



## Analyzing the use of cultural space of the Han community through the Architecture of the Nanxun Ancient Town from 1953 to 2024

Bingzhe Li<sup>1</sup> and Chakapong Phaetlakfa<sup>2</sup>

Faculty of Fine Arts, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

E-mail: 3065793741@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5081-3401>

E-mail: chakapon@g.swu.ac.th, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6032-4906>

Received 08/05/2029

Revised 29/05/2025

Accepted 05/07/2025

### Abstract

**Background and Aim:** This study focuses on the architectural and cultural spatial evolution of Han communities in Nanxun Ancient Town during the period 1953-2024, aiming to analyze the changes in the use of artistic space in Han communities by examining the architecture of Nanxun Ancient Town. The study adopted a qualitative research method and collected data through interviews with 13 people, covering three groups: long-term residents, managers, and experts. The residents were categorized into three groups: old, middle-aged, and young, according to their age and years of residence, to reflect the life experiences and spatial memories of different generations. Managers and experts provided professional perspectives on policy implementation and cultural research to enhance the diversity and depth of the study.

**Materials and Methods:** With the theoretical support of structural functionalism theory, the study combines the AGIL theoretical framework to systematically sort out the evolution paths of residential, faith-based, commercial, and public cultural spaces in three economic stages between 1953 and 2024. The structural functionalism theory emphasizes the functional roles of each element of society in the overall system, which helps to reveal how different types of cultural spaces respond to external changes and redistribute their functions during the stages of collective economy, market reforms, and cultural tourism. At the same time, the AGIL model provides an analytical framework for understanding how architectural spaces adapt to their environments, achieve their social goals, and maintain the order of the community and the transmission of their cultural identities.

**Results:** Between 1953 and 2024, the Han community cultural space in Nanxun Ancient Town transformed from communalization under the collective economic system to a return to functionality during the period of market economy, and then to a composite reuse during the stage of cultural revitalization. In the period of collectivization (1953-1980), the architectural space changed from private to collective use, reflecting the process of adaptation of traditional clan structure to the national ideology; after the reform and opening up (1981-2005), with the liberalization of the economy, the conventional space gradually restored to the life and cultural functions, and the symbolic significance of the building was re After the reform and opening up (1981-2005), with the liberalization of the economy, traditional space gradually restored its life and cultural functions, and the symbolic significance of the buildings was recognized again. These paths of change confirm the logic of social system adaptation in the structural functionalism theory, i.e., changes in the external economic system directly promote the reorganization of spatial structure and social functions. It explains that cultural space has been continuously stimulated with a new logic of use and social significance in the evolution of the social system and has become an effective medium connecting history and reality, as well as the local and the national.

**Conclusion:** The Han community's cultural space evolution in Nanxun Ancient Town results from economic transformation, policy orientation, and cultural identity reconstruction. The community has shown outstanding cultural resilience and adaptability in the various historical stages. The study shows that in the face of social transformation and modernization pressure, flexible spatial organization and sustainable operation can be achieved through rational adjustment of policy orientation and collaborative management of community subjects, thus enhancing the functional adaptability of historical and cultural spaces in contemporary times. This experience provides a reference for sustainable heritage management or community-centered conservation strategies in similar contexts. Future interventions in historic towns should emphasize the interactive and synergistic mechanisms of policy, community, and space, to promote the lasting social value of cultural heritage in living heritage.

**Keywords:** Han Chinese Community; Cultural Space; Evolution of Architectural Functions

### Introduction

The preservation of historic towns and cities is of vital importance for the maintenance of cultural heritage and the sustainable development of cities. Globally, Hoi An in Vietnam, Vigan in the Philippines, and the ancient towns of Venice in Italy and Toledo in Spain have been listed as UNESCO World Heritage

Sites, becoming global examples of architectural heritage preservation and cross-cultural exchange. Hoi An and Vigan have become representatives of international cultural heritage by preserving their unique urban landscape and traditional culture, demonstrating the historical imprint of cross-cultural exchanges. In contrast, through the preservation of its medieval buildings and old neighborhoods, Toledo has shown the close relationship between ancient societies and architecture, and embodied the adaptability of historical heritage in modern urbanization. Meanwhile, China's Nanxun Ancient Town, a cultural treasure of the Yangtze River Delta, dates to the Southern Song Dynasty (1252 AD) and is known for its fusion of Chinese and Western architectural styles. Driven by the silk trade boom during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Nanxun became the commercial Centre of its time and gained global recognition when it was awarded the prize for "Gili Silk" at the 1851 World's Fair in London; in 2014, Nanxun was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as part of the Grand Canal of China, further underlining the importance of the town's history as a cultural treasure of the Yangtze River Delta. Nanxun's significance in the global cultural heritage is further highlighted by its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014 as part of the Grand Canal of China. However, there are few recent studies on the changes of cultural space in Nanxun Ancient Town, especially those that lack an exploration of the interrelationship between the changes in space use and the changes in the social environment driven by modern society. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the logic of the evolution of the cultural space of the Han community in Nanxun Ancient Town between 1953 and 2024 from the perspective of structural functionalism theory, reveal how it realizes the reorganization of spatial functions and value reconstruction under different economic stages, and explore the implications of its experience for the heritage management and cultural space governance of contemporary historic towns.

This paper introduces the AGIL model of structural functionalist theory as an analytical framework. The model emphasizes how each sub-structure in a social system maintains its stability through mechanisms such as adaptation, goal achievement, integration, and potential value maintenance, and is suitable for understanding how cultural spaces are self-regulated and restructured under the intersection of macro-policy changes, community organizational restructuring, and cultural identity transformation. At the same time, this paper also refers to the theory of "spatial production" in the field of building management, emphasizing that cultural space is not only a physical heritage, but also a composite field of community collective memory, social practice, and public value reproduction.

The reorganization of spatial functions and values in Nanxun has been characterized by multiple drivers and balanced interests at different times, as revealed by the emphasis in the field of building management on the coordination of various claims in the process of adaptive reuse (Liu, 2023). Economic development needs are often seen as the core driving force for spatial reconfiguration of cultural heritage (Tian & Luo, 2024), while the active participation of on-site residents not only empowers the community but also plays a key role in transforming cultural spaces (Li & Wang, 2024). Specifically, this paper analyzes the development of Nanxun Ancient Town's cultural space by dividing it into three phases. The spatial changes in each phase reflect the architectural space's response to the economic system and cultural policies in different periods and reveal the community subject's activism in the process of spatial production and identity construction. Therefore, the practice of reuse in Nanxun should stimulate economic vitality while fully respecting the community's demands and realizing the organic balance between cultural values, social benefits, and local identity.

