

# *Research on the Protection and Activation of Traditional Villages in the Context of Rural Revitalization: A Case Study of Huangshan City, Anhui Province, China*

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**Abstract:** With the convening of the National Poverty Alleviation Summary and Commendation Conference in February 2021, and the official release of the No. 1 Central Document titled *Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalization and Accelerating Agricultural and Rural Modernization*, the development of rural areas in China has entered a new stage. In light of this, this paper takes Huangshan City, Anhui Province as an example, aiming to explore how localities can achieve rural revitalization in the protection and activation of traditional villages under the guidance of central policies. Through literature research, questionnaire surveys and field study, this study sorts out and analyzes the current situation, development effects, and shortcomings of the protection and activation of traditional villages in Huangshan City and proposes feasible suggestions for existing problems. The research results illustrate that although the protection and revitalization work of traditional villages in Huangshan has achieved certain achievements, there are still problems, such as insufficient public propaganda, excessive commercialization, and defective governance of government departments and self-government organizations at the grassroots level. Therefore, local governments, relevant social forces, and residents of traditional villages should join hands to adjust, improve and participate in the process of rural revitalization more actively. This paper enriches the research in related fields and provides feasible references for heritage protection, traditional village development, and rural revitalization; hence, it has high theoretical value and practical significance.

## 1. Introduction

The *National Rural Revitalization Strategy Plan (2018-2022)* issued by the Chinese government in 2018 pointed out that for traditional villages, efforts should be made to "maintain the integrity, authenticity and continuity of villages... form a benign mutual promotion mechanism for the protection of characteristic resources and village development" [1]. The "Central Document No. 1" of 2021, titled *Opinions On Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalization And Accelerating The Modernization Of Agriculture And Rural Areas*, also emphasized that the revitalization of rural areas

should be conducted "according to local conditions; preserving the distinctive rural characteristics and appearance... carrying out various constructions in an orderly manner based on planning; strengthening the guidance on village appearance, protecting traditional villages, preserving the characteristics of villages, and maintaining the rural atmosphere" [2]. As a matter of fact, "Rural revitalization" refers not only to promoting rapid economic development in rural areas, but also to achieving comprehensive revitalization and modernization of rural areas through coordinated development of economic construction, cultural construction, social construction, and other aspects. Among them, the "traditional villages" in rural areas, namely "ancient villages", as important carriers of thousands of years of farming civilization and the foundation of Chinese local culture, still contain rich cultural, historical, economic, and social values to this day. Therefore, the protection and activation of "traditional villages" has become one of the key points that must be touched upon in the rural revitalization strategy.

However, in the specific practice of promoting rural revitalization and the protection and activation of traditional villages, many local government departments and people in many areas still cannot coordinate the relationship between "developing rural economy, improving people's living standards" and "protection and activation of traditional villages" in the rural revitalization strategy, as well as the relationship between "protection of traditional villages" and "activation of traditional villages". Overall, there are still problems such as the decline of ancient villages, the continued destruction of rural historical buildings, and the continuous decline of related cultural heritage in the actual implementation of local policies [3]. Among them, Huangshan City, Anhui Province, as the core city of the Wannan International Tourism Culture Demonstration Zone, formerly known as Huizhou, is an important birthplace of Huizhou culture. It has 271 traditional villages, accounting for about 4% of the total number of traditional villages in the country [4]. The traditional villages in Huangshan City not only have a long history and cultural tradition elements but also have a large difference in protection levels, which will be more conducive to obtaining sufficient research samples and related data. In view of this, based on theoretical analysis, this paper takes Huangshan City, Anhui Province as a research example, systematically investigates the protection situation of traditional villages under the background of rural revitalization, and explores the contradictions, problems and underlying causes between the implementation of rural revitalization policies and the protection and activation of traditional villages on this basis. Finally, this paper will also put forward relevant recommendations for further optimization of Huangshan's rural revitalization work.

Combining the results of questionnaire surveys, existing research literature, and field investigation, this paper finds that under the background of rural revitalization, Huangshan City has taken some measures to promote the protection and activation work of traditional villages and has achieved certain achievements. However, there are still three major problems: "insufficient public propaganda and excessive commercialization", "defective governance of government departments and self-government organizations at the grassroots level", and "population loss and land contradictions intensified with urbanization". Overall, Huangshan City has not yet coordinated well with the relationship between "the protection of traditional villages" and "the activation of traditional villages" as well as the relationship between "the protection and activation of traditional villages" and "rural revitalization". There is still a large room for improvement in the local cultural, tourism, and other industries related to traditional villages. Therefore, local governments should adjust relevant policies so that governments, relevant social forces, and residents of traditional villages can join hands to adjust, improve, and participate in the process of rural revitalization more actively.

