Article

A Comparative Study of Traditional Village Renewal Characteristics Driven by Different Entities from the Perspective of Place-Making

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Abstract: The renewal of traditional villages should not only focus on the protection of cultural heritage but also comprehensively consider the development of social, economic, and environmental aspects. The concept of place-making offers an effective strategy to address the issues faced by traditional villages today, such as the destruction of cultural heritage, socioeconomic decline, and population loss. At the core of place-making is the establishment of harmonious human–land relationships. This study aims to explore the influence of different entities on place-making during the process of traditional village renewal. This research focused on traditional villages in southeastern China. Based on literature reviews and field surveys, this study employed the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) to develop evaluation criteria for traditional village renewal based on place-making. By selecting case studies of traditional village renewal driven by three entities, government, artists, and villagers, relevant data were collected through field surveys and expert assessments, followed by a comparative analysis of these villages using the place-making evaluation criteria. The results indicate significant differences in traditional village renewal due to varying entity-driven approaches, leading to diverse impacts on different facets of place-making. In conclusion, establishing a renewal model for traditional villages that involves diverse entities is crucial for achieving comprehensive place-making and ensuring the high-quality, integrated, and sustainable development of traditional villages.

Keywords: place-making; traditional village renewal; cultural heritage protection; human–land relationship; entity-driven model; evaluation system; analytic hierarchy process (AHP)

1. Introduction

With the rapid growth of urbanization and globalization in the 1990s, urban and rural areas globally have become more homogeneous, blurring regional distinctiveness [1]. This phenomenon is particularly evident in China, where cities first lost their unique characteristics, leading to a phenomenon of uniformity among thousands of cities [2]. In recent years, with the development of social and economic conditions in rural areas in China, especially with the advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, the countryside has become a focal point of development. In this process, many low-quality and template-based renewal models have been widely applied, leading to the loss of local identity in traditional villages and the destructive impact on regional cultural heritage [3]. As a result, an increasing number of studies and practices emphasize the importance of the concept of locality for regional development.

The formation and shaping of a locality are closely related to the people living there. Human geographers believe that locality reflects people’s feelings, experiences, and memories because “place” is a “space” that is embodied and interpreted [4].

In traditional Chinese society, villages are commonly formed based on kinship and geographical relationships, with development primarily led by the community. This ensures that the characteristics and functionalities of the villages are highly adapted to the needs of the local residents, thus exhibiting distinct local features (see Figure 1). However, following the establishment of new China and the subsequent extension of governmental
power, urbanization and industrialization have progressively encroached on traditional rural societies. This encroachment has eroded the insularity of rural communities, allowing various entities to become involved in the development process. These entities include the government, which possesses significant allocative resources, as well as scholars and artists with humanitarian inclinations. The involvement of entities with different characteristics has led to noticeable differentiated features in the renewal of traditional villages, directly influencing and reshaping the landscapes of these villages. Therefore, it is essential to conduct comparative studies on the characteristics of rural renewal driven by different entities to identify the most suitable modes of engagement for traditional villages. This will maximize the utilization and preservation of local resources in traditional villages, thereby achieving their sustainable development [5,6].

This paper selects Xiadian Village, Xiadi Village, and Tongyang Village, which have similar geographical terrains and socio-cultural-economic levels, as the subjects of study to explore the impact of different entity-driven models on the renewal of traditional villages. These three villages show distinct differences in the driving forces behind their development; Xiadian Village is primarily driven by government-led initiatives, Xiadi Village’s renewal was initially started by artists and gradually attracted more artists, and Tongyang Village’s renewal is completely driven by the personal sentiments of the villagers [7].

Based on the theory of place-making, along with research results and practical experiences related to the renewal of traditional villages, this paper proposes an evaluation system centered around “Place-making” tailored for the renewal of traditional villages in China. This evaluation system was applied to empirically analyze the local construction situations of the three villages, comparing the characteristics of village renewal under the three different entity-driven models using quantitative indicators, and proposing a more suitable participation mode for traditional village renewal within the Chinese context that can effectively achieve place-making.

Existing research on place-making has been limited to theoretical and case-study analyses. A novel aspect of this article is its use of quantitative indicators to assess place-making, and this set of indicators has a certain universality, serving as a practical tool applicable to future evaluations of other villages, thereby facilitating the renewal and development of traditional villages.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory of “Place-Making”

“Place-making” is an interdisciplinary research field involving geography, sociology, anthropology, urban planning, and more. This concept emphasizes the social nature of places, suggesting that places are not merely physical spaces but are also products of
human activities, experiences, and meanings. Edward Relph discussed “placeness” and “placelessness”, pointing out the crisis of losing local characteristics in the modernization process and the call for pursuing local identity [8]. John Agnew proposed the three elements of a place model, as follows: place as geographical location, place experience, and place imagination. In his concept of “High-Context Culture”, Jan Gehl emphasizes the critical role of environmental and cultural backgrounds in the interactions between people and places. He highlights that in such contexts, these elements significantly influence the dynamics of human–environment relationships [9,10].