Through the above analysis, this paper provides a reference for understanding how Chinese historical and cultural towns can balance cultural preservation and social renewal in modernization. At the same time, it will provide theoretical support and on-the-ground experience for building management and heritage governance.

## Objectives

To analyze the changes in the use of the cultural space of the Han community through the architecture in Nanxun Ancient Town from 1953 to 2024.



## Literature review

### 1. Cultural Spatial Evolution and Social Change in Nanxun.

Since 1953, as Chinese society has gone through the stages of socialist transformation, reform, and opening up to the development of urban-rural integration in the new era, the architectural space of Nanxun Ancient Town has also gone through many reconstructions. In this process, the utilization and reshaping of cultural space in Han communities have been influenced by multiple factors intertwined with institutional change, economic policy, and cultural identity. Many scholars have explored the relationship between cultural space and architectural form from historical and social perspectives, providing essential insights for understanding the evolution of Nanxun Ancient Town since the 1950s. Zong Yuanhan(1970) systematized the regional characteristics of Nanxun Ancient Town's architecture in the Journal of the Huzhou Prefecture, Zhejiang Province, which provides a basis for understanding the original state of Nanxun's architectural heritage in the early 1950s, even though his study focuses primarily on the Traditional Period. Although the theory of cultural evolution proposed by Lewis H. Morgan (1971) and L.A. White (1988) does not directly address the Chinese context, its theoretical contribution to the mechanism of cultural change is still helpful in understanding the process of integrating traditional and modern elements in the architecture of ancient towns.

With the acceleration of urbanization after the reform and opening, Ogden (1989) and Zukin (1989) revealed the functional transformation problems faced by cultural spaces driven by market logic from the perspective of socio-economic changes, which provided theoretical support for the understanding of the evolution of Nanxun's architecture from a living residence to a commercial tourism space. Fei Xiaotong (1988) emphasized the interaction between regional development and cultural adaptation, Wang Mingming (1997) explored the role of architectural symbols in the construction of social identity, Zhang Ming (2001) and Wu Da (2008) revealed the cultural carrying function of architectural space from the perspectives of power structure and cultural identity, respectively. These studies have given us rich experience in understanding the multiple forces transforming ancestral halls and guildhalls during collectivization to “re-commercialization” after the reform and opening. Wu Xiaoyan (2011) further points out that there is a close relationship between cultural construction and community identity, and his views on the governance of cultural space and community participation provide practical insights for the current reuse of cultural space in Nanxun.

Exploring cultural space management in other ancient towns in China also provides a valuable reference for Nanxun. For example, Fu Ya (2003) explored the Qionglai Pingluo ancient town of protection and renewal from the perspective of sustainable development; Wu and Dong (2006) to the “cultural vein of the doctrine” interpretation of Suzhou Mudu ancient town of improvement planning; Wang and Huang (2008) proposed a tourism-driven Chongqing Qianjiang Maushui ancient town preservation strategy. These studies are of great significance in enhancing the overall planning concept of ancient towns. However, they mainly focus on the macro policy level, and seldom explore the specific conflicts, power coordination mechanisms, and local governance strategies in cultural space management in a specific historical stage. Therefore, in the face of the historical and practical context of Nanxun from 1953 to 2024, it is necessary to continue the historical continuity based on further exploring how to harmonize the cultural space between the traditional protection and contemporary utilization, and then provide more operational theoretical support and methodological paths for the practice of building management.

### 2. From functional coordination to spatial production: transforming and expanding theoretical perspectives

Structural functionalism provides a theoretical path to analyze architectural and cultural space as a component of the social system. Parsons' "AGIL" framework is used to analyze the adaptive (A), goal-achieving (G), integrative (I), and latent (L) functions of architectural space in Nanxun Ancient Town, thereby revealing its role in maintaining social stability and cultural continuity in the Han community. For example, the "street in front and river at the back" pattern demonstrates the ability to adapt to the natural and economic environment (A); the ancestral halls and Guanghui Gong embody the realization of social



goals, such as cultural inheritance and community organization (G); the multi-functional space integrates religious, cultural, and economic exchanges (I); The moderate modernization of traditional buildings (e.g., converting them into cultural pavilions) reflects the implicit transmission of values and collective memory (L).

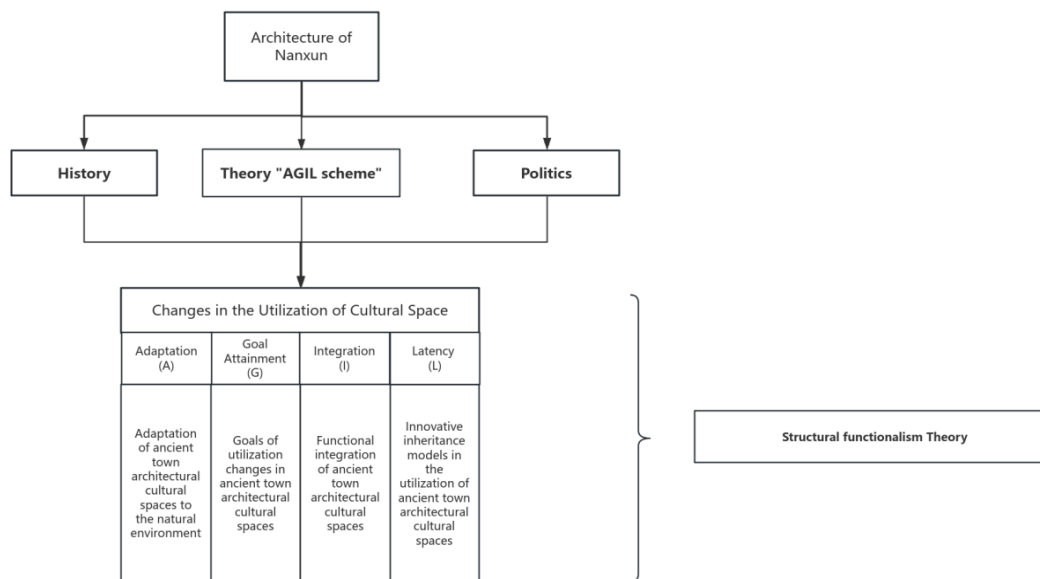
However, in terms of the actual changes in China from 1953 to 2024, structural functionalism has obvious deficiencies in explaining spatial conflicts, power inequalities, and management barriers. For example, spatial unification and transformation during collectivization often neglected the original clan structure, while tourism and commercial development during the marketization phase intensified the representational consumption of local culture. The contradictions and tensions in these processes go beyond the assumptions of structural functionalism about "balance" and "stability".