This paper enriches related research fields and provides references for the protection and activation of traditional villages under the background of rural revitalization in China, holding both theoretical and practical significance. Overall, there are three possible innovations and marginal contributions: First, this paper sorts out concepts such as "traditional village", "protection", "activation", etc.,

demonstrates the close relationship between "protection of traditional village" and "activation of traditional village" as well as "protection and activation of traditional village" And "rural revitalization", while proving the theoretical feasibility of related strategic planning. Second, this paper uses Beijing Foreign Studies University's platform advantage to conduct extensive online questionnaire surveys to collect real thoughts and feelings from local cadres and masses to provide valuable rural perspectives and grassroots experience for future policy formulation, improvement, and implementation. Thirdly, this paper provides relevant suggestions for governments based on corresponding findings to further promote better protection and activation work in various places under the background of rural revitalization.

## 2. Literature Review

The current research primarily focuses on two main aspects. On the one hand, many scholars focus on the theoretical construction of rural revitalization and traditional village protection or the analysis of related issues. In theory, Hou and Shi (2021) argue that there is a phenomenon of hollowness and decentralization in traditional villages [5]. The article *Analysis on the spatial structure of tourism resources in the south of Anhui province* also points out that there is weak spatial connectivity between various tourist attractions in the Southern Anhui tourism area, mainly centered around Huangshan area[6]. It is also suggested that enhancing the transportation network should be used to strengthen regional connectivity. In fact, the Southern Anhui region is representative of China's rich tourism resources, but it faces issues such as a small market share and low per capita consumption. Overly dense but poorly coordinated tourism resources can create a "resource agglomeration blocking effect," leading to excessive competition among attractions within the region, exacerbated by underdeveloped transportation networks [6]. Additionally, Richards and Wilson (2006) emphasize that cultural heritage plays a vital role in the identity and vitality of rural communities [7]. The preservation of cultural traditions, arts, and historical landmarks is essential for rural flourishing. Cultural tourism, which highlights local traditions and heritage, can contribute to economic growth and community pride. Furthermore, Shi, Yang, and Wang (2022), relying on value chain theory, signal theory, and symbiosis theory, summarize three typical development models that effectively promote rural revitalization with intangible cultural heritage, which have high theoretical value [8][8]. Based on the value chain theory, leveraging intangible cultural heritage (ICH) skills and cultural resources as a comparative advantage in rural areas can be integrated into the value chain of traditional village preservation, thereby enhancing their value. Drawing on the signal theory, incorporating cultural phenomena such as tradition, rituals, skills, music, and dances as resources into market mechanisms to satisfy non-material demands necessitates addressing the substantial information asymmetry between ICH inheritors and external consumers. This issue can be tackled through applying for ICH projects, establishing infrastructure, and implementing effective communication strategies. From the symbiosis theory, the precious cultural resources of ICH can establish interdependence and mutually beneficial relations with traditional villages, thus facilitating rural revitalization.

On the other hand, practical cases and problem determinations are examined in the context of rural revitalization and traditional village preservation. To date, numerous scholars have extensively analyzed cases of rural development from Europe, Asia, the Americas, among others, through various perspectives such as "rural tourism," "ecological museums," "landscape identification and evaluation," "sustainable development," and "intensive agriculture and crafts development" [9,10,11,12]. From these analyses, it can be found that there are multiple pathways to achieve rural revitalization and traditional village preservation. When formulating development policies, different regions should consider their specific circumstances and select the most suitable approaches rather than blindly replicating successful cases. Turning sights to China, Wang (2018) conducted a policy

evaluation of the subsidy funds for the construction of the rural tourism cultural system in J City, administered by the Financial Supervision Department of Shanxi Province's Jincheng [13]. The study revealed issues related to policy implementation in the process of traditional village preservation and development. In general, there is a lack of effective local regulatory oversight, resulting in project funds not fulfilling their intended role (the township government diverting the rural tourism construction funds for other purposes), as well as a common issue of "distorted" signal transmission in the exploration of methods and pathways. Additionally, Gao and Wu (2017) investigated the role of rural tourism in rural development and poverty alleviation, using Yuanjia Village, Shaanxi Province, as a case study [14]. They identified "protection" and "utilization" as two key themes for revitalizing traditional villages and argued that the case demonstrated the need for comprehensive approaches encompassing material, social, and spiritual dimensions in realizing rural revitalization. Moreover, they further emphasized that rural revitalization should be an endogenous, bottom-up development process rather than a top-down arrangement.

