

Research on Integrated Conservation of Island Settlement Cultural Heritage in China: A Case Comparison from the Perspective of "People - Dwelling - Environment"

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Abstract

Island settlement cultural heritage is a regional human settlement system formed through long-term interaction among the marine environment, traditional livelihoods, and local society. Its value lies not only in traditional buildings themselves, but also in the integrated relationships formed among settlement space, production and lifestyle, local culture, and the natural environment. In response to issues such as population outflow, livelihood transformation, and the decline of settlement space, this paper selects Yim Tin Tsai Village in Hong Kong, China, and Dongmen Fishing Village in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, as cases. Using literature analysis and case comparison methods, it compares cultural heritage conservation practices in the two places from the perspective of "People - Dwelling - Environment," and analyzes them in terms of participating subjects, spatial conservation, livelihood relations, and cultural transmission. The study shows that Yim Tin Tsai takes community participation as an important driving force and sustains its local cultural landscape through the coordinated conservation of traditional buildings, salt fields, and cultural spaces; Dongmen Fishing Village, based on the repair and renovation of traditional dwellings, combines fishing culture transmission to maintain the connections among dwellings, fishing ports, and local culture. Accordingly, this paper summarizes the integrated conservation pathways of value identification, cultural translation, spatial maintenance, and community co-governance, providing references for the conservation of island settlement heritage and the inheritance of traditional dwelling wisdom.

Keywords: Island settlement cultural heritage; Integrated conservation; People - Dwelling - Environment; Community co-governance; Wisdom of traditional dwellings

1 Introduction

Island settlement cultural heritage has distinct regional characteristics. Its traditional dwellings have long been interrelated with settlement space, the natural environment, traditional livelihoods, and local culture. In recent years, due to factors such as population outflow, industrial transformation, and the decline of traditional functions, some island settlements have faced idle traditional buildings, declining vitality of settlement space, and weakening links between production and daily life. Preserving architectural entities alone can no longer maintain their integrated value. Related research has gradually expanded from conserving individual buildings to conserving settlements as a whole and cultural landscapes, emphasizing relationships among buildings, the environment, residents' lives, and local culture. Zhang Song^{错误:不能识别的开关参数。} emphasizes that traditional villages should be protected as integrated human settlement forms encompassing buildings, the environment, and residents' lives; Kou Huaiyun and Yu Wenbin^{错误:不能识别的开关参数。} propose ideas for regional conservation of rural heritage from a cultural-landscape perspective.

However, existing conservation practices for island settlement cultural heritage still focus more on repairing and preserving building entities, and there remains room for further research on integrated attention to the relationships among buildings and settlement space, traditional livelihoods, the natural environment, and community life. When traditional production modes and resident structures change, even if building entities are preserved, their original spatial relationships and cultural connotations may gradually weaken. Therefore, conserving island settlement cultural heritage should shift from individual buildings to the settlement as a whole, focus on relationships among different heritage elements, and maintain connections with the environment, livelihoods, and local society while protecting the historical characteristics of traditional buildings.

On this basis, this paper selects Yim Tin Tsai Village in Hong Kong and Dongmen Fishing Village in Ningbo as cases. Both possess island settlement characteristics and retain traditional dwellings and spatial elements related to production, belief, and the natural environment. Still, they differ in heritage composition, participating subjects, and conservation practices, making them suitable for comparison. This paper adopts literature analysis and case comparison. From the perspective of "People - Dwelling - Environment," and focusing on participating subjects, spatial conservation, livelihood relations, and cultural transmission, it compares the conservation practices of the two places. It focuses on answering: what interrelated elements constitute island settlement cultural heritage and how is its integrated value manifested; and, under livelihood transformation and functional change, how different practices coordinate the relationships among buildings, space, environment, livelihoods, and community life. Accordingly, it summarizes pathways for integrated conservation, providing references for conserving island settlement heritage and inheriting traditional dwelling wisdom.

