving as historical and cultural repositories through their unique structures and monuments. Artistically, the essence of traditional life is expressed in the villages' construction methods, customs, and overall aesthetic, often characterized by a sense of unpretentious beauty. Socially, these villages functioned as cohesive communities, fostering a strong sense of belonging and shared identity. Public spaces within the villages facilitated communication and interaction among residents. Historically, they represent a tangible record of the past, preserving the unique cultural and social fabric of a particular era. Finally, the spiritual value of traditional villages is multifaceted. Residents often feel a deep sense of attachment and longing for their home villages, while tourists seek a connection to the past and a unique emotional experience. In essence, the value of traditional villages transcends mere aesthetics, encompassing historical significance, economic potential, and the intangible aspects of human connection and artistic expression.

Preserving the historical and cultural features of traditional villages necessitates a comprehensive approach. This includes safeguarding the overall spatial layout and environment, emphasizing the protection of historically significant elements. Protected areas within traditional villages should encompass the entire physical landscape, including streets, courtyards, buildings, landscaping, and other elements. Additionally, intangible aspects of the cultural environment should also be considered. A hierarchical protection system proves beneficial, dividing the protected area into distinct zones. The core zone prioritizes preservation and restoration, while the buffer zone allows for controlled transformation and renewal. Finally, the peripheral zone accommodates development and construction, ensuring environmental compatibility. Recognizing that

traditional villages have evolved over time, resulting in a potential fragmentation of historical elements, an organic and dynamic approach to protection is crucial. This strategy balances static preservation with necessary adjustments and reconstruction within protected areas. Encouraging public participation and raising awareness of heritage protection are further vital components of this comprehensive strategy.

Preserving the integrity of a characteristic village's cultural ecology necessitates safeguarding both its tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These elements represent the unique cultural character of the village and reflect its distinct "ecological civilization". While establishing an ecological museum can be a valuable tool for comprehensive protection, a one-size-fits-all approach of replicating urban museums or solely focusing on data centres is inappropriate. Effective strategies must involve the active participation of local residents, going beyond the involvement of experts and scholars alone. Similarly, rural tourism development should prioritize cultural preservation over purely economic gains. Vulgar entertainment that disrupts traditional customs should be avoided in favour of activities that harmonize with the local folklore and ecological environment. Therefore, the development of an ecological museum for a characteristic village must be firmly rooted in the specific cultural and ecological context of the village itself. This approach aligns with the principles of ecological systems thinking, emphasizing the interconnectedness of tangible and intangible cultural elements. By prioritizing the integrity of the village's cultural ecosystem and fostering local resident participation, such a museum can effectively contribute to the preservation of this unique heritage.

5. CONCLUSION

Our exploration of cultural inheritance in Anhui Province villages revealed strong cultural preservation efforts, with well-maintained architecture, continued traditional practices, and a deep sense of community. However, concerns regarding modernization's impact and the need for knowledge transmission highlight the complexities of safeguarding cultural heritage. While this study provides valuable insights, limitations include the focus on two villages and the reliance on self-reported survey data. Future research could benefit from a broader sample size, incorporating objective measures of cultural practices and exploring the experiences of younger generations to gain a more comprehensive

understanding of cultural continuity in these villages. The findings emphasize the need for strategies that promote intergenerational transmission of knowledge, involve the community in decision-making, and achieve a balance between cultural preservation and economic development through sustainable tourism practices.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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