

A Relational Thought on the Rural Heritage Reservation in China

The Contingences in Traditional Villages, Taking Dawan Village as a Case Study

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Abstract: The debate on the social-spatial turn have influenced the understanding of space in a dominant way in the past decades (Lefebvre, 1991), thus the absolute conception of space as a container for objects and processes shifted towards inclusive and multifaceted knowledge (Löw, 2016). The relations between spaces and social processes have been recognized, and this shift requires a more complex and scientific methodology for analysis (Heley & Jones, 2012).

Urban morphology has been first considered as a methodology to address the urban design practices in order to reproduce organically the space, then it attempted to understand the built environment in an analogical way in social, historical and physical terms (Oliveira, 2019). Therefore, adopting the urban morphology and social relational theories to analyze the built environment as an assemblage is core to understand the spatiality in physical and social terms in continuous transition processes.

We try to include the above-mentioned notions in Chinese rural context because they performed the relationality due to their independence on geographical conditions, the intrinsic relation with the social forms, and the cultural and social practices occurred in everyday life (Zwerger 2006; Peng, 1992). In this paper, we analyze how the spatial policies have impacted on the urban form through Dawan village as a case study for its representativeness and generality, adopting the urban morphology approaches as an instrumental device to create the linkages between social form and space. Firstly, we trace its morphological formation and the traditional paradigm of the space making. Secondly, we look at the current dynamics in the spatial policies preservation and development from which the social and spatial inequality have been generated in a transitional society. By identifying the changed actors and relations in the new round of rural development, this paper proposes a holistic framework to understand relationally today's rural heritage in China.

1. Introduction

Alongside the social-spatial turn emerged after the 1980s, the relations between spaces and social processes have been recognized (Lefebvre, 1991; Löw, 2016; Heley & Jones, 2012). The relations between the physical space and the contributors of different dimensions that define the evolutionary processes of the space have become the core of the studies in different disciplines.

The studies regarding the rural context, however, has not been the centre of the debate due to its heterogeneous geographical and spatial materiality. The gradual shift towards the rural is an global trend to break the dichotomous division of various types of built environments, particularly in an era that requires the sustainable development in a holistic way.

The studies of understanding the spatiality in Chinese rural settlements were stimulated by scholars from the architecture and urban planning (Peng 1992; Luo 2008). In the debates about the relation between the built environment and the natural, social and political settings, arguments arose focalizing on the morphological characters of rural settlements from geographical and cultural perspectives (Xi *et al.*, 2015), the typologies of the vernacular architecture (Zhao *et al.*, 2013) and its relation with the social forms (Yu, 2015).

Urban morphology has been recognized as an instrumental device to frame preservation priorities (Whitehand & Gu, 2007). The notion about the urban landscape “spirit of the succession of societies that inhabits it” (Conzen, 1966; Whitehand & Gu, 2010) can be applied and testified in rural context, that meet merely the issues related to the rural decay which have been gradually emerged as a subject in the last decades.

In fact, the awareness to preserve the rural settlements have been emerged at the international level, particular attention has been paid to the preservation policies and the issues related to the spatial transformations in developing countries (Xi *et al.* 2015; Oakes 2013; 2016). However, the main scholar gap has been appeared in how to relate the current emergent spatial polices have influenced synchronically by the preservation and the valorization processes within local cultural conditions and social-political agenda.

2. Methodology

The research firstly adopts morphological analysis from historical and geographical perspective to investigate the urban evolution of the village in relation with the social forms occurred throughout history, that gives a convincing support to understand how the rural society has generated the space making paradigm in given geographical context.

Moreover, in analyzing the shifts of the paradigm of space making, and in accordance with the spatial polices led by the recurrent preservation and valorization approaches, the morphological analysis has been applied as an instrumental device in understanding the up-to-date dynamics and relations in producing the space in traditional villages, exploring the most recent cognition of the preservation of rural heritage and the tensions emerged during the rural revitalization.