Therefore, in analyzing the evolution and management of Nanxun's cultural space from 1953 to 2024, we should introduce more diversified theoretical perspectives, especially the "social production of space" in the field of construction management, a concept proposed by Henri Lefebvre, which emphasizes that space is not only physical existence, but also social production. The idea was proposed by Henri Lefebvre, who noted that space is not only a physical existence, but also a product of social relations, power structure, and ideology. (Lefebvre, 1991). In the context of Nanxun, the generation of architectural space reflects the adaptation of nature and function and is deeply embedded in the multiple interactions of national policy, the logic of capital, and local identity. For example, the collective transformation in the 1950s embodied the state's institutional reconfiguration of spatial resources. At the same time, the rise of cultural tourism since the reform and opening up demonstrated the process of redefinition and encoding of cultural space under the impetus of the market mechanism. Social production of space reveals how the dominant force in Nanxun has realized resource control and identity construction through spatial practices at different stages of its history. The social production of space reveals how the dominant forces in Nanxun realized resource control, identity construction, and cultural reproduction through the practice of space in different historical stages, which provides a key addition to understanding the evolution of Nanxun's architectural and cultural space. At the same time, social production of space also provides new ideas for contemporary architectural management - that is, in the protection of architectural heritage and spatial renewal, we should pay attention to the social relations and power structure behind the space and build a more inclusive and sustainable cultural space governance model through negotiation mechanisms and participatory planning. The governance model of cultural space is more inclusive and sustainable through consultative mechanisms and participatory planning.

### Conceptual Framework

The framework of this study is centered on the change of architectural functions in Nanxun Ancient Town from 1953 to 2024. The AGIL theory analyzes the change process in cultural space by combining the three dimensions of history, theory, and politics. The evolution of the cultural space of ancient town architecture is divided into four functional modules: adaptation, goal achievement, integration, and latency. In turn, it reveals the functional evolution and value reconstruction of Nanxun cultural space in the multicultural fusion and social change.





**Figure 1** Research framework

## Methodology

This study employs a combination of various research methods:

**Literature review method:** Literature review methodology includes collecting, verifying and organising literature to gain scientific understanding through analysis, the focus of this study's literature review includes: the historical development of architectural culture in Nanxun ancient town, through analysing local historical books such as Nanxun Zhi, Huzhou Prefecture Zhi and Jiayetang Collection, the study explores the origins of Nanxun's architecture, its development, and its connection with the local economy and social structure; the second focus of the literature review is on the interaction between residents' needs and architectural functions. It's combined with a review of the spatial triadicty framework; these documents will guide the interpretation of how resident needs and building functions are discussed in the literature.

**Field research method:** Also known as the fieldwork method, this research project investigates Nanxun Ancient Town in depth through fieldwork. It focuses on its buildings' spatial layout and functional evolution. During the investigation process, the researcher will record the state of use of the building, spatial organization, and the characteristics of the surrounding environment through structured observation, and at the same time, combine with semi-structured interviews with the original residents, commercial tenants, and managers to obtain the experience of the correlation between spatial change and social cognition. In addition, visual information such as key nodes and façades will be recorded through photography and hand-drawing to support post-analysis. All the field data will be systematically processed through the organization of interview notes and archiving of images, and analyzed against historical documents, to construct a dynamic mapping of the relationship between architectural space and social practices. This process enhances the effectiveness of data collection and ensures the comprehensiveness and rigor of the research results in terms of spatial understanding and cultural analysis.

**Case study method:** The case study method is a research method that analyses a specific case in depth to reveal universal patterns or phenomena. This paper will analyze the cultural changes of representative buildings in Nanxun Ancient Town in different periods. By selecting a sample of eight buildings, the researcher chose the top eight buildings from each functional category based on the purposive sampling method (including residential, commercial, religious, and public buildings). These categories were selected based on the four dimensions of cultural change and the buildings recommended by the researchers.

Representative examples of architecture reveal how cultural change has evolved through the evolution of architectural space, function, and form.

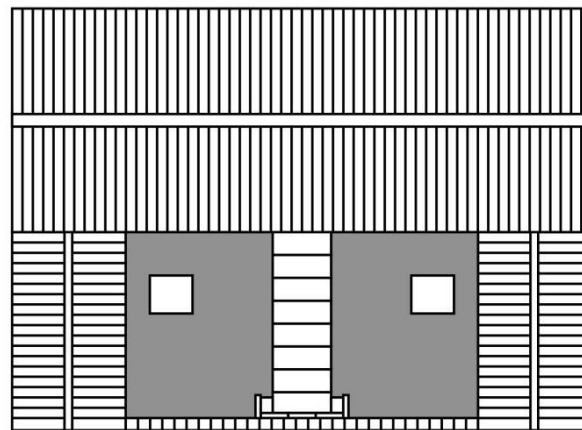
## Results

### 1. 1953-1980: Transformation of architectural space and remodelling of the concept of community under the collectivisation system

From 1953 to 1980, Nanxun was an ancient town of architecture and culture with a spatial structure that was part of a period of dramatic transformation. This stage, from the beginning of the first five-year plan of the new China, to the eve of reform and opening, was when the country implemented a highly centralized planned economic system and socialist collectivization policy. In this social context, Nanxun ancient town of traditional architectural space is in the system and ideology under the dual influence of the material form of simplification and functional transformation, accompanied by community members' cognitive approach, value judgement, and even aesthetic concepts of fundamental remodeling.

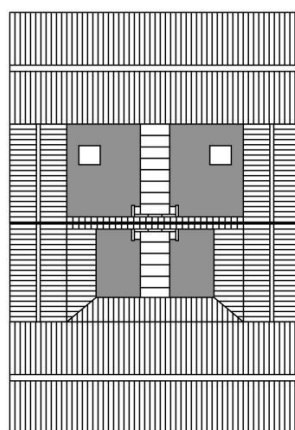
On the one hand, the policy level promotes the traditional clan space, religious space, and merchant cultural symbols of the space of de-functionalization, de-sacralization, and functional re-configuration. On the other hand, the form of social organization has shifted from a clan-village structure to a unit-organization structure, and the transformation of cultural space in terms of physical use and symbolism reflects the process of reorganizing the social structure of the Han community.

Before 1953, the ancient town of Nanxun in the Han community generally used the traditional courtyard layout, with a one-entry or multi-entry courtyard as the basic type. This forms a strong functional partition and family beliefs of the spatial system. Figure 2 shows a typical one-entry courtyard, with two-story buildings and trees in the courtyard, which ordinary and well-off families own.