Geographer Wright once said, “Places carry human subjectivity and are ways of constructing meaning [11]”. Doreen Massey also pointed out that a place is a “collection of social relationships” that is constantly changing and open. This concept promotes the understanding of places as dynamic processes. Places are no longer seen as static backgrounds but as spaces where human interactions and social relationships develop [12]. Therefore, the construction of human–place relationships is at the core of place-making. Many scholars have discussed the central role of people in place-making, including practices, behaviors, and narratives [13] that give places meaning and identity.

Henri Lefebvre proposed the theory of social production of space, emphasizing that space is both a product of social relationships and a tool for reproducing them [14]. Within this framework, place-making is viewed as the result of the interaction between social forces and human behavior in specific physical spaces, including power relationships, economic activities, and cultural expressions. Therefore, space becomes the object of place-making. Li Fan and others further refined place-making from a cultural perspective into the following two aspects: “Material Space making” and “emotional space construction” [15]. The reshaping of urban spaces and the development of rural spaces in achieving place-making have been discussed extensively by many scholars [16,17]. Many studies have empirically explored topics such as the reshaping of urban spaces and the development of rural communities [18]. Some scholars have summarized the specific purposes, content, and strategies of place-making practices and pointed out that place-making is not a goal but a process [19]. The protection and construction of local cultural characteristics in Chinese villages have also been widely discussed. The perspective of place-making emphasizes the importance of maintaining the uniqueness of villages, believing that local culture, history, and natural environment are the roots of village charm and competitiveness [20,21]. Many scholars also emphasize that place-making should ensure the primary status of community residents in the village development process, which is key to achieving sustainable development in rural areas [22].

2.2. Evaluation System for the Traditional Villages Renewal

The evaluation system for the renewal of traditional villages refers to a set of standards and indicators used to assess the process and outcomes of village renewal. In recent years, scholars have increasingly realized that the evaluation of traditional village renewal should not solely rely on economic indicators but should construct a multidimensional evaluation system that includes culture, society, environment, and economy [23,24]. Especially for the renewal of traditional villages, the protection of cultural heritage is one of the core contents. The protection and inheritance of cultural heritage are considered key indicators of whether the renewal work is successful [25,26]. Meanwhile, social participation and community development are also important indicators for evaluating traditional village renewal. Studies have shown that the active participation of community residents and their satisfaction with the renewal work are key factors for achieving sustainable development. Promoting community cohesion and building social capital during the process are equally important [27,28]. Although traditional village renewal should not only pursue economic benefits, economic vitality and sustainability are still important components of the evaluation system. The key to evaluating its success lies in whether the renewal project can improve the economic situation of the village, promote employment, and create new economic activities [29,30].
To more systematically assess the comprehensive effects of traditional village renewal, numerous scholars have refined effective evaluation indicators and methods based on actual renewal cases of traditional villages [31–41]. In the fields of urban planning and cultural heritage conservation, methods such as the Delphi expert survey and the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) are most predominantly employed. These methods enhance the scientific rigor and applicability of research by systematically filtering evaluation indicators, with AHP being particularly recognized and utilized for its structured decision-making framework.

AHP was developed by American operations researcher Thomas L. Saaty in the 1970s [42] and was further elaborated in 1980 on its theoretical foundations and practical applications [43]. Since then, AHP has been extensively applied globally in decision analysis and has subsequently been adopted in the fields of architectural heritage conservation and urban planning, especially in building assessment systems for sustainable development and the restoration of architectural heritage [44–48]. In recent years, the application of AHP has expanded into more niche areas such as rural infrastructure decision-making, providing robust quantitative decision support and analysis tools [49,50]. For instance, research by Jong-san Choi and others using the AHP method revealed that education projects are the top priority for rural development in the Dadeldhura region of Nepal [51]. Additionally, studies by Bharath M. and colleagues have combined AHP with the TOPSIS method to evaluate and rank rural water resource schemes, identifying groundwater wells as the most sustainable choice due to their advantages in climate and environmental impact [52].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Object—Traditional Villages in Northeastern Fujian

This study focuses on the Jiufeng Mountain region in the northeastern part of Fujian. Fujian Province has a density of traditional villages far above the average level, ranking 6th among 31 provinces in China. Fujian also boasts a rich traditional cultural heritage, with many traditional folk activities and local folk beliefs still actively practiced in its villages. In addition, due to geographical constraints, many historically and culturally valuable architectural heritage sites have been well preserved. In addition, among Fujian Province, the northeastern part, which this paper focuses on, is a typical region that conforms to the above characteristics. The northeast part of Fujian roughly corresponds to the boundaries of Ningde City. Due to its geographical and transportation limitations, the mountainous area of northeastern Fujian has remained relatively isolated and underdeveloped, preserving many more traditional villages than other regions of Fujian. According to statistics, since 2012, 141 villages in Ningde City have been listed in the “Chinese Traditional Villages” directory, ranking first in Fujian Province. With the promotion of the rural revitalization strategy, these traditional villages rich in cultural value have attracted widespread attention, promoting the implementation of numerous rural construction projects and bringing about significant changes (Figures 2 and 3).