3. Analysis

Dawan is a village inhabited by Miao people. It is located 49 km from the Municipality of Tongren and 8 km from the core township Panxin, which provided a relatively convenient mobility condition for the village. The overall landscape and the compacted urban form have been conserved. And thanks to its well-preserved traditional settlement and representativeness in rural heritage preservation, it has been subjected to various preservation and valorization policies. It is important to understand today's traditional rural settlement not only by the classic methodologies in understanding the built environment, but also by looking to the current dynamics and relations of the tensions, in which the traditional village is experiencing drastic changes.

3.1. A historical and geographical approach to understand the traditional paradigm of space making

The historical morphological analysis is assisted by official documents and local chronicles. In order to trace the formation of the village, a set of semi-structured interviews with local inhabitants were conducted. The first phase of settlement developed at the beginning of the dynasty Ming, when the ancestor Teng came from Hunan province and settled down in today's Dawan. The last phase of development was in the second half of the 1900 in conjunction with the modern construction of the new road and parking area in the 1980s.

As other traditional villages inhabited by ethnic minorities in Southwest China, the proliferation of the space in the village obeys patriarchal social forms and environmental settings, which are determined by the social-historical changes that can be read through an in-detailed morphological analysis (including the two-dimensional layout that comprises the street system, plot pattern and building block plans, building forms, and the pattern of land and building utilization). The presence of the courtyard plays an essential role that has impacted strongly the organic unity of the overall landscape of the village. Representing the rural settlements inhabited by Miao people, the village consists of a scattered settlement, arranged in an organic form following the contour of the irregular hilly ground inhabited by 113 residents. More than 80%¹ of the young people are working in cities in different regions as emigrant workers.

Each building has a courtyard facing to the South, which has defined the composition of an semi-opened space for the dwelling. The urban fabric is thus made up by the mosaic of plots of the individual properties. Each plot includes the dwelling, the courtyard and the related open areas, these three elements give the order and the unity to the urban landscape, so as to define the road network in the village (Figure 1).

3.2. A gaze upon the traditional paradigm of space making

The *ganlan* building has been the popular building typology in the village, as in the Southwest regions due to its adaptability to the local climate and geographical conditions (Zhao *et al.*, 2013; Guo, 2015; Luo, 2008). The basic module with "I" form is a standard space for the daily demands which composed of the main hall, that in case of Miao is usually used as main living room for collective activities, and the side rooms. In accordance with the increased number of family members and the demands for living spaces, additional stilted buildings are erected forming the shape of "U" and "L" shapes of the building complex that create a varied distribution of functions. There are two main building typologies present in the village: 1) the basic typology, consisting of a central "hall" and two lateral compartments 2) the many variations of the basic type caused by the addition of other rooms, either in a lateral position, in front of the courtyard, or through two additional stilted buildings attached or detached from the main body to form a "U" building. Moreover, all the constructions and the restorations are in charge of individual families with spontaneous projects (Figure 2).

This analysis helps us to investigate the traditional paradigm of space making in Chinese rural context, which is essentially based on the needs of individual families in the agricultural society. The increase of family member and the consequential separation of the families have been the main motivation that stimulated the construction of the dwellings. Afterwards, the

1. The data is obtained according to the interview with Teng family, which was conducted during the field survey in September, 2018.



Figure 1. *Basic spatial morphological unit of Dawan.* Source: elaborated by the author based on the data obtained during the field survey in September 2018.



Figure 2. *Sequences of space making processes in Dawan.* Source: elaborated by the author based on the data obtained during the field survey in September 2018.

modern life style and the increased needs for a more specialized space distribution have been collaged into the existing building typologies, that resulted in a series of modularized but temporal constructions with the incongruous feature.

