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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Study on the Application of Eco Museum Concept in Rural Revitalization: Taking Yim Tin Tsai in Hong Kong as an Example**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the relationship between Eco Museum and rural revitalization. This study explores the possibility of combining the Eco Museum concept with rural revitalization to find a way out for the village's future development. From the perspective of the components of an Eco Museum, this study selects Yim Tin Tsai in Hong Kong as the research object to elaborate and evaluate the application of the Eco Museum concept in the restoration project of Yim Tin Tsai in order to provide a reference for the practice of the Eco Museum concept in China. The study concludes that the local residents of Yim Tin Tsai have been given autonomy to preserve their own local nature and cultural resources in situ. On the basis of this, Yim Tin Tsai has been able to develop sustainably and generate economic benefits for local residents. This study illustrates that it is feasible to realize rural revitalization while practicing the concept of Eco Museum.

**| KEYWORDS**

Eco Museum; Rural Revitalization; Community Participation; Yim Tin Tsai

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### **1. Introduction**

At present, China is in a period of social transformation and rapid economic growth with remarkable achievements in urban-rural integration and improvement of the rural environment. On the other hand, some villages are experiencing increased aging and hollowing out, loss of native culture, etc. The implementation of rural revitalization strategy across the country has its own effectiveness and shortcomings. In the current village conservation and development, developers or the government are often in the leading position, while villagers are subordinate in the participation. The government and developers have become the "cultural agents" of the villages, while the villagers, who really give life to the local culture, have become the spectators to the construction of their hometown. The involvement of foreign parties has severed the relationship between the local residents and the local environment. Thus, villagers' motivation has decreased. The revitalization of the villages is superficial but tangible. By guiding the villagers to understand their local culture and enhance their cultural identity, the Eco Museum could reshape the relationship between people and the environment. It allows the local culture to be revitalized through human participation and lets the villagers take the lead in the development direction of their own culture, deciding how to revitalize their hometown. Eco Museum integrates the environment and people into a whole. So, it is not only the village itself that will be revitalized but also the values, local memories, and cultural accumulation of the land. Therefore, it is desirable and valuable to apply the Eco Museum concept to the construction of rural revitalization.

Yim Tin Tsai, Sai Kung, Hong Kong, which has realized the autonomy of local villagers under the guidance of the Eco Museum concept, has reshaped and revitalized local memories. This paper takes it as an example to explore how the Eco Museum concept is implemented in the restoration of Yim Tin Tsai in Sai Kung, Hong Kong, and its implications for rural revitalization.

In this paper, the research method of desktop research was used. Based on an extensive reading of “Eco Museum theory” and actual cases both domestic and overseas, as well as an understanding of the implementation status of the rural revitalization strategy in China, the theoretical basis for this study was provided; By collecting and summarizing a wide range of data from the case of Yim Tin Tsai, integrating this case into the theoretical basis, the relationship between the application of “Eco Museum theory” and the realization of “rural revitalization” was analyzed.

## **2. The concept of Eco Museum**

The concept of the Eco Museum first came from France in the 1970s (Yu, 2014). The definition of an Eco Museum has been in a dynamic state of flux. Both of its initiators have developed definitions, and other researchers have attempted to define them. However, the definition that is now generally accepted is “an evolutionary definition” proposed by Georges Henri Rivi re in 1980 (Yu, 2014; Yu, 2006). In this lengthy definition, he attempts to provide an exhaustive account of various aspects of the Eco Museum, which focus on the relationship between public authority and public participation, the metaphor of mirrors and tools, the spatial-temporal versus heritage character, and the idea that the Eco Museum has three functions: laboratory, school, and conservation center (Yu, 2006; Zhao, 2020).

Most scholars believe that the place, heritage, inhabitants, education, and democratized operations are the basic elements of what constitutes an Eco Museum (Zhao, 2020). In 1988, Ren  Rivard proposed a simple formula to distinguish traditional museums from eco-museums: traditional museums = architecture + collection + experts + audience; Eco museums = place + heritage + memory + inhabitants (Yu, 2014). Eco museums have the basic purpose of preserving local identity, focusing on cultural memory, preserving local resources in situ and operating through community spaces, and serving the community's residents. Eco museums enable the natural environment, human environment, and community residents to be in a harmonious, dynamic, and co-developing state; it is also referred to by other scholars as community residents' autonomous museums (Yu, 2006). The eco in Eco Museum doesn't mean the dual definition of ecology and economy, but a balanced system of the social environment.

In 1986, Mr. Su Donghai, a famous museologist, introduced the concept of Eco Museum to China and built the first eco-museum in China with the help of Norwegian museologist John Jestrom. In the decades since the introduction of the Eco Museum concept in China, the construction of Eco Museums has been carried out in Inner Mongolia, Yunnan, Guangxi, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and other provinces and regions. The research related to eco-museums has become multidisciplinary and cross-cutting in nature (Zhao, 2020).