In conclusion, current research primarily focuses on the initial construction of theories or the interpretation of specific practices, often treating rural revitalization, traditional village preservation and development, and cultural heritage as specific observation perspectives or theoretical backgrounds. The internal connections between "rural revitalization" and "traditional village preservation and revitalization," as well as research on the development, governance, and policy implementation of rural traditional village "cultural tourism industry," still need further exploration.

### **3. Theoretical Analysis: Concept Elucidation and Relationship Sorting**

#### **3.1 Explanation of Related Concepts**

##### **3.1.1 Rural Revitalization Strategy**

The Rural Revitalization Strategy, as one of the seven core strategies of China, aims to consolidate the achievements of poverty alleviation, resolve social contradictions, and promote modernization in rural areas [15]. The twenty-character general requirement of the rural strategy is "prosperous industry, livable ecology, civilized rural customs, effective governance, and affluent life", which correspond to the goals in the fields of "economy, environment, culture, society, and people's livelihood" [16]. Therefore, as aforementioned, the essence of the rural strategy is to achieve all-round revitalization of China's vast rural areas in multiple domains.

##### **3.1.2 Traditional Villages**

Traditional villages, also known as "ancient villages", refer to human settlements in rural areas that have rich traditional cultural resources and were formed earlier [17]. The "Notice on Carrying out Surveys on Traditional Villages" jointly issued by the Ministry of Culture and other four departments of China pointed out that traditional villages need to meet at least one of the three conditions: "complete traditional architectural style, traditional characteristics maintained in site selection and layout, and intangible cultural heritage activation" [18]. Generally speaking, traditional villages have certain "historical, cultural, scientific, artistic, social and economic values".

##### **3.1.3 Protection of Traditional Villages**

The protection of traditional villages is a relatively static concept, including two major categories: "intangible safeguard" of intangible culture and "tangible protection" of material resources [19]. The concept of "protection" emphasizes more on the restoration and maintenance of existing ancient buildings and related patterns in traditional villages to prevent them from being damaged, as well as

the preservation and continuation of cultural resources including intangible heritage skills and folk characteristics in traditional villages.

### 3.1.4 Activation of Traditional Villages

The activation of traditional villages, that is, the development, inheritance, and utilization of traditional villages is a relatively dynamic concept. "Activation" aims to break away from the traditional museum-style preservation approach, which involves relocating residents from traditional villages and turning traditional villages into uninhabited scenic areas or protected zones. The activation and development of traditional villages further emphasize the existence of "people" as a subject, and keep the material and intangible culture of traditional villages always "vibrant" through the development of related "cultural tourism industries".

## 3.2 Relationship Sorting of Related Concepts

### 3.2.1 Relationship between "Protection of Traditional Villages" and "Activation of Traditional Villages"

The "protection of traditional villages" and the "activation of traditional villages" do not have a clear boundary, and they can be regarded as the "two wings of one body" in dealing with the issue of "traditional villages".

Firstly, the protection of traditional villages must achieve activation and development. As Dr. Felton, the world-renowned heritage conservation expert, said: "One of the best ways to maintain cultural relics is to use them properly" [20]. Reasonably using, developing, and activating traditional villages through "cultural tourism industries" can provide certain financial support for protection, retain and attract relevant talent resources, which is more conducive to the inheritance and continuation of related architectural skills. In addition, traditional villages are not the same as historical sites and relics in the general sense, they are not immutable, but dynamically developing. The core significance of traditional villages in today's era lies in the "vibrant" national memory, folk culture tradition, and craft technology knowledge they carry behind them. People and residents have always been the inherent driving force and soul of the village [21]. Those protection modes that protect for the sake of protection and see things but not people not only destroy the inherent cultural ecology of the village but also easily overlook the core of protection. Therefore, only by truly activating traditional villages can we achieve true protection.

At the same time, the activation of traditional villages must be based on the premise that it does not damage the "ancient village". The protection of traditional villages should always be the basis for activation and the core of inheritance. The activation and development of traditional villages always need to continue existing architectural forms, planning patterns, memory characteristics, and cultural features [22,23]. We should not ignore the traditional features of ancient villages and blindly develop them, nor should we only pursue the economic benefits brought about by activation at the expense or even give up the protection of ancient villages.