2 Theoretical Perspective and Analytical Framework for Adaptive Regeneration

A. The Perspective of Integrated Cultural Heritage Conservation

Integrated conservation of landscape heritage emphasizes that settlement heritage is not composed of isolated building entities, but is a dynamic system formed through long-term interaction among the natural environment, settlement space, modes of production, and social culture. Therefore, beyond focusing on the form, materials, and construction of traditional buildings, heritage conservation should also emphasize the relationships among buildings, settlement space, the natural environment, production and daily life, and local culture. For island settlements, traditional dwellings and settlement space are closely related to the marine environment, traditional livelihoods, and local society. Protecting building entities alone cannot fully sustain their heritage value.

With population mobility, industrial transformation, and changes in traditional functions, some original production - life relationships have gradually weakened, and the use of traditional buildings, the continuity of settlement space, and local cultural transmission have also been affected. Therefore, this paper understands island settlement cultural heritage as an integrated whole composed of elements such as "architecture - settlement - environment - livelihood - social culture" and their interrelationships, and extends the conservation focus from individual buildings to the continuation of related heritage elements and their relationships.

B. The "People - Dwelling - Environment" Perspective and Analytical Dimensions

From the perspective of integrated conservation, the different elements of island settlement cultural heritage and their relationships can be further summarized into three interrelated dimensions: "People - Dwelling - Environment." "People" mainly refers to residents, community organizations, and related participating subjects, reflecting subject relationships in heritage conservation; "Dwelling" mainly refers to traditional dwellings, streets and lanes, and public spaces, reflecting settlement architecture and spatial form; "Environment" mainly refers to the island's natural environment, traditional livelihoods, and related cultural spaces, reflecting the connections between the settlement and the environment and livelihoods. The three interact through long-term production and life practices, jointly constituting the basic relational structure of island settlement cultural heritage.

The wisdom of traditional dwellings is formed and continued precisely within this relational structure. Its value is reflected not only in material aspects such as architectural form, materials, and construction, but also in traditional dwellings' adaptation to the natural environment, the organization of production and living functions, and the connections formed with local livelihoods. Therefore, this paper takes "People - Dwelling - Environment" as the basic analytical perspective and further compares the cases from four dimensions: participating subjects, spatial conservation, livelihood relations, and cultural transmission. These four dimensions are used together to examine conservation practices related to elements of island settlement cultural heritage and their interrelationships.

3 Conservation Practices of Island Settlement Cultural Heritage in China

Both cases have experienced population decline, industrial transformation, or the decline of traditional functions. However, differences in settlement spatial foundations, heritage composition, and participating subjects have led to different conservation practices in traditional building conservation, production landscape maintenance, cultural transmission, and community participation. This paper analyzes these practices through the lenses of heritage composition and conservation background; conservation subjects and implementation methods; maintenance of spatial and livelihood relations; and cultural transmission and contemporary utilization, to compare integrated cultural heritage conservation in the two island settlements.

A. Yim Tin Tsai Village, Hong Kong, China: Integrated Cultural Landscape Conservation Driven by Community Participation

Yim Tin Tsai Village is located in the inner sea of Sai Kung, Hong Kong. The traditional village is laid out according to the mountainous terrain. Traditional dwellings, salt fields, St. Joseph’ s Chapel, Ching Po School, and the pier together constitute a settlement space for residence, production, belief, and external connections, as shown in Figure 1. Among them, the salt fields are not only traditional production facilities but also important heritage elements linking the coastal environment, local livelihoods, and historical culture. Therefore, the conservation object of Yim Tin Tsai is not limited to the building fabric, but also includes the relationships among the village settlement, production landscapes, cultural spaces, and the marine environment. With industrial development, the decline of the traditional salt-making industry, and residents' out-migration, some village houses, schools, and production spaces gradually lost their original functions, and the links between life and production weakened. In response, Yim Tin Tsai's conservation practice expanded beyond repairing individual buildings to include village space, salt fields, and related cultural spaces within the conservation scope.