3.3. Understanding the up-to-date spatial policies in traditional villages

It is important to study the rural heritage preservation as social processes, rather than a simplified and outdated reading from physical and spatial perspectives. The Chinese countryside has been experiencing a shift from the productivist to the post-productivist period since 1980. Consequently, the spatial policies in the rural context have been nourished by the Chinese urban planning realm, which has been strictly connected to the aim of poverty reduction. In addition, spatial policies impacted in rural context has been described as “the extension of state-sponsored urban planning regimes into rural jurisdictions” (Bray, 2017), where the urban planning has been considered as an instrumental tool to solve the rural problems in specific rural contexts. Such planning policies can be divided into the generic

one, which aims at improving the built environment in the whole territory; and the sectorial one, which has specialized thematic goals, such heritage preservation for traditional villages, the exploitation to the village with ethnic minority characters, etc. Despite some of the objectives in the two types of plans have been overlapped, and in some of the cases controversial (e.g., the fully exploitation of the cultural and historic value in order to approach to a tourism oriented development paradigm; the construction of a new image for the new rurality for a nation in transitional period; and the demands to reduce the rural poverty) the multifaceted finalism has never been changed.

In the case of Dawan, two types of plans have been attempted to modify the spaces in both physical and social terms. The first one is the “Village Rectification Plan (VRP) approved in 2011, which aims at improving the appearance of the village considering both environmental, aesthetic and cultural heritage preservation issues. The second one is the Overall Plan for the Protection and Development (OPPD) elaborated by the Urban-rural Planning Institute of Tongren in 2017. However, this plan has not been implemented due to problems and conflicts at the administrative level. The quality of the planning and design institutions is extremely important. The trend of the professionalization of the “rural planners”(who were previously urban planners in an urban context) is evident.

In the VRP, several subjects regarding the measures of building restoration and the public space requalification have been taken into consideration. In many of the objectives², the emphasis to “*rationally develop the internal space of the village, in order to form a characteristic landscape, establish a comfortable ecological environment, so as to build economic, beautiful and safe dwellings*” (VRP 2011). In reality, the renovation and reparation of the dwellings are in charge of the individual dwellers, except for the unified beautification for the façade of the kitchen and the hygienic services, which are supported by government’s funds. Since the renovation of the dwellings relies on the individual capability and financial affordability, the outcome varied dramatically. In general, for the historic buildings in wooden structure, it has been declared that load-bearing structure of the house should be inspected and reinforced. For the modern buildings in concrete and brick materials, the “style unification” is proposed under the premise of ensuring the quality and safety of the building.

Contradictorily, both the highway road accessed to the village and the internal paths have been hardened with concrete due to the consideration of the “*dirt road could cause incidents*”³. In addition, all the courtyards have been renovated with the same approach, despite their importance in representing the spatial composition and greening the space.

When it comes to the public spaces and facilities, a village square with 1068 square meters has been placed near the village committee. A library and a public toilet are placed and attached with the activity center to meet daily needs of the inhabitants. In addition, the road hardening has been emphasized in terms of both hygienic condition improvements and comprehensive landscape beautification. Moreover, during the planning and implementation

2. The objectives of the plan are: “a realize reasonable village structure, a perfect function matching, a convenient transportation, a convenient condition for production and living”. In order to make Dawan Village clean and beautiful after the rectification, gradually improve the external traffic construction, drainage organization, give play to the advantages of regional transportation, and promote the economic development of villages and towns. Moreover, it is important to rationally develop the internal space of the village and town, form a characteristic landscape of the village, and establish an elegant and comfortable ecological environment of the village, build economic, beautiful and safe dwellings. It is emphasized also the Improvement of the infrastructure and the restructuring of the agricultural sectors to bring forward the village’s development.

3. The data is obtained according to the interview with Teng family, which was conducted during the field survey in Septembre, 2018.

processes, despite the public participation has been highlighted as a condition based on the VRP which would be implemented⁴(VRP, 2011) , and the ordinary inhabitants have been rarely involved in such activities actively due to the dominant role of the village committee and the local elites.