In an ideal state, protection and activation should achieve a kind of mutually promoting positive "interactive relationship". The protection of traditional villages provides a foundation for inheritance and development for activation, and activation can provide internal motivation for protection work. Therefore, the best mode to treat "traditional villages" should be to "protect in activation and activate in protection", so as to achieve organic integration of protection and activation.

### **3.2.2 Relationship between "Protection and Activation of Traditional Villages" and "Rural Revitalization"**

In theory, there should be a positive interactive relationship between "protection and activation of traditional villages" and "rural revitalization".

On one hand, "protection and activation of traditional villages" is an important driver for achieving rural revitalization. Firstly, with rich human history resources contained in "traditional villages", protecting and activating traditional villages can directly promote cultural revitalization in rural areas and promote local unique "rural civilization" preservation and inheritance. For instance, Yim Tin Tsai in Hong Kong SAR of China, is endeavouring to revitalise the traditional village based on the concept of "eco-museum", thereby preserving the unique "Hakka" and "Christian" fusion of the local rural culture [24]. Additionally, during the process of protecting and activating traditional villages can drive related tourism industry development as well as cultural creative industry development which can add new employment positions as well as related industry income for locals thus improving local residents' living standards [25]. Therefore, "protection and activation of traditional villages" will bring many economic as well as social benefits for rural revitalization.

On another hand, rural revitalization theoretically can also feed back well to "protection and activation of traditional villages". Based on rural revitalization's urgent need for cultural construction as well as rural revitalization strategy's high regard for vast rural area's "traditional village", governments at all levels have provided strong financial support to further promote "protection and activation of traditional village". For example from 2014 to 2019 government provided each village listed in protection directory with 3 million yuan totaling over 13 billion yuan in financial support [26]. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, rural government while attracting investment to promote local rural revitalization's economic construction development (for example investing into "cultural tourism industry") will also attract more external funds as well as social forces to participate into protecting as well as activating traditional village.

Through above analysis, it can be found that from macro theoretical perspective there indeed exists positive interactive relationship between "protection as well as activation of traditional village" with "rural revitalization". Protection as well as activation of traditional village can promote rural area's revitalization while at same time rural revitalization can also further promote this area's protection as well as activation of traditional village.

## **4. Overview of Traditional Villages in Huangshan**

### **4.1 The spatial distribution and historical evolution of traditional villages in Huangshan**

As the birthplace of ancient Huizhou and Huizhou culture, Huangshan City has a vast and rich resource of traditional villages and a long history of cultural development. The spatial distribution of traditional villages in Huangshan City presents a wide range and multi-level characteristics - in addition to the well-known ancient architectural clusters such as Xidi and Hongcun, Huangshan City also has a rich and diverse cultural heritage of ancient architecture such as Tangyue Archway Group and Tangmo Ancient Village, involving various aspects of Huizhou local customs, food, education, clans [27]. These ancient buildings are widely distributed in various villages throughout the city. Ancient architects followed the so-called "pillow mountain, surrounded by water, facing the screen, heaven and man are one" feng shui concept, organically combining Huizhou gardens, water town scenery and pastoral scenery to form a unique landscape where the natural environment and human spirit are intertwined with "elegant mountains and rivers pastoral, Huizhou ancient building corridor" [28]. Many traditional villages in Huizhou still preserve a relatively complete spatial layout and historical appearance, which contains the profound cultural connotation of Huizhou settlements.

## **4.2 Current policies for the protection and activation of traditional villages in Huangshan**

Due to the wide and scattered distribution of traditional villages in the Huizhou region, current government-led policies cannot cover all traditional villages for unified management. In addition, due to the relatively backward economic development level of Huangshan City for many years, the government's financial system is unable to support large-scale cultural heritage protection, so most traditional villages have been in a state of "free-range" for many years, with unmanaged and uninhabited ancient buildings facing serious threats such as disrepair over the years, private sale or demolition. To this end, the Huangshan City government has taken a series of measures to solve the above problems [29]. These measures can be roughly divided into following three main parts:

### **4.2.1 Actively apply for national and provincial traditional village directories**

By applying for high-level traditional village directories, not only can the city's traditional village resources be placed under the management system of provincial or central governments to alleviate local government financial pressure, but also can enhance the visibility of traditional villages and develop local tourism. According to statistics, since 2012, 271 villages in Huangshan City have been included in the China Traditional Village Directory, and 451 villages have been included in the Provincial Traditional Village Protection Directory [4]. In June 2020, Huangshan City was listed as a national demonstration city for concentrated protection and utilization of traditional villages [4]. At present, Huangshan City is still striving to promote the declaration of traditional village projects.