This study extensively visited 12 traditional villages (Figure 4), investigated 9 traditional villages that have undergone spatial renewal, and examined the initiators, funding sources, and operating entities of these renewal projects. Eventually, Xiadang Village, Xiadi Village, and Tongyang Village were selected as the research objects (Figure 5). These three villages had significant differences in their dominant entities during their development. Firstly, the development of Xiadang Village is entirely government-led. The development of Xiadi Village began with artists’ exploration and involvement. The village gradually attracted more artists, forming a characteristic village where artists gather. The development of Tongyang Village is entirely driven by the personal feelings of the villagers and is less influenced by external factors. Table 1 shows the basic information of the three villages, and the subsequent sections will outline the renewal processes of these three villages.
The development of Xiadi Village began with artists' exploration and involvement. The village gradually attracted more artists, forming a characteristic village where artists gather. The development of Tongyang Village is entirely driven by the personal feelings of the villagers and is less influenced by external factors. Table 1 shows the basic information of the three villages, and the subsequent sections will outline the renewal processes of these three villages.

![Figure 2. Jiufeng Mountain area (image source: photos taken by the author).](image)

![Figure 3. Geographical area of Jiufeng Mountain region (image source: created by the author).](image)

**Table 1.** Basic information regarding Xiadang Village, Xiadi Village, and Tongyang Village.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Xiadang Village</th>
<th>Xiadi Village</th>
<th>Tongyang Village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Daixi Town, Pingnan County, Fujian Province</td>
<td>Xiling Town, Pingnan County, Fujian Province</td>
<td>Qingyuan Town, Shouning County, Fujian Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from the city</td>
<td>40 km, 55 min drive</td>
<td>8.2 km, 13 min drive</td>
<td>5.4 km, 10 min drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered population</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>1488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent population</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total area (km²)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built-up area (hectares)</td>
<td>11.87</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorary title</td>
<td>The seventh batch of traditional Chinese villages (2014)</td>
<td>The sixth batch of traditional Chinese villages (2023)</td>
<td>— —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation time</td>
<td>Early 16th century</td>
<td>Early 15th century</td>
<td>Early 14th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start of tourism development</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development model</td>
<td>Initiated by government, run by state-owned enterprise</td>
<td>Initiated by artists, assisted by the government, run by artist group</td>
<td>Initiated by villagers, assisted by the government, run by villagers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2. Place-Making—Evaluation Method for Traditional Village Renewal

3.2.1. Traditional Village Renewal under the Concept of Place-Making

Traditional village renewal refers to a series of transformation and regeneration activities carried out in historically rich rural areas. These activities typically encompass refurbishing old buildings, improving infrastructure, enhancing public services, and protecting and revitalizing traditional culture, among other aspects. Traditional village renewal under the concept of place-making is closely related to concepts like rural development [53], rural tourism development [54], rural heritage conservation [55], and rural construction. While there are overlapping evaluation indicators, each concept has its distinct focus (Figure 6). For instance, rural development appears more like a socioeconomic development strategy
aimed at enhancing the productivity and economic development level of rural areas [56]. Rural tourism development is a specific practical field of place-making, aiming to boost local economic development and cultural inheritance through tourism, attracting tourists by shaping unique local characteristics and experiences. However, unlike rural tourism development, which is oriented toward short-term economic benefits, place-making emphasizes starting from the needs and perspectives of local residents, focusing on sustainability and cultural preservation. Both place-making and rural heritage conservation emphasize the recognition and protection of local history and culture. Still, place-making also involves the comprehensive development of the local economy, society, and culture, as well as strong attention to the rural subject. Rural construction leans more toward the spatial shaping of local areas in the fields of architecture and planning, while place-making focuses more on how to shape rural spaces with unique local characteristics and connotations through means like rural construction.

![Figure 6. Research topics related to place-making in traditional villages (Image source: created by the author).](Image)

Therefore, we conceptualize place-making from the following three perspectives: material space, living space, and social space. Material space-making focuses on the renewal of rural physical elements, living space-making emphasizes the sustainability of cultural heritage and lifestyles, and social space-making underscores the relationships between people and the land, as well as social connections within the village (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Content of Place-Making</th>
<th>Specific Content</th>
<th>Objectives of Place-Making in Traditional Villages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material Space</td>
<td>Physical Environment</td>
<td>Architectural style, living environment, ecological environment, street and lane texture</td>
<td>Distinctive traditional aesthetics, pleasant living environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Space</td>
<td>Atmosphere Building</td>
<td>Traditional customs and beliefs, livelihood methods</td>
<td>Rich spiritual and cultural life, utilizing local resources for economic development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Space</td>
<td>Social Relationship-Building</td>
<td>Neighborhood mutual aid, self-governance, and co-construction</td>
<td>Residents have a sense of happiness and belonging, stable internal development momentum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.2. Evaluation System for Traditional Village Renewal Based on Place-Making

To effectively address the multifaceted and complex criteria involved in the renewal of traditional villages, this study adopts the AHP as its primary research methodology. AHP facilitates a systematic and comprehensive evaluation process by constructing a hierarchical model. This method is particularly suited for determining the relative importance of various decision factors, providing comprehensive quantitative support for the decision-making process. The steps for constructing the evaluation system in this study are as follows:

- Field research and interviews: This aspect mainly includes documenting and researching the physical environment, as well as conducting interviews with entities involved...
in the process of rural renewal. It aims to understand the basic cultural information of the region, clarify the challenges and main factors influencing village development.