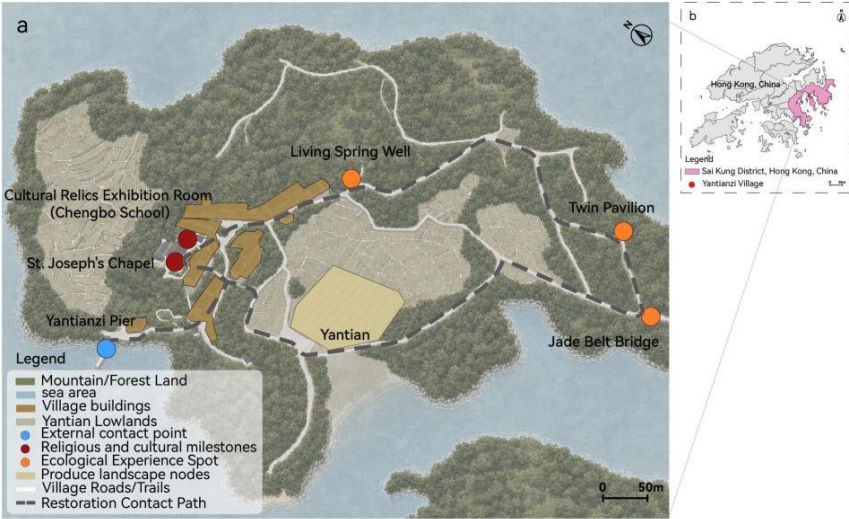


Fig. 1 Relationship between the spatial structure of the Yim Tin Tsai cultural landscape and restoration nodes (Source: drawn by the authors)

In terms of conservation subjects and implementation methods, Yim Tin Tsai identifies Chen clan descendants and related community organizations as

key participants. In 2012, Chen clan descendants launched the Salt Field Restoration Project and organized conservation work through the Salt and Light Conservation Center, with professionals and locals working together^{错误,不能识别的开关参数}. Through field investigation, traditional materials, and local crafts, the project restored the salt field space, making traditional salt-making knowledge and related local skills part of the conservation content^{错误,不能识别的开关参数}, as shown in Figure 2. Thus, conservation actions targeted not only the physical space itself but also the local knowledge and production culture related to the salt fields.



Fig. 2 Before-and-after comparison of salt field restoration in Yim Tin Tsai¹

In terms of maintaining spatial and livelihood relations, Yim Tin Tsai maintains spatial elements such as the traditional village, St. Joseph's Chapel, Ching Po School, and salt fields as interrelated cultural spaces^{错误,不能识别的开关参数}. The chapel preserves religious memory, the school serves cultural display functions, and the salt fields provide production-landscape display, ecological education, and cultural experience, re-establishing connections among the original residential, religious, educational, and production spaces. The salt field restoration is not intended to restore commercial salt-making from the historical period, but rather, through the display and education of traditional salt-making processes, to enable traditional landscapes that have withdrawn from the daily production system to continue playing a cultural role.

In terms of cultural transmission and community participation, Yim Tin Tsai shares traditional salt-making knowledge and local history through activities such as ecological tours and cultural exhibitions, enabling the original production landscape and cultural spaces to be used continuously. The conservation subjects also expanded from a single implementer of building repair to clan descendants, community organizations, professionals, and public participants, forming a practice that combines conservation, display, and operation. As a result, Yim Tin Tsai's conservation practice extends to related heritage elements such as production landscapes, local knowledge, community memory, and the marine environment, and pays attention to the continuation of their interrelationships. In 2015, the Salt Field Restoration Project received the Award of Excellence in the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.

B. Dongmen Fishing Village, Zhejiang Province, China: Integrated

¹ Sources: (a) and (b) from UNESCO Bangkok. (2020). Asia Conserved: Lessons Learned from the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation (2015 – 2019) (p. 57). UNESCO Bangkok Office; (c) from Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark. (n.d.). Yim Tin Tsai. <https://www.geopark.gov.hk/tc/discover/attractions/yim-tin-tsai>.