The attempts to renovate the built environment of Dawan have been continued with the designation of the pilot village of national ethnic Characteristic village in 2014 by the Administration of Ethnic Affairs, and the Chinese traditional village at national level in 2016 by the Ministry of Housing and Construction.

As one of the Chinese traditional villages, Dawan started to have its own Overall Plan for the Protection and Development (OPPD) elaborated by the Urban-Rural Planning Institute of Tongren in 2017. Although this plan has not been approved yet, we can analyze the logic and the attempts that tried incorporate the heritage value and the overall improvement of the living and environmental conditions in the village. According to this plan, the village is forecast as a ‘village scenic spot’, as well as ‘Agritourism experience zone’ and ‘Water entertainment centre’.

Agritourism played an important role in the future development, some building renovation projects have been emerged to meet the demands of tourism development. Cultural resources and the peculiarity of the ethnicity of Miao community has been exploited, thus an exhibition center and a cultural gallery are designed as spaces for cultural display of the local events and objects based on the existing conditions. The overall idea of the OPPD focuses on the innovation of a systematic “Point-Linear-Area” preservation and development system. A set of objects identified for the protection will contribute to a dispersed point system, which is linked by the creation of the historic paths and cultural itinerary as the connection passing through the whole settlement (Figure 3). The objects identified for the protection include ancient river course, ancient trees, ancient well, which are in adjacent with the planned public spaces such as incineration area, the paddy field, central place for meeting, trying to create spaces for both ritual and ordinary daily activities. Furthermore, basic infrastructure and spaces for the administration are incorporated with modern buildings, which have been separated from the historic settlement in order to keep the original characteristics of the overall historic feature of the village.

Apart from the above mentioned comprehensive design strategy, in the OPPD, a series of principles for building restoration and preservation have been taken into account based on OPPD. In case of Dawan, according to the preliminary survey carried out by the Urban-rural Planning Institute of Tongren, only one building complex was recognized as to be restored. Other dwellings are all subject to the so-called “rehabilitation”. Furthermore, for those dwellings not in tune with the historic feature of the built environment, are proposed to be “renovated” with guidelines⁵.

4. In order to demonstrate the democratic, fair, normative and authoritative nature of the planning, so as to ensure the overall and the long-term interests of development, safeguarding the public interest is urgently needed for further improvement, it is necessary to establish a scientific institutionalized system for the assessment. The supervision and management of planning and public participation are crucial processes. The preparation of the plan should fully collect the opinions of the public and allows the public to participate effectively in the planning processes. It is important to establish a supervision and management mechanism to supervise the implementation of the plan. Source: VRP 2011, Chapter 6.2.

5. I. the wooden frame of the window should be polished with sandpaper. The decorative elements such as window frame and pattern should adopt local ones II. the wooden surface needs to be cleaned with sandpaper and brushed with varnish. The damaged wood materials should be replaced III. the damaged wooden doors should be replaced by new traditional ones iv. railings should be cleaned, polished with sandpaper and painted with varnish v. concerning the roof, the grey tiles should be repaired.