## **3. The Relationship between Eco Museums and Rural Revitalization**

The concept of eco museums, which protects local culture and regional environment and stimulates active participation of community residents, coincides with the concept of “green water and green mountains are golden mountains”, sustainable development, and building beautiful villages in rural revitalization. Thus, rural revitalization can be realized by applying and practicing the concept of Eco Museum. At present, rural revitalization in China is characterized by serious homogenization, imitation, copying, etc. Moreover, the indigenous people are less dominant because of their ignorance of local culture (Liu, 2015; Mai, 2019; Yin, 2019). The introduction of the Eco museum could enable the local aborigines to reacquaint themselves with the questions of “who am I” and “where do I come from” to enhance their cognitive understanding of local culture, rediscover cultural identity and pride, dig deeper into the roots of local natural and humanistic culture, enhancing cultural self-confidence, so as to improve their cohesiveness and participation to control the direction of their hometown development, to be the leader of their own hometown construction.

Mr. Su Donghai suggests that the development of Eco museums in China should follow the path of “localization”. First, the idea of Eco museums must be “localized” in order to take root; second, residents are the masters of their own culture, while the government and experts are only temporary agents of local culture (Yu, 2014). How to make the original residents truly autonomous is an important issue that needs to be addressed, both for the revitalization of the countryside and the construction of the Eco Museum.

## **4. Study on the Restoration Project of Yim Tin Tsai, Sai Kung, Hong Kong**

### **4.1 The Profile and Regional Resources of Yim Tin Tsai**

Yim Tin Tsai is an island located in Sai Kung Hoi in the New Territories of Hong Kong, 3 km from Sai Kung City, connected to Kau Sai Chau in the south and via the Jade Belt Bridge. The area of the island is less than 1 square kilometer, and the coast is covered with mangrove forests (Chen & Zheng, 2020; Shek et al., 2018; Xinhuanet, 2020; Zhu, 2022).

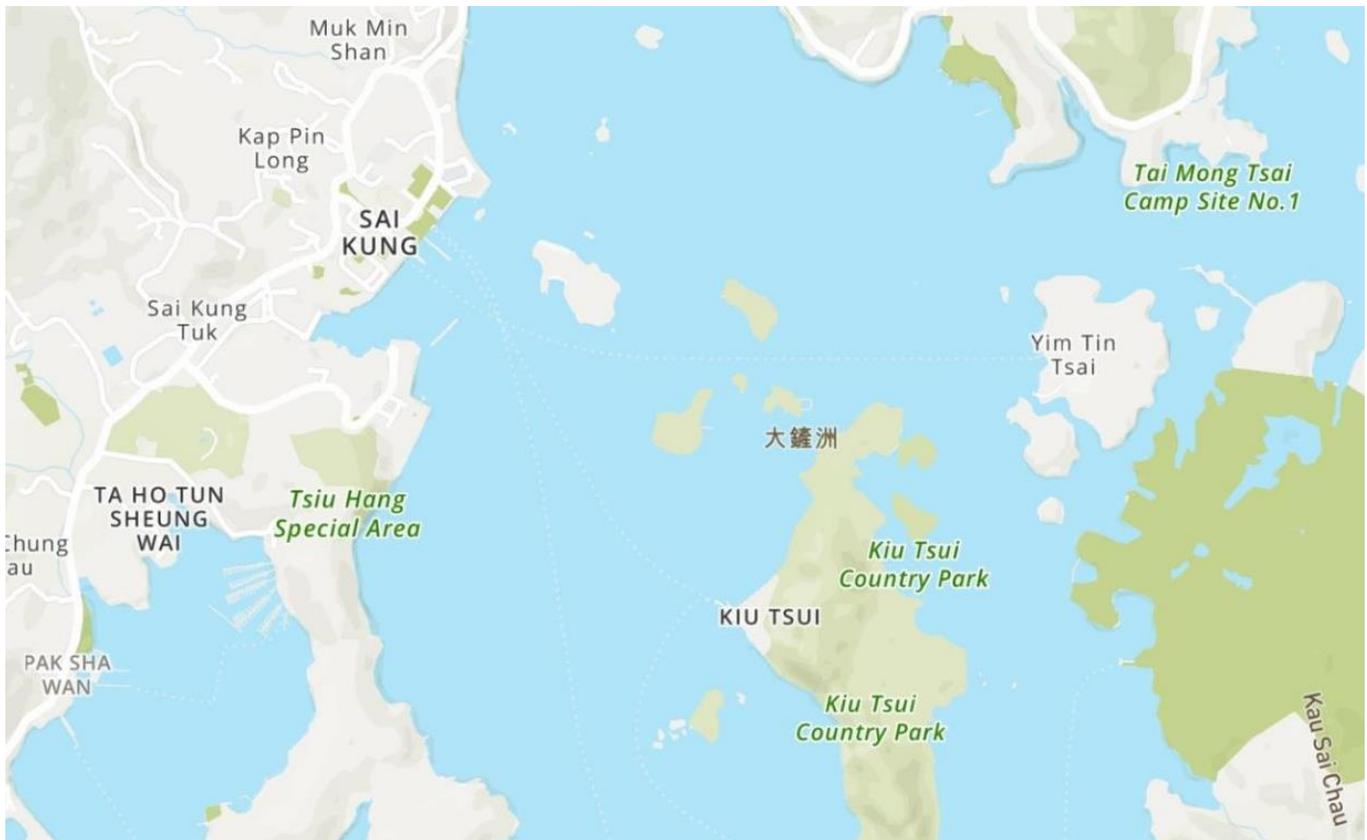


Fig. 1. Location of Yim Tin Tsai. (Source: MapQuest)