Dongmen Fishing Village is located on Dongmen Island, Shipu Town, Xiangshan County, Zhejiang Province. It is a traditional island settlement based on marine fishery. The village extends along the mountains and faces the sea, forming an interlocking spatial pattern of "mountain - village - sea - port". Traditional dwellings are distributed along slopes, streets, and lanes. The fishing port and pier serve production and external-connection functions. Belief sites such as Tianhou Temple are embedded in daily life, forming a human settlement system in which dwellings, fishing production, and marine beliefs are interrelated, as shown in Figure 3. Traditional dwellings mostly use wooden structures, stone-wall foundations, and gray-tile pitched roofs, and are laid out according to slope and terrain to adapt to the island topography. As traditional fishery production modes and village functions change, some traditional buildings face problems such as idleness and insufficient maintenance. In response, Dongmen Fishing Village, based on the repair of traditional buildings and the maintenance of the historical environment, has in recent years continued to promote the conservation of ancient buildings and the construction of intangible cultural heritage display spaces, gradually extending the conservation scope from building entities to related historical environments and cultural elements.

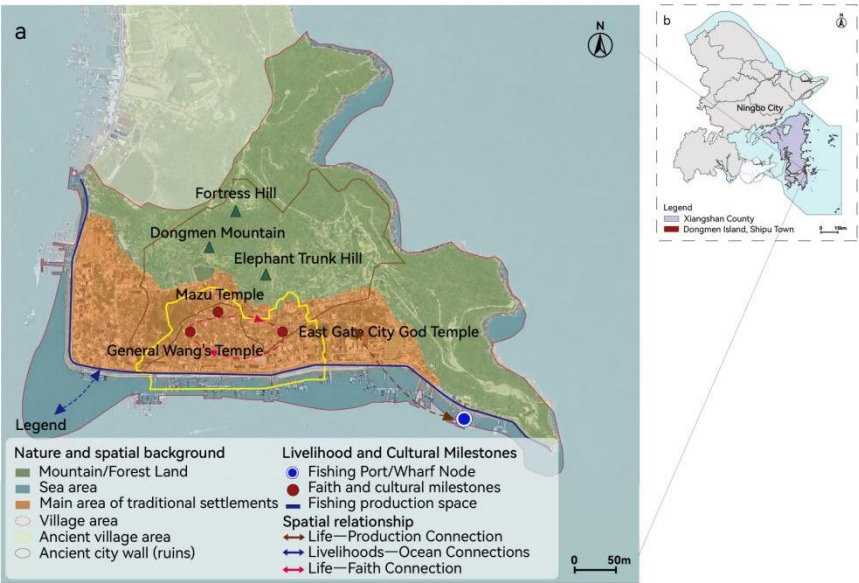


Fig. 3 Spatial background and livelihood relationship diagram of "mountain - village - sea - port" in Dongmen Fishing Village (Source: drawn by the authors)

In terms of conservation implementation, Dongmen Fishing Village involves the local government, the village collective, and related cultural conservation forces as the main participants, and advances conservation through methods such as ancient building repair, historical environment improvement, and cultural display. In recent years, ancient buildings such as the City God Temple, Tianhou Temple, and Temple of General Wang have been repaired in the village, and the Dongmen Intangible Cultural Heritage Transmission Institute has been built relying on the Former Residence of the

Ren Family, to display fishery history, intangible cultural heritage skills, and traditional customs 错误,不能识别的开关参数. Related practices show that traditional buildings are not preserved as isolated historical remains, but are combined with village cultural display and public use.

In terms of livelihood relations and cultural transmission, Dongmen Fishing Village, through the construction of the Marine Fishing Culture Ecological Protection Area, incorporates local knowledge, belief customs, and fishery-based lifestyles into its cultural transmission system. Through methods such as intangible cultural heritage transmission, fishing culture display, and study-tour experiences, traditional cultures such as Kaiyang and Xieyang ceremonies and fishermen’s work songs have gained contemporary channels of dissemination; at the same time, the fishing port, traditional dwellings, historical buildings, and public cultural spaces still jointly constitute the fishing village cultural landscape. Thus, Dongmen Fishing Village’s conservation practice is grounded in traditional building conservation and extends to the historical environment, fishing culture, and local lifestyles. Through building repair, spatial maintenance, and cultural transmission, it maintains relationships among the elements of the traditional settlement, reflecting the expansion of island settlement cultural heritage conservation from building-entity conservation to integrated relationship maintenance.