- Fundamental literature review and determine the evaluation indicators (Table 3): This step primarily clarifies the general process of spatial renewal in traditional villages, the types of drivers, and the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the study area. It involves collecting a series of indicators related to the renewal of traditional villages from a variety of perspectives in the literature, including national and regional policies and normative indicators related to “New Rural Construction [57]”, “Beautiful Countryside”, “Rural Revitalization”, a selection of China’s traditional villages [58], cultural heritage protection [59], rural tourism development [60,61], etc. Then, the indicators gathered are classified and filtered through the theoretical lens of place-making. The detailed references of each indicator showed in Table 4.

- The first is the use of the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) to calculate the weights of the evaluation system’s indicators for traditional village spatial renewal based on place-making (Table 3). This step results in the determination of individual ranking weights and overall ranking weights for each level (the evaluation system has been assessed by 3 scholars in the relevant field and 2 government officials).

- The final evaluation method includes 3 secondary indicators, 8 tertiary indicators, and 20 quaternary indicators (Table 3). This paper uses a weighted function to derive the indicator scores for the three villages, with the specific formula as follows:

\[ G = \sum_{i=1}^{n} O_i \times W_i (i = 1, 2, 3, \ldots, n) \]  

(1)

where \( G \) represents the comprehensive evaluation score of the assessment object, \( O_i \) is the score of the i-th indicator, and \( W_i \) is the weight of the i-th indicator. The higher the comprehensive evaluation score, the higher the degree of place-making in the village renewal.

3.2.3. AHP Model Consistency Check

To ensure the validity of the AHP model, we conducted a detailed consistency check of the judgment matrix. The main steps include constructing the judgment matrix, calculating the maximum eigenvalue (\( \lambda_{\text{max}} \)) and its corresponding eigenvector, calculating the consistency index (CI), finding the random consistency index (RI), and calculating the consistency ratio (CR).

Taking the primary indicators (B1, B2, B3) as an example, the constructed judgment matrix is as follows:

\[
A = \begin{bmatrix}
1 & 3.9706 & 6.3004 \\
0.2518 & 1 & 1.5876 \\
0.1587 & 0.6299 & 1
\end{bmatrix}
\]

Using the eigenvalue decomposition method, we calculated the maximum eigenvalue (\( \lambda_{\text{max}} \)) to be 3.0000000000000004. According to the consistency check formula, as follows:

\[
\text{CI} = \frac{\lambda_{\text{max}} - n}{n - 1} = \frac{(3 + 4 \times 10^{-16}) - 3}{3 - 1} = 2.22 \times 10^{-16}
\]

Looking up the random consistency index (RI), for a 3-order judgment matrix, the RI value is 0.58. Thus, the consistency ratio (CR) is calculated as follows:

\[
\text{CR} = \frac{\text{CI}}{\text{RI}} = \frac{2.22 \times 10^{-16}}{0.58} = 3.83 \times 10^{-16}
\]

Since CR is much less than 0.1, it indicates that the judgment matrix has good consistency.
Table 3. Place-making—evaluation method for traditional village renewal indicators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal Layer</th>
<th>Primary Indicator</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Secondary Indicator</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Tertiary Indicator</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material Space-making</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>0.7089</td>
<td>Pattern Texture C1</td>
<td>0.2559</td>
<td>D1 Completeness of Traditional Areas</td>
<td>0.2047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D2 Proportion of Traditional Areas</td>
<td>0.0512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Architectural Style C2</td>
<td>0.3536</td>
<td>D3 Preservation Ratio of Traditional Buildings</td>
<td>0.0707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D4 Application Ratio of Traditional Construction Techniques</td>
<td>0.2829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ecological Environment C3</td>
<td>0.0687</td>
<td>D5 Integrity of Natural Ecological Environment</td>
<td>0.0172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D6 The degree of harmony between the settlement and nature</td>
<td>0.0515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Infrastructure C4</td>
<td>0.0307</td>
<td>D7 Infrastructure Satisfaction Level</td>
<td>0.0205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D8 Public Service Satisfaction Level</td>
<td>0.0102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place-making (Weight 1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Local culture C5</td>
<td>0.1340</td>
<td>D9 Vibrancy of Local Cultural Activities</td>
<td>0.0215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Livelihood and Life C6</td>
<td>0.0447</td>
<td>D10 Familiarity with Local Culture</td>
<td>0.0199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D11 Sense of place attachment</td>
<td>0.0925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Space-Making</td>
<td>B3</td>
<td>0.1125</td>
<td>Neighborhood relations C7</td>
<td>0.0563</td>
<td>D12 Retention of Local Livelihood</td>
<td>0.0254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D13 Preservation of Local Living Styles</td>
<td>0.0149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D14 Integration of Tourism Development with Village Traditional Culture and Lifestyle</td>
<td>0.0043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Governance C8</td>
<td>0.0563</td>
<td>D15 Familiarity with Neighbors</td>
<td>0.0281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D16 Frequency of interactions with neighbors</td>
<td>0.0281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D17 Level of Participation in Community Public Activities</td>
<td>0.0422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D18 Degree of Engagement in Village Renewal Projects</td>
<td>0.0141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. References for evaluation indicators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1, C2, C3</td>
<td>Standards for the Selection of Chinese Traditional Villages [62], Evaluation Index System of Chinese Rural Landscape [63]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>Evaluation System of New Rural Construction [57], Evaluation Methods for Human Settlements [64]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5–C6</td>
<td>Standards for the Selection of Chinese Traditional Villages [62], Evaluation System for Rural Revitalization [65], Methods for Rural Cultural Governance [66]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Value Judgment of Rural Culture [67]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>Evaluation System for Rural Revitalization [64], Methods for Rural Cultural Governance [66]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3. Research Data