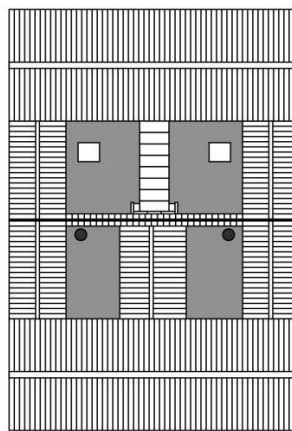
**Figure 2** Inner courtyard layout form 1

Figure 3. The compound is generally the second in a multi-part courtyard. The front part of the house is generally a living room, the back is generally housing, the front part of the inner courtyard corridor is usually set up with beautiful people leaning on the courtyard, and sometimes there are wells. Outside the side corridors are auxiliary rooms such as kitchens, servants' rooms, etc., which are connected to the courtyard through the corridors.



**Figure 3** Inner courtyard layout from 2

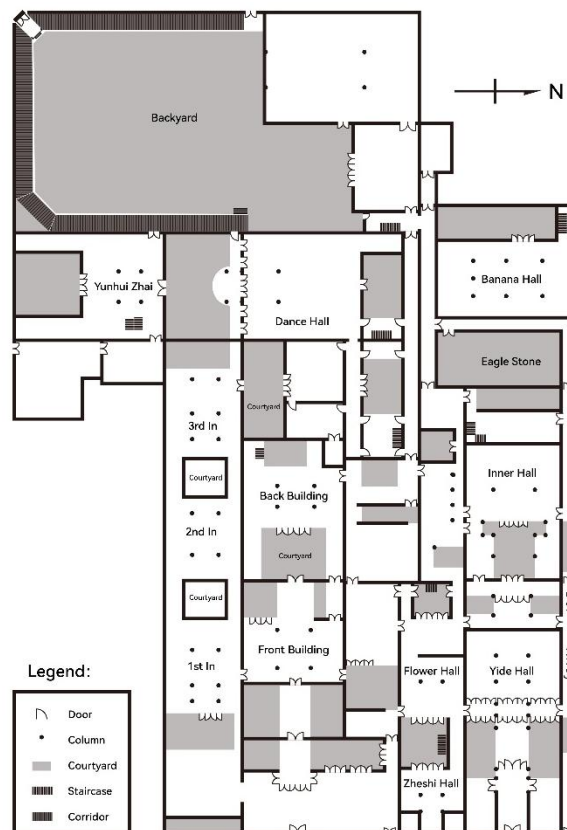
Figure 4 this type of courtyard is generally the last into the courtyard, the courtyard is generally a garden, the back of the big house for the owner's study or other recreational rooms, the front of the big house for the bedrooms or halls, with a single corridor connecting the front and back of the inner courtyard to show the meaning of a deep courtyard, the backyard is generally planted with two large trees, the front yard by the fence is usually planted with bamboo or climbing plants. This layout not only meets the needs of family life but also reflects the Nanxun residents' family ethics, spatial order, and natural harmony, which are essential and integral to the Han community cultural space in Nanxun's ancient town.



**Figure 4** Inner courtyard layout from 3

The representative of traditional residential architecture in Nanxun, Zhang Shiming's former residence, belongs to this courtyard layout. Still, its use changed significantly from the 1950s to the 1960s, reflecting the reconfiguration of the spatial function of private mansions during the collectivist period. In this period, the former residential land was vacant for many years, under the government escrow, which basically maintains the original spatial function as shown in Figure 5. Moreover, according to the record of Shen Shen (2019), the building was borrowed by the PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY 99 HOSPITAL in 1951, and was used for the stationing and medical functions of the army's health system; it was taken over by the Logistics Department of the Zhejiang Military Region in the early 1960s, and continued to serve as a base for the army's administrative offices and material deployment. To 1968 and transferred to the China Tea Import and Export Corporation as a warehouse, completely detached from the original residence and family function, the building's original ballroom interior furniture, furnishings are vacated, only as a basic

warehouse use as Figure 6. 1958, the CPC Central Committee approved the "resolution on the establishment of the people's commune", agriculture, industry, education and the military, etc., integrated into a basic social unit, that is, the people's commune. At the same time, due to the planning system requiring all economic sectors to be integrated into a unified arrangement, Nanxun ancient town of residential, commercial, faith, and public building space was gradually forced into the service of collective production, publicity, and education tools. Although the former residence retained the surface form of the basic brick structure and the original volume during this period, the nature of architectural space and logic underwent a fundamental transformation. From the original highly privatized and ritualized family residence, the space was incorporated into the "functional redistribution" mechanism dominated by the state and the unit system. It became the temporary land for the military system and the state-run enterprises. The spatial rights have shifted from "generational inheritance" to "planned distribution." The emotional connection between the residents and the building has been institutionalized and interrupted, while the cultural symbolism of the former residence has also been diluted. This spatial transformation triggered a systematic reconstruction of traditional aesthetic concepts. The public's aesthetic attitude towards the space of the mansion gradually shifted from "exquisite structure, superiority and inferiority of the layout" to "durability, unity, and service to the collective", and the building was no longer a symbol of personal status and cultural indoctrination, but rather a symbol of personal status and culture, and a symbol of artistic education. Architecture is no longer a symbol of personal status and cultural indoctrination, but a functional container serving the collective goal, reflecting the deep coupling between cultural space and national political logic.



**Figure 5** Zhang Shiming's Former Residence: Architectural Functional Space



**Figure 6** Photographs of a ballroom that has lost its original function after being used as a warehouse

Nanxun Chamber of Commerce, as a representative of the traditional commercial building, has experienced a more dramatic functional reconstruction. Initially used for businesspeople's meetings, the business culture symbol of the space, after the country's founding, was incorporated into the collective economic system, and changed to serve as a much-needed Nanxun town government office. This brought about the decline of merchant culture, the residents of the "commercial space" imagination from "exquisite prosperity" to "silence and simplicity", and gradually accepted collective production as the goal, and accepted the logic of spatial value aimed at collective production.

Traditional faith buildings also changed during this period. Interviewee Ms. Zhou mentioned that (Zhou, 2024). When she was in her twenties (around the mid-1950s), the local use of 'religious sites' changed, with buildings converted into cultural halls, religious decorations painted over or replaced with slogans, and shrines and temples downgraded from 'sacred symbols' to 'functional shells'. Shrines and temples were downgraded from "sacred symbols" to "Functional space". The people's behavior in the space has also shifted from rituals, prayers, and ancestor worship to local organizational activities such as meetings, broadcasts, etc. The original psychological mechanism of "worshiping God" gradually faded, and the sense of cultural belonging to the space was fundamentally shifted.