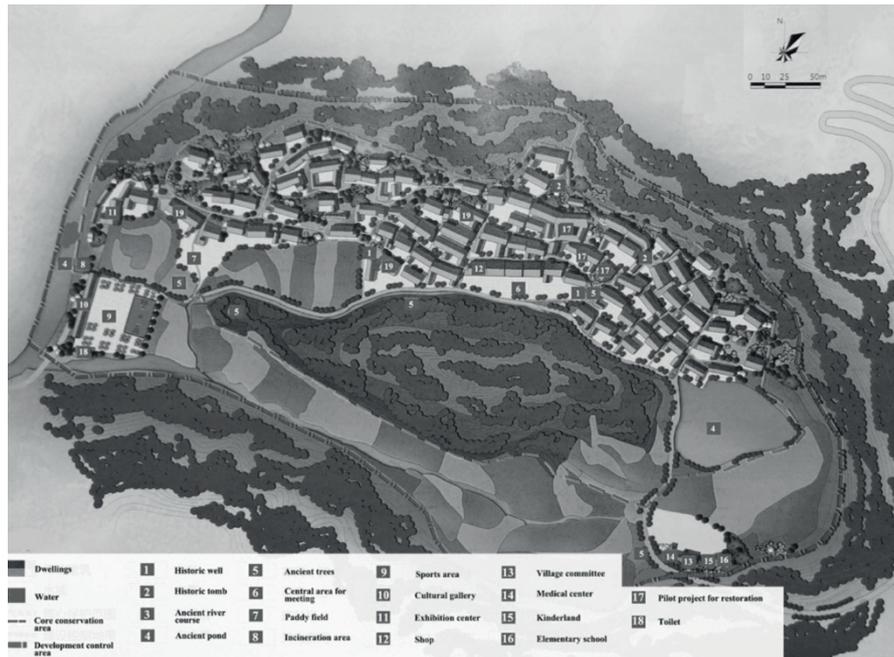


Figure 3. Master plan of the Overall Plan for the Protection and Development of Dawan. Source: Municipality of Tongren, 2017.

3.4. Inheritance, Controversies and Relations

In a top-down planning system, the objectives are assigned horizontally and vertically to each administrations, with homogenous aims and methods. The space making processes has been transformed by the modern planning processes in traditional villages, some of the approaches have been maintained in the current cultural and political settings, especially those interventions and practices based on individual families (Figure 4). It is worthy to notice that, the role of local elites has been maintained in the preservation and development arena. Local elites have demonstrated a dominant capacity in leading potential resources and the decision making processes. For one thing, they attempted to create dialogues among the inhabitants and administrations, trying to attract beneficial policies from the upper level administrations by performing as negotiators. They support the planning policies to be implemented successfully at village level. For another, they are identified as beneficiaries in the new round of rural development. Therefore, how to maximize the profit at village level to include all the inhabitants is still a problem to be resolved. Moreover, the quality of the planning and design institutions is extremely important.

4. Discussion

4.1. A Changed Paradigm and the Homogenous Approach in the Space Making

According to the interviews, we found that the current plans were in one months with very superficial preliminary investigation and scarce human resource. The homogeneous objective to exploit the historic and cultural resource of the Miao community, despite of the outstanding

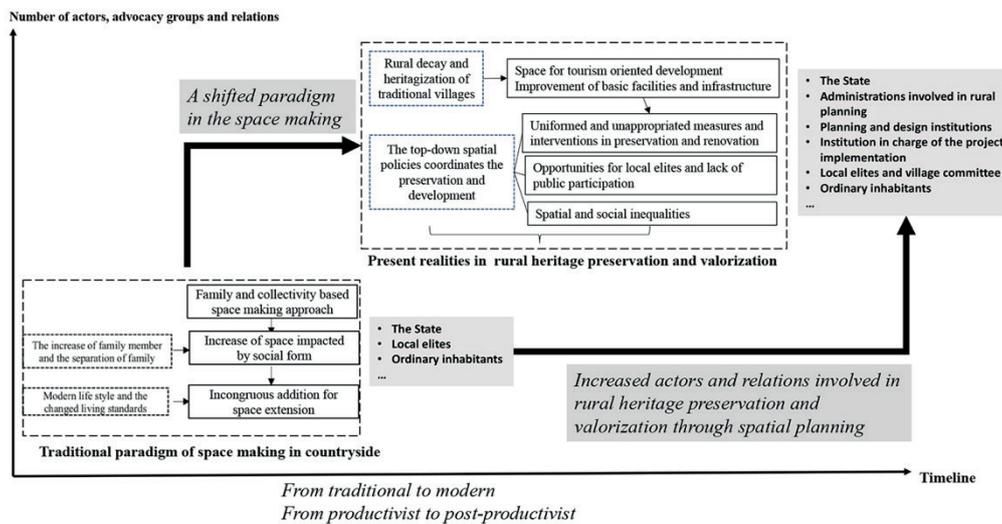


Figure 4. A framework to understand the shifted paradigm of space making in traditional village. Source: elaborated by the author.

presence captured by the media of different nature. The current outcome of the past plans and programs showed an extremely tourism-oriented approach.