Based on the presentation of each factor, the 17 indicators can be divided into objective assessment indicators (D1–D6) and subjective assessment indicators (D7–D17). Each indicator is classified into the following five levels: excellent, good, fair, poor, and very poor, with respective level coefficients of 10, 8, 6, 4, and 2 (Table 5).
Table 5. Scoring criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Factor</th>
<th>Scoring Criteria</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Assessment Indicators</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Objective assessment indicators (D1~D6):
  Objective assessment indicators are derived from statistical data from relevant departments and field research, combined with the opinions of relevant experts.

- Subjective assessment indicators (D7~D18):
  For qualitative data, we use questionnaire surveys to obtain data. By surveying target groups, we collect their subjective evaluations of the village spatial renewal and quantify these evaluations using a scoring method. For the subjective evaluation part, we target the following two groups of people: one is external entities related to rural renewal, including the government, external developers, tourists, etc., and the other is the internal entities of the countryside, namely, the villagers themselves. Two types of questionnaires will be designed for both internal and external groups, and the average score for each item will be calculated in the end. The final valid response numbers were 23 for Tongyang Village, 45 for Xiadang Village, and 28 for Xiadi Village.

4. Empirical Analysis of Traditional Village Renewal Driven by Three Different Entities

4.1. Overview of the Renewal in Three Villages

4.1.1. Xiadang Village
  Xiadang Village is located in Xiadang Township, Shouning County, Ningde City, Fujian Province, 10 km away from the township government, with an altitude of 830 m. The village is a revolutionary old area with an area of 3.4 square kilometers and a population of 620. The overall layout of Xiadang Village is from west to east, back to the mountains and facing the water, with a relatively steep overall slope. There is a Lu Feng Bridge in the village, built in 1536, which is the longest traditional single-arch wooden arch bridge in China, possessing significant historical and cultural value.

  Xiadang Village is seen as an important example in China’s poverty alleviation efforts and has, therefore, continuously received government resources, making it a typical case of traditional village renewal driven by the government. Currently, most of the original inhabitants of Xiadang Village have moved to the new Xiadang Village, either voluntarily or involuntarily. The government has led large-scale village facade renovations and construction activities, such as tourist service centers, tourist toilets, parking lots, homestays, and commercial streets, as well as investments of up to 190 million yuan in the Communist Party of China education center and the village’s night scene lighting project, building landscape trails in the mountains and along the river.

4.1.2. Xiadi Village
  Xiadi Village is located in the southeast of Pingnan Township, Pinging County, Fujian Province, 8 km from the county town, with an altitude of 278 m. The village has a history of over 800 years, covering an area of 6.5 square kilometers, with a total population of 475, including 154 permanent residents. In October 2015, with the support of the “Traditional Village Protection and Development Work Leadership Group” of Pinging County, renowned artist Cheng Meixin founded the Senke Charity Organization, dedicated to the protection and revitalization of Xiadi ancient village. By 2016, the buildings in the village had been comprehensively renovated and equipped with basic facilities such as
sanitation and water electricity, making 19 buildings available for use. These restored buildings account for 75% of the total building area of Xiadi ancient village, approximately 6000 square meters.

Furthermore, Xiadi Village initiated several cultural and creative projects, such as an artist residency program, a charitable film training base, and a base for sketching and photography. Thanks to these cultural activities, the village successfully attracted a large number of young people from outside. These young people have brought rich public cultural activities to the countryside, effectively alleviating the issues of hollowing out and aging in the countryside. At the same time, Xiadi Village has attracted a large amount of external investment under this active cultural environment, such as some organizations opening homestays or organizing cultural and creative study tours, further promoting the development and prosperity of the countryside.

4.1.3. Tongyang Village

Tongyang Village is located in the northern part of Qingyuan Town, Shouning County, Ningde City, Fujian Province, adjacent to the county town, only 4 km away from the Qingyuan village, where the township government is located. The village covers an area of about 6.2 square kilometers and has a long history of over 700 years. The village preserves 28 intact ancient houses and a Ming Dynasty building—Liu’s Clan Ancestral Hall, covering 1600 square meters. The overall layout of the settlement is distributed from northwest to southeast, backed by mountains, facing clear water sources, perfectly embodying the traditional Chinese landscape layout. The traditional architectural area of the village covers about 0.016 square kilometers, with a high building density and a regular shape.

However, since the reform and opening up, the traditional appearance of Tongyang Village has been severely damaged. Many traditional buildings on the outskirts of the village were demolished, the traditional scenic area was abandoned deep within the settlement, and most traditional buildings were in a state of disuse, being used to store miscellaneous items and poultry.

Although Tongyang Village is not outstanding in terms of traditional historical and cultural resources, the villagers’ personal sentiments and rich collection of folk cultural artifacts provide core competitiveness for the development of the traditional village. The villagers first rented some abandoned residences from fellow villagers and carried out preliminary renovations. Subsequently, the project attracted the attention and support of the Qingyuan Town government, including basic development work such as street environment renovation. After the project showed initial results, the county cultural bureau further provided financial and planning support, but the entire project is still independently operated and managed by local villagers.