This series of changes in architectural space not only reflects the simplification of form and homogenization of function on the physical level but also maps out the reorganization of collective concepts and the reconstruction of aesthetic consciousness of the Han Chinese community at a deeper level. The cultural space was gradually replaced by an institutional "production and mobilization platform" from a "symbolic network of places", and the residents' attitude towards architecture shifted from an emotional, identity, and ceremonial cognition to a rational cognition of functionality, unity, and order. This change has shaped a new phenomenon under collectivist aesthetics - decoration has been devalued, scale has been unified, privacy has been replaced by collectivity, Beauty standards have given way to individual experience, policy advocacy, and institutional discipline.



**Figure 7** Nanxun Chamber of Commerce exterior wall, left with the slogan.

From the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, in the context of the state's comprehensive implementation of the planned economy and collectivist ideology, the cultural space of Nanxun Ancient Town underwent a deep-seated institutional adjustment. The cultural space changes in this period can be systematically analyzed with the help of Parsons AGIL theoretical model: at the level of adaptation, the use of buildings was rapidly adjusted to serve the national economic production goals, such as mansions as warehouses, temples as auditoriums, reflecting the space's ability to respond to resources of the macro-system; at the level of goal attainment, the traditional cultural space has been endowed with the functions of policy propaganda, organizational mobilization, etc., and has become the national At the level of integration, the original clan-centered living structure was broken down and shifted to a living pattern of shared units and blurred public and private interests, and community behavioral norms and social order were reconstructed through spatial sharing; at the level of potentialsail pattern maintenance, the cultural value system underwent a profound remodeling, with traditional beliefs and aesthetic patterns gradually fading away to be replaced by institutional norms and ideological slogans, forming a "cultural system" and a "cultural system". In the level of potential pattern maintenance, the cultural value system has also undergone a profound remodeling, with traditional beliefs and aesthetic patterns gradually fading and being replaced by institutional norms and ideological slogans, resulting in a pattern of cultural submergence that "prioritizes functionality and silences symbolism. The spiritual core of the cultural space at this stage was systematically rewritten, and the residents' spatial identity, aesthetic standards, and cultural behaviors underwent a profound transformation under the discipline of institutional forces, marking the transition to a collective economic system, and leaving tension and potential resources for the reactivation of the cultural space after the 1980s.

## **2. 1981-2005: Adjustment of cultural space and the return of the concept of community during the period of reform and transition**

With the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, China entered a significant period of economic transition between 1981 and 2005. From the Sixth Five-Year Plan to the Tenth Five-Year Plan, a financial model guided by market mechanisms was gradually established at the national level, with individual economies, township enterprises, and private industries encouraged by policy, and the cultural sphere gradually shifted from a single ideological orientation to a plurality of expressions. In 1982, the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics was promulgated, establishing ancient buildings as objects of protection for the first time. In this context of transformation,

Nanxun ancient town of architecture and cultural space has undergone structural changes, embodied in the adjustment of the physical form of the building, the restoration of the functional structure, and the reconstruction of community residents' cognitive, aesthetic, and cultural attitudes.

From the living space point of view, after a long period of unitization and collectivization of use, the Nanxun ancient town of traditional houses in this stage gradually restored to the family living unit. Baima building area, for example, was initially divided into multiple households living together in the mansion. Property ownership returned, and spatial reorganization began to appear. Through the village units, the government gradually promoted the recognition of property rights and residential base recovery and distribution to encourage households to repair their old houses. The family has become the basic unit of residential and economic behavior; some residents will strengthen the ancestral house renovation, open a small store, and set up handmade stores, forming a new pattern of "under the store on the house. In this process, the Nanxun government set up Huzhou Nanxun Tourism Development Co., Ltd., which is the main implementation of the Nanxun ancient town restoration unit, responsible for funding and project management, and the historical value of the façade, walls, and ridges to provide subsidies for restoration advice. Traditional architectural details such as gray walls and tiles, horse head walls, patio space, etc., were re-recognized and respected, and the aesthetics of living began to return from functional to cultural.

Regarding commercial space, the Silk Industry Hall, a representative building, was gradually incorporated into the local cultural development system after it was withdrawn from administrative use in the planning system. The Silk Industry Primary School, established in 1921, was restored and used during this period. In the following years, the school was moved out to protect the old building, and in appearance, the Silk Industry Hall restored the elements of the building, such as door plaques, roof ridges, and window patterns. With China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and other major nodal events, promoting the "merchant spirit" from the former "remnants of capitalism" to be re-identified by the local community as a manifestation of cultural self-confidence and regional memory, several community residents in the interviews were proud of Nanxun's previous commercial achievements. Several community residents interviewed were proud of Nanxun's last commercial successes, and one interviewee in particular, Ms. Weng (2024), told us that the perception of the term "chamber of commerce" and "guild" had changed from pejorative to neutral or even positive during this period. This change in perception has also influenced the subsequent management of the building, such as the transfer of the Silk Chamber to the operation of the Huzhou Nanxun Tourism Development Co., Ltd., and the joint organization of exhibitions, open days, and other activities with the community, forming a mechanism for the integration of culture and business.



**Figure 8** Silk Industry Primary School in the 1980s and the Silk Industry Hall in 2024

In addition, faith spaces have also been revived to a certain extent during this period. Traditional buildings, such as the Guanghui Palace and the Liu Family Temple, had their faith and spiritual functions partially restored alongside the rise of the discourse of "cultural heritage". Shrines and incense in the temples have been rekindled, and festivals have resumed. In terms of architectural appearance, the



Guanghui Palace was rebuilt in 2003, with the restoration of plaques and decorative elements. Functionally, these spaces have served as ceremonial and deliberative spaces and have become a flexible vehicle for connecting traditional culture with modern community life. In participating in using these spaces, the residents gradually restored their cultural identity regarding the relationship between faith, rituals, and space.