Teng Jicheng, as the cultivated village leader presents a hesitated idea towards different spatial plans in Dawan. The interviews shows that he knows clearly the potential benefits behind the heritage plans and the renovation projects, but he also claims that:

the exterior parts of the kitchen and toilets have been refurbished with a uniformed way... from some aspects it is good that the government doesn't have enough funds to complete the project on the ordinary dwellings... however, the buildings will have same appearance under the unified projects.

Family Teng, a beneficiary of the current social and political condition showed their preoccupation on the emergency to preserve the Miao culture in contemporary transitional society, which is not limited in the reason in the case of Dawan, the issue can be categorized into two level of current phenomenon i) The influence of the globalization that involves all types of built environment through the transformation of social, cultural and political conditions having affect on the modern life style ii) Domestically, the long-term unbalanced social and economic development, and the consequential longstanding cultural assimilation that involves the debate about the “Minority” and the “Majority”, that the latter have been always the rule-makers. The discourse here is not related to the neat “post-colonial” era of the heritage making (Svensson 2006), but rather a localized relation between the decaying heritage assets (including both tangible and intangible terms) and a dominant and rigid heritage setting conditioned by a set of heterogenous principles, regulations that in many of the cases are vague, which will modify the physical spaces into an ideal model one.

4.2. Problems in Building Renovation and Restoration

Given the fact that the approval of the OPPD of Dawan has been suspended, the recovery process has been carried out according to habitus and tradition spontaneously. Most of the

preservation and restoration projects are carried out voluntarily by the villagers, except for the unified beautification for the façade of the kitchen and the hygienic services supported by government's funds. Up to now, apart from rare cases, all the interventions have been simple maintenance and had followed the traditional construction methods. The buildings No. 2 e No. 4, which are the works of greater impact started a few years ago, with methods of transformation very close to traditional methods, are an example. More in general, the people interviewed will affirmed that the traditional way of construction have been recognized by villagers as a necessity for Dawan, for the purpose of both cultural conservation and future tourism development. Currently, renovations or new building constructions are ongoing following a formal-informal mixed way of land use regulations and social judgement.

4.3. An Hesitated Attitude towards the Planning for Heritage in Rural

There is a strong presence of local elites in Dawan, whose role is the protector of Miao culture. Teng Jicheng, who was the former vice director of the Tongren Archive has been decisive in heritage preservation and has contributed to the stimulation of the local development by developing and utilizing his own political and cultural position. The buildings No. 2 and No. 4, the two well-preserved and recently rehabilitated buildings complex belonging to Teng Jicheng and Teng Dengfa brothers, are designated as built heritages according to the values identified by a "Dynamic Heritage Archive of Dawan", where a number of photographs, objects of different nature and value have been collected. The designation and the preservation processes have been led by the family Teng, especially Teng Jicheng who is able to gain the support from the Municipality.

The role played by local elites has represented a double-sided position in the village preservation and development. Being beneficiaries in terms of social position, they promoted the Miao culture by their practices, and they succeeded in attracting the financial support and the attention from the upper level administrations. However, the benefit is quite strictly limited within the sole lineage that has not been spread all over the whole village. The newly restored buildings are all related to the Teng Family, who aware of the tendencies and the potentials in tourism development of Dawan thanks to their family networks. However, other dwellings of ordinary families remain under unlivable conditions or are abandoned although some governmental measurements have been launched under the name of poverty alleviation. The distinctive physical conditions of the dwellings in Dawan have mirrored a neat social and spatial inequality even from the perspective of a village scale.

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