4.2. Data Comparison among the Three Villages

Based on the steps listed in Section 3.3, the actual values of the quantified indicators were dimensionally normalized and combined with the calculation of weights, resulting in a comprehensive evaluation score table for the renewal of Xiadang Village, Xiadi Village, and Tongyang Village based on place-making (Table 6).

Table 6. Comprehensive assessment score sheet.
Table 6. Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Xiadang Village</th>
<th>Xiadi Village</th>
<th>Tongyang Village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>Social Space-Making</td>
<td>0.1125 / 3.5268</td>
<td>/ 5.1671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Pattern Texture</td>
<td>0.2559 / 2.8003</td>
<td>/ 8.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Architectural Style</td>
<td>0.3536 / 4.3999</td>
<td>/ 6.3999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Ecological Environment</td>
<td>0.0687 / 7.4993</td>
<td>/ 8.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>0.0307 / 7.5564</td>
<td>/ 7.1131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>Local culture</td>
<td>0.1340 / 5.5017</td>
<td>/ 4.9506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>Livelihood and Life</td>
<td>0.0447 / 4.9734</td>
<td>/ 4.0885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Neighborhood Mutual aid</td>
<td>0.0563 / 4.5474</td>
<td>/ 4.3258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>Self-governance</td>
<td>0.0563 / 2.5000</td>
<td>/ 5.9992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>Completeness of Traditional Areas</td>
<td>0.2047 / 2.0000</td>
<td>0.4094 / 8.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2</td>
<td>Proportion of Traditional Areas</td>
<td>0.0512 / 6.0000</td>
<td>0.3072 / 8.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3</td>
<td>Preservation Ratio of Traditional Buildings</td>
<td>0.0707 / 6.0000</td>
<td>0.4242 / 8.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4</td>
<td>Application Ratio of Traditional Techniques</td>
<td>0.2829 / 4.0000</td>
<td>1.1316 / 6.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D5</td>
<td>Integrity of Natural Ecological Environment</td>
<td>0.0172 / 6.0000</td>
<td>0.1032 / 8.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D6</td>
<td>The degree of harmony between the settlement and nature</td>
<td>0.0515 / 8.0000</td>
<td>0.4120 / 8.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D7</td>
<td>Infrastructure Satisfaction Level</td>
<td>0.0205 / 7.7780</td>
<td>0.1594 / 7.6670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D8</td>
<td>Public Service Satisfaction Level</td>
<td>0.0102 / 7.1110</td>
<td>0.0725 / 6.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D9</td>
<td>Vibrancy of Local Cultural Activities</td>
<td>0.0215 / 5.1110</td>
<td>0.1099 / 5.3330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D10</td>
<td>Familiarity with Local Culture</td>
<td>0.0199 / 4.6670</td>
<td>0.0929 / 4.3330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D11</td>
<td>Sense of Place Attachment</td>
<td>0.0925 / 5.7780</td>
<td>0.5345 / 5.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D12</td>
<td>Retention of Local Livelihood</td>
<td>0.0254 / 4.8890</td>
<td>0.1242 / 4.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D13</td>
<td>Preservation of Local Living Styles</td>
<td>0.0149 / 5.1110</td>
<td>0.0762 / 3.6670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D14</td>
<td>Integration of Tourism Development with Village Traditional Culture and Lifestyle</td>
<td>0.0043 / 5.1110</td>
<td>0.0220 / 6.1670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D15</td>
<td>Familiarity with Neighbors</td>
<td>0.0281 / 4.8890</td>
<td>0.1374 / 4.0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D16</td>
<td>Frequency of Interactions with Neighbors</td>
<td>0.0281 / 4.2220</td>
<td>0.1186 / 4.6670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D17</td>
<td>Level of Participation in Community Public Activities</td>
<td>0.0422 / 2.6670</td>
<td>0.1125 / 6.3330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D18</td>
<td>Degree of Engagement in Village Renewal Projects</td>
<td>0.0141 / 2.0000</td>
<td>0.0282 / 5.0000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indicator Data Analysis

From the perspective of total scores, Tongyang Village ranks first with a score of 7.2262, followed by Xiadi Village with 6.5056, and Xiadang Village last with 4.3759. This indicates
that in terms of comprehensive place-making evaluation, Tongyang Village performs the best. Further analysis of primary indicators shows that Tongyang Village exhibits relative advantages in the construction of material space, living space, and social space (Figure 7).

In the in-depth assessment of secondary indicators, Tongyang Village demonstrates its leading position in multiple areas, specifically reflected in C2 architectural style (8.8030 points), C7 neighborhood mutual aid (7.8610 points), C5 local culture (7.8386 points), C6 livelihood and life (6.3764 points), and autonomous co-construction (6.1243 points). At the same time, Xiadi Village leads in C3 ecological environment with 8.000 points, while Xiadang Village performs best in C4 infrastructure construction with 7.5564 points (Figure 8).

Figure 7. Radar Chart of Scores for Primary Indicators (Image source: created by the author).