### **4.2.2 Adopt overall protection for architectural clusters in traditional villages**

A series of protective policies are adopted to promote the protection of intangible cultural heritage and architectural clusters in traditional villages through various methods such as rescue protection, overall protection, productive protection, digital protection. For intangible cultural heritage, the municipal government has taken the lead in building a number of museums themed on "Huizhou Culture", such as Huizhou Cuisine Museum and Xiuning County Scholar Museum. The intangible cultural heritage is preserved in museums in forms such as physical exhibitions, digital reproductions or modern technology reproductions. This forms a diversified protection pattern mainly composed of thematic museums and intangible cultural heritage exhibition centers [30]. For architectural clusters within traditional villages, a series of physical rescue and protection measures are adopted. At present, the Huangshan government has launched the "Hundred Villages Thousand Buildings" Traditional Village Ancient Residential Protection and Utilization Project. For restorable ancient buildings, repair and restoration are carried out; for irreparable buildings, a strategy of "relocation" is adopted for centralized protection and management; modern technology is used to reproduce a batch of ancient buildings [30]. This project has enabled a large amount of tangible and intangible cultural heritage within Huangshan to be preserved and inherited to a considerable extent. Simultaneously, it has achieved a good combination of traditional villages and cultural heritage.

### **4.2.3 Promote economic development on the basis of protection**

Relevant policy documents have been introduced to promote the protective development of traditional villages, enabling them to be integrated with modern service industries. Mechanism for the transfer and transfer of property rights in traditional villages has been established, facilitating the participation of social capital in the protection and activation of traditional villages. Currently, various places in Huangshan have successively set off a wave of building homestays, and a large number of homestay enterprises have been established in traditional villages and rural tourism hotspots. For example, Huizhou District has adopted the "Homestay+" model, relying on the rich ancient residential

resources in the district, and has established a multi-level homestay tourism industry from farmhouses to high-end homestays [31]. The homestay industry has become an indispensable part of the interaction between cultural heritage and rural revitalization in Huangshan. On the one hand, by establishing characteristic homestay industries, it not only substantially increases the income of residents, but also allows visitors to feel the profound historical and cultural atmosphere of Huizhou, thereby achieving the dual effects of economic development and cultural communication, and helping traditional villages to revitalize. On the other hand, the economic development brought about by rural revitalization can theoretically enhance the enthusiasm of the public to participate, thereby changing the current single pattern of cultural heritage protection led by the government.

## **5. Questionnaire Survey Research and Data Results Compilation**

### **5.1 Questionnaire Design and Investigation**

From September to November 2022, the research team conducted a questionnaire survey titled “The Current Situation of Traditional Village Conservation and Rural Revitalization Process in Huangshan City, Anhui Province” through “WeChat Questionnaire Star” online platform. The main questions of the questionnaire included the basic situation of the respondents and their understanding of the heritage of Huangshan traditional villages, their knowledge and satisfaction with the heritage conservation policies of Huangshan traditional villages, and the economic and social benefits brought by them. The research subjects mainly focused on people who had long-term living experience in Huangshan, with a total of 393 questionnaires collected, of which 387 were valid, with an effective questionnaire response rate of 98.47%. Combining questionnaire data for factor analysis, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale-type items in this study was 0.987, indicating high reliability of the questionnaire data. The KMO statistic value of 0.720, which tests the partial correlations among variables, suggests no significant differences in the correlation among variables, indicating that the data is suitable for factor analysis. The p-value of Bartlett's test of sphericity is 0.000, rejecting the null hypothesis, indicating the presence of a good construct validity in the data.

### **5.2 Summary of questionnaire data and results**

#### **5.2.1 The Basic Situation of The Survey Respondents and Their Understanding of The Heritage of Traditional Villages in Huangshan**

The respondents of this questionnaire survey consisted of 49.87% males and 50.13% females, with an average age of 40 years old; 22.13% were from Huangshan urban area, 39.92% were from Huangshan townships, and 37.94% were from Huangshan rural areas; 61.07% had a bachelor's degree or above, 28.24% had a college degree, and 8.14% had a high school degree; among them, 52.67% were enterprise employees, 25.45% were government officials and public institution staff, 6.36% were farmers, and 3.56% were students. The statistical results showed that 94.07% of the respondents had visited the Huangshan traditional village heritage sites. Regarding the question of “the tourism experience of Huangshan traditional village heritage sites”, 64.29% of the respondents said that they had a very good experience, but still more than 30% of them thought that the tourism experience was average or even poor, and the main reasons for the poor experience were concentrated on the following aspects: the scenic spots were relatively monotonous and not interesting (77.73%), undesirable tourism environment (32.35%), and over-commercialization (28.99%).