In short, between 1981 and 2005, with the Chinese society moving from the planned system to the market economy system of transition, Nanxun, an ancient town of architecture and cultural space, experienced a deep systematic adjustment. Analyzed in the framework of the AGIL study. In the face of the gradual relaxation of policies, economic openness, and cultural pluralism of the external environment, Nanxun's cultural space shows a powerful ability to adapt to the system. On the one hand, through the restoration of family housing, encourage the development of self-employment to cope with the new economic structure, on the other hand, also in line with local governance objectives, were reintegrated into the regional cultural and economic construction system, to achieve the integration of spatial resources to the use of modern economic goals. This transformation not only took place on the financial level but also touched the relationship structure and value identity within the community. The revival of religious temples, temple fairs, and festivals rebuilt the cultural connection between community members and reconstructed the public order and social integration mechanism between rituals and daily life. More importantly, the reconstruction of cultural space in this period restored the recognition of traditional aesthetics and cultural values at a deeper level, reviving the once-suppressed carvings and paintings, folk colors and festive atmosphere, which became an essential psychological carrier for the residents to reconstruct their identity and local identity. This process of structurally coordinating spatial use and social relations, and culturally restarting the symbolic system and aesthetic mode, fully demonstrates the comprehensive ability of a social system to simultaneously adapt to the environment, transform goals, integrate order, and reproduce culture during the transition period. This is an actual demonstration of the systemic self-regulation and functional complementarity emphasized by Structural Functionalism.

### 3. 2006-2024: Consumerization, Landscaping, and Cultural Consciousness Reconstruction of Cultural Space

Since entering the 11th Five-Year Plan in 2006, China has officially entered the historical stage of parallel development of a cultural powerhouse and a new type of urbanization. Accompanied by the "cultural industry", "tourism economy", "non-heritage protection", "historic district renewal", and other national strategies, Nanxun ancient town was included in Zhejiang Province and the national key historical and cultural district protection and development system. From 2006 to 2024, Nanxun's cultural space underwent policy support, capital intervention, and aesthetic reconstruction under multiple forces, showing a significant function of composite, representation of landscape, and cultural consumption characteristics. This stage is a critical period of spatial reconstruction and a turning point for local community residents to reconstruct traditional values, regional identity, and the aesthetic system.

At the level of residential buildings, the traditional houses represented by the Hundred Houses have undergone a typical cultural and tourism integration transformation. Based on retaining the traditional form of Jiangnan, the appearance of the building is unified with additional lighting, guidance, and landscape elements, building the image of "poetic Jiangnan" in the minds of tourists; the interior has been transformed into a multi-functional space, such as boutique lodging and cultural experience halls, with the life gradually giving way to exhibition and commerciality. With the transformation of space functions, the roles of the original residents have also changed. Some choose to rent out their homes for a long time and withdraw from business affairs, while others retain some of their residential functions and personally participate in the operation of the B&B and cultural activities. This shift in identity from "resident" to "operator" has not only reshaped the rhythm of daily life in the community but also brought more entrepreneurial opportunities to the younger generation, leading to a reconceptualization of the privacy and public nature of the space. To cope with the pressure of cultural tourism development, the street and enterprises have established a



multi-party coordination mechanism to promote residents' participation in spatial governance, which, to a certain extent, enhances the community's voice and sense of belonging in the management of cultural tourism.



**Figure 9** Nanxun Ancient Town B&B

Nanxun Chamber of Commerce also began to transform during this period. The original traditional local Chamber of Commerce, later used for government offices and cultural exhibitions of the building, after 2010 was transformed into a "Jili Silk Hall", as the flagship venue for the artistic display of the Nanxun non-heritage silk industry chain. The building surface restoration of delicate brick carvings, grey tile façade, and the interior is done through the exhibition design, immersive set, and modern technology to present the silk craft and historical picture. At the same time, the residents and operators' perception of the space has shifted: it is no longer seen as a static site, but as a platform for dynamic commercial and cultural narratives. On an aesthetic level, the 'tradition' of commercial buildings is no longer seen as the past. Still, it is repackaged in landscapes and storytelling as 'cultural commodities' that can be perceived, consumed, and disseminated, such as the Silk Guild Hall, where storytelling occurs daily.

The evolution of the religious architectural space reflects the reconciliation of the function of faith and community culture. In the case of Guanghui Palace, while maintaining the ritual function, the space is embedded in the local culture and the nodes for tourists to pray for blessings. The appearance of the building not only reproduces the traditional form but is also equipped with modern facilities such as night lighting and visitor guides. The space is transformed into a complex of community faith, visitor experience, and faith culture display. Under the new spatial logic, residents no longer confine their knowledge of the faith building to ancestor worship and rituals. Instead, they more often recognize it as a social function carrier for "spiritual culture display". On the aesthetic level, the residents returned from the religious distance of "respect and distance" to the interactive aesthetic cognition of "participation and recreation", and the aesthetic evaluation of temple colors, artifacts, and structures gradually broke away from ideological constraints and turned to sensory experience and the expression of cultural identity.

The cultural space in Nanxun has undergone a functional transition from garden to classroom in the educational heritage. With the family school system replaced by modern schools, traditional cultural spaces through public education continue their cultural function. For example, in the 1970s, 'Yiyuan' was converted into a primary school to provide a place for local children to study; the silk industry hall was also transformed into a 'silk industry primary school' in the 1980s. These transformations reuse space and reflect the core value of education in the community, continuing the Han tradition of valuing education. The space's cultural atmosphere and educational content are integrated so that the modern system can sustain the original logic of 'cultural place'. Jiayetang Library is one of the most representative of Nanxun cultural heritage spaces. It was built during the Qing dynasty, the Tongzhi years, and is located in Liu Xiaolian village. The collection of books reached its peak of more than 600,000 books. It is not only the cultural symbol of the gentry family but also bears the social function of public cultural reproduction. Even after

wars and social changes, its structure and functions have remained stable. In recent years, to ensure its continued relevance and accessibility, Jiayetang has been listed as a key cultural heritage unit, and its management has enhanced its public attributes by digitizing ancient books, organizing exhibitions and cultural lectures, and opening up applications for academic research, to turn it from a "culture in a building" to a dynamic knowledge platform for "educating people with culture". "It is a dynamic knowledge platform. "Family school - school - social library" this spatial function chain constitutes the Nanxun Han community cultural inheritance and reproduction of the internal logic: family school is rooted in the family ethical structure, is the starting point of cultural inheritance; school to public education in the form of inheritance and expansion of family value system, is the re-socialization of cultural norms platform; library represents the social sharing of culture and intergenerational memory of the macro-inheritance mechanism. The bookstore represents the social sharing of culture and the macroscopic inheritance mechanism of intergenerational memory. It embodies the transformation and continuation of the traditional cultural space from privacy to publicity.