Figure 8. Radar Chart of Scores for Secondary indicators (Image source: created by the author).
Further comparison of tertiary indicators reveals the unique advantages of each village more clearly. Tongyang Village scores high in the application of D4 traditional crafts (10 points), D15 familiarity with neighbors (8.75), and D11 sense of place belonging (8.5 points), showing its strong capabilities in cultural and social dimensions. Xiadi Village stands out in D2 in the proportion of traditional areas (8 points), the D3 preservation rate of traditional buildings (8 points), and D16 community activity participation (7.667 points), reflecting its focus on preserving cultural heritage and community participation. In contrast, Xiadang Village surpasses the other two villages in D7 infrastructure satisfaction (7.778 points) and D8 public service quality (7.111 points), highlighting its advantage in providing basic living facilities. This layered analysis provides a deep understanding of the strengths and characteristics of each village, offering solid data support for subsequent discussions (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Tertiary indicator bar chart (Image source: created by the author).
5. Discussion: Comparison of Traditional Village Renewal Characteristics under Three Driving Models
5.1. Material Space-Making

The renewal of material space is key to the spatial renewal of traditional villages and requires substantial resource input. Many traditional villages, typically located in economically underdeveloped areas, find it challenging to effectively improve the material landscape without sufficient resources. Local governments in China play a crucial role in this process, equipped with abundant “allocative resources” and “coercive resources”, becoming pioneers and managers of traditional village spatial renewal.

Taking Xiadang Village as an example, under strong government leadership, the village exhibits characteristics of advanced planning, the involvement of professional development companies, and significant investment, leading to notable changes in the rural landscape and substantial improvements in infrastructure within a short period. Xiadang Village scored the highest in the C4 infrastructure indicator, with 7.5564. However, its overall score in B1 material space-making was the lowest at 4.3759. This is attributed to the construction of large-scale buildings and artificial landscape trails, road widening, and parking lots, which disrupted the traditional village’s closed pattern and serene coexistence with nature. The renewal process often lacked a deep understanding of traditional cultural heritage, which was evident in the arbitrary use of “traditional elements” and poor imitation (Figure 10), undermining the village’s authenticity and representing a distortion of local identity, as reflected in Xiadang Village’s lowest scores in D1 (0.2047) and D4 (1.1316).

![Figure 10. “Antique” facade of Xiadang Village’s main street buildings (Image source: created by the author).](image)

Xiadi Village’s spatial renewal is mainly led by artists who plan and design the entire process. These artists and related designers have a deep understanding of cultural heritage protection, hence Xiadi Village’s higher scores in D2 (0.4096) and D3 (0.4242). However, these external designers, although professionally commendable, do not fully belong to the local cultural context. Their design approach inevitably carries external characteristics. In attempting to construct a “locality”, they struggle to escape the “urbanite” fantasy of...
an ideal rural world, leading many projects to disregard the traditions and actual lives of local villagers. This lack of traditional construction methods in material space-making is why Xiadi Village scored lower in D4 (1.6974). For instance, the iconic Pioneer Bookstore, although a renovation project of an old building, strayed significantly from the original architectural logic and atmosphere. The local residences are characterized by closed thick rammed earth walls on the outside and open, lightweight wooden structures on the inside, with spaces unfolding around courtyards. However, the renovation scheme used thick raw concrete for interior walls, creating closed spaces. This design style lacks a strong connection to the locality, appearing applicable to other villages or even urban areas, and represents more of a superficial imitation and borrowing of local culture without retaining the core functions and meanings of traditional architecture (Figure 11).

In Tongyang Village, without the pressure of external capital and government project development, the project progression was relatively moderate. Due to limited financial support, some large-scale infrastructure and public services lagged behind those in the other two villages, resulting in Tongyang Village’s lowest score in C4 infrastructure at 3.6669. Modernization post-economic reform has damaged the traditional village pattern and ecological environment, and individual villagers’ efforts to renew and optimize these aspects are limited, leading to lower scores in C1 pattern texture at 6.0000 and C3 ecological environment at 5.0015.

Tongyang Village scores higher in material space-making (B1 score of 7.1990) because the lead figures in the renewal are residents themselves, who operate the project in a highly localized manner and effectively utilize local artisan resources, adhering to the principle of restoring the old as old, thereby maximizing respect for tradition. For example, modifications to several abandoned traditional residences were limited to necessary repairs, and the main building, Liu’s Clan Ancestral Hall, was restored while preserving its original structure, style, materials, and techniques, innovatively using old building materials, allowing for the observation of a coexistence of new and old wood materials in the details (Figure 12).

Figure 11. Comparison of Pioneer Bookstore in Xiadi Village with traditional northeastern Fujian houses (Image source: created by the author).

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5.2. Living Space-Making

Traditional villages are the carriers of local residents’ lives and production. Without the living spaces closely related to villagers’ lives, these traditional villages would become indistinguishable from theme parks or Disneyland. Comparing the construction of living spaces in the three villages, Xiadi Village scores the lowest in B2 living space-making at 4.7376. Although Xiadi Village’s operation team hoped to revive the formerly declining village by introducing new public service spaces and cultural activities, these new spaces and activities had little connection to local villagers. These spaces were more often seen as consumption venues for tourists, with little participation from villagers. Interviews with space operators revealed that new projects like “cafés”, “bookstores”, and “studios” were not optimistic about profits, failing to truly activate the original rural community and seemingly intensifying outsiders’ “occupation” of the village, contributing to Xiadi Village’s lower score in production and living.