### **5.2.2 The Survey Respondents' Understanding of The Protection Policy of Traditional Villages in Huangshan and Its Influencing Factors**

In the survey of the understanding level of the heritage conservation policies of Huangshan traditional villages, only 35.97% of the respondents said that they were “very concerned” about the conservation policies of Huangshan traditional villages, 49.05% said that they were “relatively concerned”, and 15.02% said that they were “not very concerned”. Among them, online news media and oral communication with family and friends were the main channels for obtaining information on the heritage conservation of Huangshan traditional villages. At the policy implementation level, 45.45% of the respondents thought that the policy implementation degree of Huangshan traditional village heritage conservation needed to be further strengthened, 52.96% thought that the policy execution subject was unclear, and 68.38% thought that there was a lack of corresponding policy supervision and evaluation mechanisms. The survey statistics found that the lack of participation awareness, lack of financial support, lack of effective protection and inheritance mechanisms, and defects in grassroots governance were all the reasons for the above problems.

### **5.2.3 The Significance of Protecting and Revitalizing Traditional Village Heritage**

Regarding the significance of traditional village conservation and revitalization, the respondents believed that village conservation could combine the protection of historical and cultural heritage with improving the surrounding ecological environment and raising the living standards of residents (89.06%), stimulate the residents' patriotism and love for their hometown through the long history (86.26%), restore the historical appearance (64.12%), and promote the development of tourism industry (78.63%). In the survey of “the biggest problem facing the heritage conservation of traditional villages in China”, as many as 84.73% and 76.84% of the respondents thought that the problem was “lack of effective protection and inheritance mechanisms” and “lack of financial support”, respectively, and “the lack of autonomous participation awareness of villagers” (68.45%) was also one of the existing problems. In addition, the traditional village heritage conservation model of “government-led, social organizations and the broad masses of people jointly protect” received the most support from the respondents.

## **6. Analysis of Existing Issues and Causes**

In an ideal state, there is a positive correlation between the conservation of cultural heritage such as traditional villages and rural revitalization, in other words, they can achieve benign interaction and mutual promotion. However, relevant social practices have exposed the significant contradictions between them, especially in the current complex economic and social environment, the potential contradictions and problems between them have been further highlighted. At the same time, there are also many contradictions and conflicts between the “protection” and “activation” of traditional villages themselves. Based on the data of this research questionnaire survey, extensive literature research, and the findings of field visits, this paper believes that the problems related to this field in Huangshan can be broadly summarized into the following three areas:

### **6.1 Public Communication and Commercialization Issues**

The data from the research questionnaire indicate that Huangshan traditional village heritage has the problems of low public understanding and high degree of commercialization. Behind these problems, it reflects the issues of insufficient publicity and poor brand effect of traditional village cultural heritage tourism. The lack of depth and breadth of publicity makes the public, even the local residents of Huangshan, unable to fully understand and experience the charming traditional village

heritage culture of Huangshan, which leads to the current situation of low popularity of Huangshan traditional village heritage. And the low popularity directly affects the income of rural people in cultural tourism, and then affects the government's financial input in traditional village heritage conservation. Therefore, the government's cultural and tourism department has to operate the traditional village heritage tourism attractions in a highly commercialized mode, in order to increase income and maintain the existing level of traditional village heritage conservation.

From the perspective of traditional village heritage development and conservation, whether it is rural tourism sightseeing developed for the intangible cultural heritage inheritance of traditional villages, or traditional homestays established for the development of rural dwellings, what they focus on are the commercial and economic values contained in traditional villages, and use this kind of value to increase the enthusiasm of the public to protect the traditional village cultural heritage. It cannot be denied that this commercial-oriented development model has achieved considerable results in the short term - for example, as of 2021, the homestay industry in Huizhou District alone had a business income of 30 million yuan [31], which significantly improved the income of local residents, and therefore stimulated the participation enthusiasm of residents. But some scholars also believe that this development model will cause serious damage to the environment and overall humanistic atmosphere of traditional villages, which is not conducive to their sustainable development [32]. In the previous research, it was found that residents in traditional village development areas including Xiuning County, She County and other places reflected that "the degree of commercialization is too high, and the local traditional life mode is impacted". Due to the commercialized development policy that changed the traditional farming civilization-style lifestyle of local villagers, the cultural identity and sense of belonging of local villagers to the village gradually declined, which may eventually lead to the disappearance of traditional village humanistic genes and cultural core. Therefore, "how can Huangshan traditional village cultural tourism industry provide continuous and stable financial support for village heritage conservation?" and "how to make relevant villagers have enough determination and energy to invest in village heritage conservation when there is a low season of tourism or insufficient economic benefits?" will become the problems that Huangshan traditional village heritage conservation and revitalization work has to face and solve.