The evolution of public cultural space is concentrated in integrating old and new spaces, such as the ancient theatre and the Elephant Hotel. In the case of the Ancient Theatre, for example, the initially marginalized historical stage has been reintegrated into the community's cultural life, becoming an essential venue for folk music performances. The external restoration restores its visual aesthetics and makes it more suitable for modern tourism functions through internal scene modification. Elephant Hotel as a representative of the new public space, contemporary architectural language to carry the "traditional culture" meaning, its appearance to "Nanxun four elephants and eight bulls" in the legend of the "elephant" image Inspired by the appearance of the "Nanxun four elephants and eight oxen" legend "elephant" image, the internal integration of intelligent service functions, become a cultural display window for foreign tourists. This transformation has reshaped the residents' understanding of "public cultural space", from a single place of activity to a key node of community cultural reproduction and social narrative; residents' sense of spatial aesthetics has also gradually transitioned from "form follows function" to "form follows function". The residents' knowledge of the aesthetics of space has also gradually transitioned from "form follows function" to the modern aesthetic logic of "form expresses identity".



**Figure 10** Nanxun Elephant Hotel

From the perspective of AGIL theory of structural functionalism, the reorganization of architectural space in this period not only reflects the adaptability of the social system to the external environment but also the synergistic operation of local governance objectives, community integration paths, and cultural reproduction mechanisms. In the face of the trend of cultural industrialization, tourism consumption and town branding, Nanxun various types of cultural space shows a strong adaptive characteristics: whether it is the residential space of the lodging, religious space of the multi-functional embedded, or the public space



of the integration of services and visual unity, which all show the community's active response to macro policy and market environment. At the level of goal achievement, through spatial renewal, cultural activation and brand curation, the local government has realized the strategic goals of economic growth, cultural export and urban image reconstruction with the cultural space of the ancient town as the core, and the space itself has been systematically integrated into the policy frameworks of "integration of culture and tourism", "dissemination of non-heritage" and so on. The space itself has been institutionalized and integrated into the policy framework of "cultural tourism integration" and "dissemination of non-heritage". In terms of integration, the composite use of architectural space not only stimulates the residents' awareness of local culture but also rebuilds the interactive ties between communities through festivals, ceremonies, and experiential activities. Different groups around the space carry out the common construction, common use, and sharing behavior, so that the cultural space has become the intermediary platform for community collaboration. More critically, Nanxun cultural space has significantly recovered its latent function in this stage, i.e., as a symbolic system of cultural identity, collective memory, and aesthetic paradigm back in action. Through visual translation and storytelling, packaging becomes the symbolic language of cultural identity expression. Residents' attitude towards these spaces has also changed from pure use to cultural identity, and spatial aesthetics and cultural emotions have been reconstructed simultaneously. Therefore, the renewal of Nanxun cultural space from 2006 to 2024 is not only a visual restoration of the urban form, but also a re-adjustment of the social system to its own cultural structure and function, marking a local Han community in the face of the tension between modernity and tradition, through the cultural space to complete a deep-seated institutional response and cultural remodeling adaptation.

## Summary

This study finds that the cultural space of the Han community in Nanxun Ancient Town demonstrated a high degree of inclusiveness and adaptability between 1953 and 2024 and was able to continue to realize functional reorganization and value regeneration in the context of changing economic systems, policy orientations, and cultural identities. This evolution has reshaped the logic of architectural space use and the community's social structure and cultural identity system.

During this period, the cultural space has continuously responded to the challenges of environmental and social changes. From the unified planning during the collectivist period, to the return of property rights and the penetration of market mechanisms after the reform and opening, and then to the 21st-century consumer economy and the compound response to the demand for cultural tourism, residential, commercial, faith, and public buildings show a strong spatial functional adaptability. And the use of architectural space goals with the evolution of the times and adjustments. The early period was dominated by political mobilization and production function, the middle period focused on economic gain and cultural return, and the contemporary period pursued the optimization of both financial and cultural values and supported the higher goal of sustainable social development. Integration is the key mechanism to coordinate spatial and social functions among the three periods. During the collectivization period, public organizations dominated social integration; during the reform period, the market mechanism and family networks worked together; In the modern stage, through the tripartite collaboration and integration mechanism among the government, market, and community residents, cultural space presents a synergistic pattern of tripartite interaction among government planning, community practice, and market operation. The government sets spatial goals through policy guidance and functional delineation, community residents give emotional value to the space through daily use and ritual activities, and the market activates the actual function of the space through consumption scenarios and service systems. In this process, architecture becomes the medium of negotiation between all parties, realizing a balance between cultural expression and logic of use through spatial layout, functional renewal, and symbolic design. Finally, despite the political and economic conditions that inhibited traditional cultural functions during specific periods, Han communities have always preserved and activated family values, faith-based activities, and local aesthetic traditions. Especially in the second and third periods, the landscaping of cultural spaces and cultural and creative





practices has promoted the innovative expression of culture, making traditional culture return to the public in the form of contemporary expression, and enhancing the cultural self-consciousness and identity of community members.

Overall, the evolution of cultural space in Nanxun Ancient Town is not a linear process but has undergone complex adjustments and regeneration driven by inclusiveness and adaptability. Continually reconfiguring spatial form and use logic has promoted the community's compound economic growth and enhanced social cohesion, realizing the synergistic development of cultural, financial, and social goals. This multidimensional dynamic evolution provides a critical case study for understanding how Chinese Han communities achieve cultural regeneration and social transformation through architectural space in modernization. More importantly, this study offers specific insights into the field of architectural management: the experience of Nanxun demonstrates that historical buildings are not fixed remnants but can be transformed into cultural assets that support the sustainable development of a community under a multi-party collaborative mechanism. Through a dynamic balance between government guidance, market operation, and resident participation, the cultural space maintains the vitality of its use and reconfigures the community's identity structure and social network. This process provides other historical towns with management strategies for the adaptive use of heritage buildings under the pressure of modernization and theoretical support for promoting a community-centered cultural governance model. In the context of contemporary urban transformation that emphasizes conservation and development, the Nanxun case contributes to a renewed understanding of the key role of architectural space in adaptive reuse of heritage, activation of public values, and community synergy mechanisms.

## Discussion

By studying the evolution of the cultural space of Han communities in Nanxun Ancient Town from 1953 to 2024, this study finds that all Han communities exhibit significant cultural resilience and spatial reengineering capabilities, and that a combination of national policies, market mechanisms, and the internal needs of the community shapes changes in spatial functioning. For example, Talcott Parsons (1951) pointed out that the various parts of the social structure need to readjust their functions in response to changes in external conditions to maintain the stability and order of the system, and that in the face of change, the community must adapt to these changes to ensure the continuation of its stability and function. During the period of collectivization, spaces were expropriated by the state and transformed into public offices, warehouses or educational facilities; after the reform and opening up, the policy of returning property rights made the architectural spaces belong to families and individuals again, which promoted "micro-activation" mainly in the form of housing repairs, the opening of lodgings and small-scale workshops; and in the 21st century, accompanied by the policy of cultural tourism and the promotion of heritage protection regulations, the government and the government have been working together to promote the "revitalization" of cultural tourism and heritage preservation. In the 21st century, by promoting cultural tourism policies and heritage protection regulations, the government and enterprises have guided space regeneration through "investment + use guidance", promoting such spatial rejuvenation.