Xiadang Village’s main issue is the passive restructuring of original living spaces due to tourism development. Many villagers were relocated to new areas for tourism, bringing new industries that altered traditional production and living styles, resulting in Xiadang Village’s low score in C6 production and living at 4.0885. The emerging tourism culture also suppressed the vitality of traditional culture, reflected in its low score in C5 at 5.5017.

Tongyang Village scores highest in living space-making because its planners are villagers with a strong interest in local culture, playing an active role in promoting local culture, leading to the highest score in C5 cultural spirit at 7.8386. Less affected by tourism development, Tongyang Village preserved traditional production and living styles, scoring highest in C6 production and living at 6.3764. However, due to widespread hollowing-out, only the elderly and children reside in Tongyang Village, resulting in a lack of vitality. This situation indicates that even with high participation from local residents, without addressing the issue of village hollowing-out, it is difficult to maintain the village’s vitality and traditional atmosphere.

Figure 12. Restoration schematic of Tongyang Culture Park’s Family Virtues Museum (Image source: created by the author).
5.3. Social Space-Making

The renewal of traditional villages involves the allocation of various resources and the participation of people, with villagers’ participation and leadership being particularly important. When villagers can lead renewal efforts and actively engage in public affairs, their interactions become closer, unleashing initiative and creativity for village development and helping form autonomous groups, thereby promoting the sustainable development of traditional villages.

In Xiadang Village, strong government control and external influence rendered villagers passive recipients in the development process, with a lack of voice undermining their subjective initiative in village renewal, leading to the lowest score in C8 autonomous co-building at 2.5000. Government relocations disrupted original neighborhood social relations, with a growing commercial atmosphere and an influx of outsiders diluting traditional village social relations, resulting in a low score in C7 neighborhood mutual assistance at 4.5474.

Compared to Xiadang Village, Xiadi Village was less influenced by the government. However, a clear generational gap between artists and villagers led to the lowest score in C7 neighborhood mutual assistance at 4.5474. External artists and volunteers in Xiadi Village formed an organized charity group to actively develop the village, resulting in a relatively higher score in C8 autonomous co-building at 5.9992.

In Tongyang Village, where villagers are generations of the same family, the highest score in C7 neighborhood mutual assistance, 7.8610, was achieved. As the village renewal was led by villagers, their effective mobilization of villagers’ participation led to the highest score in C8 autonomous co-building at 6.1243.

6. Conclusions

In the current context, the value of traditional villages has gained widespread attention, prompting active participation from multiple departments, disciplines, and entities in traditional village renewal and development. Despite differences in motivations and methods among these participants, place-making provides an effective perspective for integrating multidisciplinary, multi-perspective, and multi-departmental efforts. Through place-making practices, we can better shape distinctive traditional appearances and beautiful living environments, enrich residents’ cultural and spiritual lives, and effectively utilize local resources to balance tradition with modernization while improving residents’ well-being and sense of belonging and activating stable internal development dynamics of villages. Therefore, traditional village renewal based on place-making is an effective, comprehensive development perspective.

Place-making is achieved through the interaction between people and the environment, with the action modes of subjects in traditional village renewal directly affecting the outcomes of place-making. This article develops an evaluation system to analyze and compare the characteristics of traditional village renewal under three different modes, as follows: government-led, artist-involved, and community-driven. This study finds that government-led modes excel in the construction of physical spaces, especially infrastructure. In contrast, the artist-involved mode focuses more on balancing material space with traditional culture, effectively enhancing the village’s appeal. The community-driven mode, meanwhile, shows unique advantages in constructing social and living spaces, which may activate the endogenous development of rural areas.

To achieve a comprehensive, sustainable, and distinctive renewal of traditional villages, we should encourage the participation of diverse entities, allowing each to contribute to rural development. The degree of participation by various entities can also be adjusted according to the developmental stage and baseline conditions of the villages. For instance, in villages with better material conditions, the government should delegate authority and encourage community organization participation. For more backward villages lacking sufficient motivation for self-development, the government and other external entities should actively intervene to support and promote development. In villages with rich cul-
tural resources, artists and cultural groups can be more extensively involved to effectively preserve traditional culture and explore its contemporary values.

Moreover, the place-making evaluation system proposed in this paper applies the concepts of place-making in a standardized and systematic way to actual village renewal, facilitating timely assessments and feedback on the development of village renewal. This ensures that problems are quickly identified and effectively addressed, thereby maximizing the protection of local characteristics in the renewal process of traditional villages.

However, this study has certain limitations. Even though the evaluation system is applicable to most villages across China, the current weights of each indicator are based solely on the author’s research of several villages. For the application of this system in other region’s villages, weights may change, as they will need to be adjusted by local experts familiar with those particular conditions. Additionally, the AHP itself has limitations, as it relies on the decision-makers’ understanding and judgment to construct hierarchies and perform pairwise comparisons, which can lead to some degree of subjective bias. Future research should aim to integrate other methods to complement this study and develop more specific quantitative indicators to further refine the evaluation system. Simultaneously, expanding the scope of data collection and enhancing data quality is essential to achieve a broader and more in-depth analysis of more traditional villages.

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