## 6.2 Defective Governance of Government Departments and Grassroots Self-Governing Organizations

In the conservation of traditional village heritage, the government usually plays a key and leading role, and Huangshan City is no exception - the *Regulations on the Protection of Ancient Buildings in Huizhou District of Huangshan City* (hereinafter referred to as the "Regulations") stipulates that the cultural relics competent departments of the municipal and county (district) people's governments shall bear the main supervision and management responsibilities for the protection and utilization of ancient buildings within their administrative regions [33]. The single-directional government-led model can certainly ensure that the conservation and activation of traditional villages are effectively supported, but it will also inevitably be constrained by the inherent problems within the government. For example, local residents need to "report" to the government for repairing their old houses classified as "traditional dwellings", and they can only get a reply after the approval of the higher-level government [34]. This reflects the impact of problems such as bureaucracy and inefficient administration within the government on the conservation and activation of traditional villages. At the same time, the traditional village conservation projects under the government's leadership are often at the edge of the government's work goals, which is especially highlighted when the government is in financial difficulties - the special funds set up for the protection of ancient buildings and other work often fail to be allocated in place, which may lead to the "dangerous houses" and other

long-neglected units within traditional villages unable to get effective maintenance and upgrading, resulting in unfinished projects, which not only threaten the integrity of traditional villages, but also seriously damage the government's credibility.

In the actual work, the grassroots self-governing organizations in the traditional villages also play an indispensable role - the "Regulations" stipulates that the villagers' committees or residents' committees where the ancient buildings are located shall formulate village rules and conventions for the protection of ancient buildings and consciously carry out the protection of ancient buildings [33]. The grassroots self-governing organizations in the villages where the ancient buildings are located shall perform their own duties, formulate conventions for the protection of ancient buildings, carry out publicity and education activities, and make the villagers understand the importance and necessity of protecting ancient buildings, so as to assist the government departments in management. However, in the field investigation of the group members, some of the grassroots self-governing organizations in traditional villages could not perform their duties well. Taking Xiuning County of Huangshan City as an example, some of the village committees in traditional village development areas were only busy with the administrative work of traditional village conservation to cope with the inspection of higher authorities, but did not lead the majority of villagers to spontaneously participate in the conservation and activation work. At the same time, the staff members responsible for the work related to ancient building conservation in the village committee either lacked necessary work enthusiasm, or lacked understanding of new methods and related publicity work for ancient building conservation, and there were significant defects in personnel quality. And in a few villages, there were even irregularities such as village committees signing on behalf of villagers on documents such as commitment letters for ancient building conservation. Therefore, for Huangshan City, both government departments and grassroots self-governing organizations in traditional villages have significant problems of management vacancy. The municipal government should explore more flexible and positive government governance methods and try to form a governance model with diversified subjects.

### **6.3 Urbanization Intensifies Population Loss and Land Conflict**

With the rapid development of urbanization and economy, many rural towns in Huangshan City have undergone land resource adjustment and policy relocation, and carried out a large number of mergers and reconstruction of administrative villages and natural villages, resulting in the gradual disappearance of many traditional villages [35]. In the process of village consolidation and relocation, Huangshan City has carried out a large-scale transformation of rural areas, and some traditional villages have been blindly demolished and rebuilt. On the one hand, in recent years, the urbanization rate of permanent residents in Huangshan City has steadily increased, reaching 59.25% in 2021 [36]. The rapid development of urbanization has caused the rural resource elements to continuously shift to urban areas. As a large number of villagers abandon farmland and go to work in cities, a large amount of arable land is deserted, traditional villages are abandoned due to lack of care, traditional lifestyles are shattered, and rural hollowing out and aging problems are serious. On the other hand, population loss also poses challenges to the inheritance of rural folk art. At the same time, as a part of the cultural memory of traditional villages, the loss of rural folk art is not conducive to the spiritual civilization construction of traditional villages as a whole, thus hindering the overall layout planning of rural revitalization. At the same time, the municipal government should pay attention to giving full play to the role of the people as the main body, which not only requires the current protection and activation policies to shift to "people-oriented", but also requires mobilizing and stimulating the enthusiasm of the people in this process.