At the same time, the spatial evolution of Nanxun also reflects the theory of "social production of space" in construction management. According to Henri and Donald (Lefebvre, 1991), space is not only a physical form, but also a process of continuous "production" through social, political, and economic interaction. In Nanxun, historical spaces such as traditional houses, ancestral halls, and chambers of commerce have been redefined and activated through the negotiation between the government's planning objectives (envisioned space), the market's actual operation (perceived space), and residents' daily practices (living space). The reconfiguration of spatial functions is not a simple top-down planning, but a governance process with nested social relations and multi-party collaboration.

Overall, this study combines the findings of structural functionalism theory and spatial social production theory to review the reasons for the evolution of the cultural space of the Han community in Nanxun Ancient Town between 1953 and 2024. The Han community's flexible adjustment of the function





of cultural space in the process of transition from collective economy to market economy, along with the continuous absorption of foreign cultures while maintaining local characteristics, enabled the cultural space of Nanxun Ancient Town to adapt to the needs of the times and continue to play a role in social and economic vitality.

## Recommendation

Research shows that the cultural space of Nanxun Ancient Town is characterized by the fusion of East and West, ancient and modern, and multicultural interaction, which puts forward higher requirements for the protection of cultural heritage and tourism development. Therefore, it is recommended that the relevant decision-makers in the development of protection and development strategies, fully aware of the complexity and dynamics of the integration of different cultures, in respect of traditional religious rituals, family memories and community life and other cultural heritage based on authenticity, pay attention to the "spirit of place", that is, encompassing the tangible and intangible qualities of the Han cultural space unique nature. Based on the originality of cultural heritage, such as religious ceremonies, family memories, and community life, it is essential to emphasize the genius loci. This unique essence covers the tangible and intangible qualities of the Han cultural space. At the same time, cultural spaces should be regarded as "living heritage", emphasizing their evolving nature and promoting more dynamic and adaptive policymaking.

And based on the above, it is recommended that visitor carrying capacity assessment and revenue sharing mechanisms be used to ensure that tourism development does not erode the cultural values on which it is based. Digital recording and monitoring techniques should also be incorporated to reflect the rationality of built asset management. In addition, the two-way balancing mechanism should be incorporated into a multi-stakeholder consultation framework by systematically considering and coordinating the needs of Han communities, conservation experts, the government, and tourists. Models such as community advisory committees and participatory planning workshops should also be introduced to enhance the consultation's efficiency and realize authentic sharing and shared governance. Of course, such multi-stakeholder governance should be accompanied by clear communication and conflict mediation mechanisms to ensure consensus-building and long-term cooperation in transforming cultural spaces.

In the face of globalization and the impact of digital media, it is imperative to carry out systematic spatial evolution tracking research on traditional ancient town architecture. It is suggested that future research should integrate architectural, anthropological, sociological, and geographic methods and utilize long-term field data to construct a replicable spatial transformation analysis model. The model should cover the dimensions of physical changes in architecture and socio-cultural influences on the use of space by Han communities, to understand the evolution mechanism of cultural space more comprehensively, provide solid theoretical support for the protection and development of historical towns in China and the world, and promote the organic integration of tradition and modernity.

## References

- Fei, X. T., et al. (1988). *Research on regional development strategies and planning*. China Prospect Publishing House.
- Fu, Y. (2003). Tradition-accumulation-rebirth: Protection and development of Qionglai Pingluo ancient town. *Sichuan Architecture*, (S1), 39–40.
- Henri, L., & Donald, N. S. (1991). *The production of space*.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1974)
- Li, H., & Wang, Y. (2024). A study on the conservation and development of historic neighborhoods under the measurement of community participation: A case study of Chongqing Maguikou historic neighborhood. *Famous Cities of China*, 38(12), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.19924/j.cnki.1674-4144.2024.012.001>





- Liu, C.-A., Liu, M., Zhang, Z., Zhou, X., & Diao, X.-M. (2023). Adaptive reuse strategies for rural industrial remains: A case study of Shandong villages. *Small Town Construction*, 41(11), 13–21.
- Morgan, L. H. (1971). *Ancient society: The path of human development from barbarism through civilization* (D. C. Yang et al., Trans.). The Commercial Press. (Original work published 1877)
- Ogden. (1989). *Social change: On the nature of culture and innate features* (X. Y. Wang & Y. G. Chen, Trans.). Zhejiang People's Publishing House. (Original work published in English)
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Shen, J. (2019). Baijianlou downstairs. *Beijing Arts and Crafts Publishing House*, 1(1), 116–117.
- Tian, Y., & Luo, Y. (2024). Study on the industrial development strategy of cultural landscape heritage sites from the perspective of integral protection: The case of Jingmai Mountain. *Yunnan Social Science*, (04), 172–180.
- Wang, M. M. (1997). *Symbols and society: Exploration of Chinese folk culture*. Tianjin People's Publishing House.
- Wang, P., & Huang, C. (2008). A preliminary study on the planning strategy of tourism-driven township development—The case of Chongqing Qianjiang Maushui Ancient Township Protection and Development Planning. *Science and Technology Innovation Herald*, 10, 207–209. <https://doi.org/10.16660/j.cnki.1674-098x.2008.10.165>
- White, L. A. (1988). *The science of culture: Studies on humanity and civilization* (Y. Shen, K. K. Huang, & L. Y. Huang, Trans.). Shandong People's Publishing House. (Original work published in English)
- Wu, D. (2008). *Social change and cultural identity: A case study of the Liangshan Yi*. Xuelin Publishing House.
- Wu, W., & Dong, W. (2006). Ancient town protection from literary vitalism—The case of Suzhou Mudu ancient town protection and improvement planning. *Jiangsu Architecture*, 4, 2-9.
- Wu, X. Y. (2011). From cultural construction to community identity: The governance of village-to-community transformation. *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, (05), 9–15. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1000-2456.2011.05.004>
- Zhang, M. (2001). *The changes in rural social power and cultural structure*. Guangxi People's Publishing House.
- Zhou (2024). Ms. Zhou (personal communication, 2024), traditional faith buildings also changed during this period.
- Zong, Y. H. (1970). *Zhejiang Huzhou Fuzhi*. Chengwen Publishing House.
- Zukin, S. (1989). *Loft living: Culture and capital in urban change*. Rutgers University Press.