4 Case Comparison and Pathways for Integrated Conservation of Island Settlement Cultural Heritage

Both cases face traditional livelihood transformation and changes in settlement functions, but differ in heritage composition, conservation subjects, and implementation methods. Table 1 shows the specific comparison.

Table 1. Comparison of integrated cultural heritage conservation between Yim Tin Tsai, Hong Kong, and Dongmen Fishing Village, Zhejiang

Comparison Dimension	Yim Tin Tsai, Hong Kong	Dongmen Fishing Village, Zhejiang
Main problems	Out-migration of residents, interruption of traditional salt-making industry	Transformation of traditional fisheries, idleness of some traditional dwellings
Main participating subjects	Community organizations, original residents, and social forces	Villagers, local organizations, and related operating entities
Conservation focus	Traditional dwellings, salt fields, religious and public spaces	Traditional dwellings, fishing ports, streets and lanes, and fishing culture
Main conservation approaches	Building repair, salt-field restoration, cultural display	Building repair, environmental maintenance, cultural display
Relationship maintenance	Architecture – salt fields – community culture	Traditional dwellings – fishing port – livelihood culture
Integrated characteristics	Coordinated conservation of production landscape and community culture	Relationship-based conservation of traditional buildings, livelihoods, and settlement culture

From the case comparison, it is clear that although the two cases adopt different conservation methods, neither treats traditional buildings as isolated objects. From the perspective of "People - Dwelling - Environment," this paper further summarizes the integrated conservation of island settlement cultural heritage into four stages: value identification, cultural translation, spatial maintenance, and community co-governance.

A. Value Identification: Clarifying the Integrated Heritage Value of Island Settlements

Value identification first answers the question of "what to protect". The cases show that the value of island settlement cultural heritage lies not only in the form, materials, and construction methods of traditional dwellings, but also in the relationships among buildings and settlement space, traditional livelihoods, the natural environment, and local culture. Therefore, value identification should extend from individual buildings to the settlement as a whole, focusing on three types of relationships: first, the adaptive relationship between traditional dwellings and their construction wisdom and the island's natural environment; second, the relationship between spaces such as dwellings, streets and lanes, ports, and salt fields and traditional production and life; third, the relationship between buildings and settlement space and local beliefs, community memory, and cultural activities, providing a basis for subsequent conservation and utilization.

B. Cultural Translation: Sustaining the Contemporary Cultural Value of Traditional Heritage

Cultural translation addresses the question of "how traditional heritage can continue to enter contemporary life". Yim Tin Tsai sustains salt-making knowledge through salt field restoration and cultural displays; Dongmen Fishing Village sustains local culture through traditional buildings and displays of fishing culture. Therefore, cultural translation is not simply copying traditional forms, but extracting the core values of traditional buildings, livelihoods, and local culture, and forming contemporary expressions through display, education, public activities, and moderate functional utilization, while avoiding excessive commercialization that separates heritage from local life.

C. Spatial Maintenance: Maintaining the Integrated Spatial Relationships of "People - Dwelling - Environment"

Spatial maintenance addresses the question of "how different heritage elements can maintain their connections". The cases show that integrated conservation should not remain at the level of individual building repair, but should also maintain the spatial relationships among traditional dwellings, streets and lanes, ports, production spaces, public spaces, and the natural environment. Through traditional building repair, historical environment maintenance, and the protection of key spatial nodes, the settlement's original layout is preserved, allowing heritage elements to remain embedded in contemporary production and daily life.