Traditional villages that have not been incorporated into the urbanization process also face huge

contradictions between land use for village construction and land use for traditional village protection. The current ancient building protection work in Huangshan City always adheres to the overall land use principle of “protecting as much as possible, preserving as much as possible, and strictly prohibiting large-scale demolition and construction and destructive construction” [31]. This principle takes into account the overall protection of the complete appearance and traditional characteristics of traditional villages to the greatest extent, but in order to maintain the traditional appearance of ancient buildings, no matter how they are repaired, the internal space layout and supporting facilities of ancient buildings can no longer meet the modern people’s demand for a better life. Therefore, it can be argued that there is a clear spatial contradiction between the construction land required by traditional village residents to improve their living conditions and the protection land occupied by ancient buildings. In addition, restricted by the current imperfect laws and regulations on land property rights in traditional villages in Huangshan City, foreign capital often has concerns about local investment, resulting in insufficient capital injection for the protection and activation of traditional villages. In the implementation of current policies, neither the protection of ancient buildings nor the local residents’ demand for a better life can be fully guaranteed, and there is a significant structural contradiction between them.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper takes the protection and activation of traditional villages in Huangshan City as the research object, and explores its internal logic and connection with the rural revitalization strategy. It also briefly reviews the achievements and development status of Huangshan City in this field over the years, and analyzes the problems and contradictions in this field based on existing literatures, the data results of the questionnaire survey, and the fieldwork findings. Under the background of rural revitalization, the traditional villages in Huangshan City mainly face three major problems: insufficient public publicity and excessive commercialization, defective governance by government departments and grassroots self-governing organizations, and population loss and land contradiction. Generally speaking, the relevant subjects in Huangshan City have not fully coordinated the two pairs of relationships: “the protection of traditional villages” and “the activation of traditional villages”, and “the protection and activation of traditional villages” and “rural revitalization”. The local culture, tourism and other industries related to traditional villages still have a lot of room for improvement. In view of this, the higher-level government should first play a leading and supervisory role, lead the governments at all levels in Huangshan City to rationally develop the local traditional villages; while the local government should play the role of executor and coordinator, actively coordinate the development interests of various participating subjects while resolutely implementing the superior orders; at the same time, the government should attract the enthusiasm of the masses, make them care about the construction of traditional villages and participate in this process personally, and change the current single-oriented governance mode.

Based on the conclusion above, this paper puts forward the following recommendations for the protection and activation of traditional villages as well as rural revitalization in Huangshan:

The first is to improve laws and regulations. At present, the laws and regulations on land contracting and construction and traditional village protection in rural development and construction represented by Huangshan City are not clear and have many loopholes. As the main body of local regulations, local people’s congresses should first enrich and improve local laws and regulations on the protection and activation of ancient villages, and provide legal guarantee for rural revitalization and protection and activation of ancient villages. Among them, special attention should be paid to improving the system of “three rights separation” reform of rural land, and rationally developing and operating rural land on the premise of ensuring the legitimate rights and interests of farmers.

The second is to clarify the governance subject. Under the background of rural revitalization, the contradiction between “protection” and “activation” of traditional villages is partly determined by the contradiction among the participating subjects. The current situation of excessive commercialization of tourism industry and excessive consumerism in the field of ancient village protection is partly due to the excessive participation of enterprises, so it is necessary to clarify who is the subject of rural revitalization. Just as the rural revitalization strategy emphasizes the status of farmers as the main body, the relevant guiding policies for the protection and activation of ancient villages should also emphasize the status of villagers as the main body from a theoretical level on the basis of adhering to the leadership of central government.

The third is to coordinate the relationship among all parties. First, relevant departments should actively perform their own management responsibilities, improve relevant rules and regulations, and urge the participating enterprises to take their own social responsibility. In addition, local government agencies should also pay attention to the combination of economic and environmentally sustainable development, operate through non-destructive business models, and strive to avoid obtaining economic benefits at the expense of destroying the natural environment. Moreover, relevant institutions should also rationally plan the internal space of traditional villages while developing them commercially, and avoid excessive erosion of the cultural atmosphere of traditional villages in the development process.

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