D. Community Co-governance: Establishing a Sustainable Heritage Conservation Mechanism

Community co-governance addresses the question of "who participates and how to sustain conservation". The conservation practice of Yim Tin Tsai shows that the joint participation of original residents, community organizations, and external professional forces is an important condition for the sustainable conservation of traditional cultural landscapes. The conservation of Dongmen Fishing Village relies more on village organizations, local subjects, and cultural operation forces to promote the sustainable utilization of traditional buildings and fishing culture. Therefore, conserving island settlement cultural heritage should establish a multi-subject participation mechanism, clarify conservation responsibilities and participation methods, and continuously adjust conservation measures through sustainable use, cultural activities, and operational feedback, so that residents become key participants in heritage conservation and transmission.

In summary, the four stages respectively answer the continuous questions of "what to protect-how to continue us-how to restore the whole-how to operate sustainably," jointly constituting the basic pathway for integrated conservation of island settlement cultural heritage. Its core lies in maintaining the relationships among traditional buildings and space, livelihoods, the environment, and community culture, so that "People - Dwelling - Environment" maintain continuous connections in the settlement development process, as shown in Figure 4.

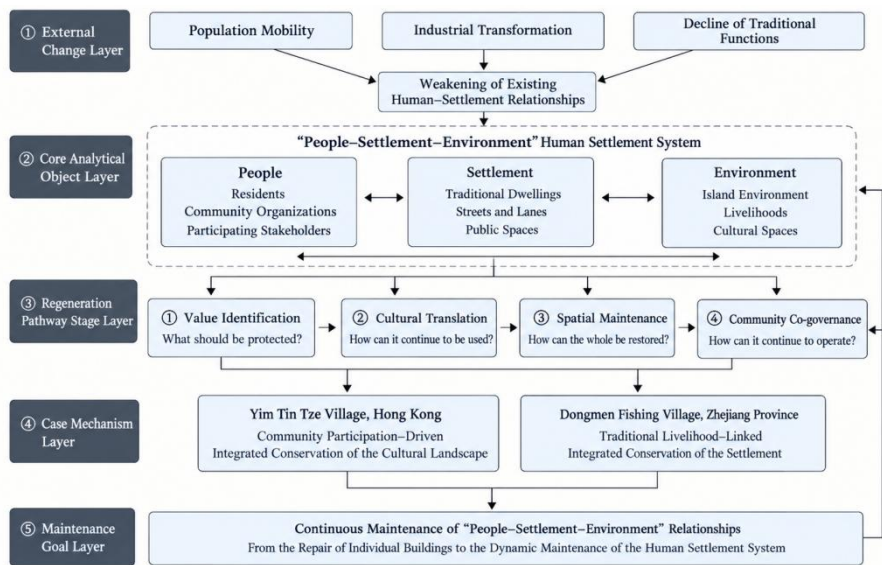


Fig. 4 Pathway diagram for integrated conservation of island settlement cultural heritage (Source: drawn by the authors)

5 Conclusion

Taking Yim Tin Tsai in Hong Kong and Dongmen Fishing Village in Zhejiang as cases, this paper explores the integrated conservation of island settlement cultural heritage against the background of socioeconomic change. The study finds that although the two settlements differ in heritage composition, conservation subjects, and implementation methods, both reflect the characteristic that the conservation object extends from traditional building

entities to related elements such as settlement space, traditional livelihoods, the natural environment, and local culture. From the "People - Dwelling - Environment" perspective, this paper further summarizes the integrated conservation of island settlement cultural heritage in four stages: value identification, cultural translation, spatial maintenance, and community co-governance. It emphasizes maintaining connections among traditional buildings, production and life, the natural environment, and community culture while protecting them, thereby promoting the continuation of traditional dwelling construction wisdom. The research can provide references for the integrated conservation of island settlement cultural heritage in China and the contemporary inheritance of traditional dwelling construction wisdom. Due to the limited number of cases and data acquisition constraints, this paper's analysis of conservation effectiveness and long-term operating mechanisms remains limited. Future research can combine continuous field investigations and quantitative evaluation to further verify the long-term effects and applicable conditions of different conservation pathways.

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