In the 1700s, Mr. and Mrs. Chen Mengde moved from Guanlan, Shenzhen, to Yantian Village in Bao'an County, Sha Tau Kok, then they drifted to an island which is later named Yim Tin Tsai to make a living by tanning salt. In the 1990s, all the residents of Yim Tin Tsai moved out, and the island was left empty. After nearly a decade of abandonment, people began to restore St. Joseph's Chapel and the salt field, and some of the indigenous people who had moved out returned to Yim Tin Tsai again. The preparations for restoration began in 2003. In 2013, the salt field in Yim Tin Tsai Village, which had been abandoned for many years, officially entered the restoration project (Chen & Zheng, 2020; Shek et al., 2018; Xinhuanet, 2020).

Yim Tin Tsai is rich in natural and human resources, which are summarized as follows:

a. Ecological resources:

This island has a high vegetation cover and a wide variety of vegetation, with common plant species such as camphor, autumn eggplant, mountain orange, and dewdrop trees. The mangrove forest on the south coast of the island is in good ecological condition and also a habitat for butterflies and insects.

b. Water Resources:

The Well of Living Spring is the last spring well in Hong Kong, which provides fresh water. It was once the only source of drinkable fresh water for villagers in Yim Tin Tsai. A reservoir on a nearby island was opened in the 1960s; the Hong Kong Water Supplies Department began supplying water to the villagers after the 1990s. The well has been supplying water for Yim Tin Tsai for centuries and is still preserved well today.

c. Natural Salt Farm:

The salt farm in Yim Tin Tsai is the only natural salt farm in Hong Kong that still uses the ancient craft of salt making operating today. The produced salt is sold as a souvenir at HK\$50 per bottle. There are volunteers explaining the entire process of salt tanning and production to visitors. This salt farm is an important base for learning the skills of the once lost salt makers. The restoration of the Salt Farm has rekindled interest in the history of Hong Kong's early development and was finally awarded a UNESCO Award of Excellence in 2015.

d. Religious Resources:

The Romanesque St. Joseph's Chapel, a Grade II historic building in Hong Kong that bears witness to the island's Hakka people as devout Catholics, is a landmark building in Yim Tin Tsai. Its repair and reconstruction won the Award of Merit in the 2005 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation. Religious attractions can also be found everywhere on the island, such as the sculpture of Father Joseph and the notice board with the commandments.

e. Hakka cultural resources:

Chengpo School, once the only elementary school in Yim Tin Tsai and nearby villages, has been converted into the Heritage Exhibition Center, where handicraft products such as traditional Hakka costumes, utensils, and farming tools are displayed to visitors. Related training courses are regularly offered and taught by speakers from local Hakka families. Moreover, Hakka architecture, food, and tea fruits also incorporate traditional Hakka skills and culture.



Fig. 2. Attractions in Yim Tin Tsai. (Source: Author's own production)

**4.2 The Three Characteristics of Yim Tin Tsai**

According to a generalized study of the natural and human resources of Yim Tin Tsai, its characteristics can be summarized in the following three points:

- a. Religion: The architecture represented by St. Joseph's Chapel and the affiliated attractions and facilities.
- b. Ecology: The rich ecological resources of Yim Tin Tsai and the ecological values contained are further protected under the conservation policy.
- c. Culture: The unique tangible and intangible cultural heritage left by the Hakka culture deposited on this island.

**4.3 The Community Participation Model of Yim Tin Tsai**

Yim Tin Tsai focuses on the community participation of local residents. It applies a “museum mentality” to its community, collecting, displaying, studying, and promoting the original culture and combining the power of local residents to bring out the cultural value of Yim Tin Tsai.

The Yanguang Conservation Center is a non-profit organization established by villagers in 2011 to provide guided tours and workshops, training courses, and kaito services to further coordinate the restoration of Yim Tin Tsai. It plays a supporting role in the management of Hakka cultural resources; empowered by a joint meeting of the Yim Tin Tsai Village Council and the St. Joseph Chapel Development of the Sacred Heart Church in Sai Kung; supervised and monitored by a Board of Directors; Its work of different task forces is coordinated by an Executive Committee (Chen & Zheng, 2020; Shek et al., 2018; Zhu, 2022).

The Joint Council is a body that provides and sets the direction for the development of the island, which is led by the villagers of Yim Tin Tsai; the Village Council is primarily responsible for monitoring the work of the Yan Guang Conservation Center and plays a leading role in the management of Hakka cultural resources; Sacred Heart Church owns and manages the St. Joseph's Chapel who focus on matters related to religious activities; NGOs provide advisory or other nurturing services to the Joint Conference; There are programs collaborate with other schools to serve as experiential bases for students who could provide volunteer services for Yim Tin Tsai. The community participation model of Yim Tin Tsai and the decision-making process of development planning are shown in Figure (3).

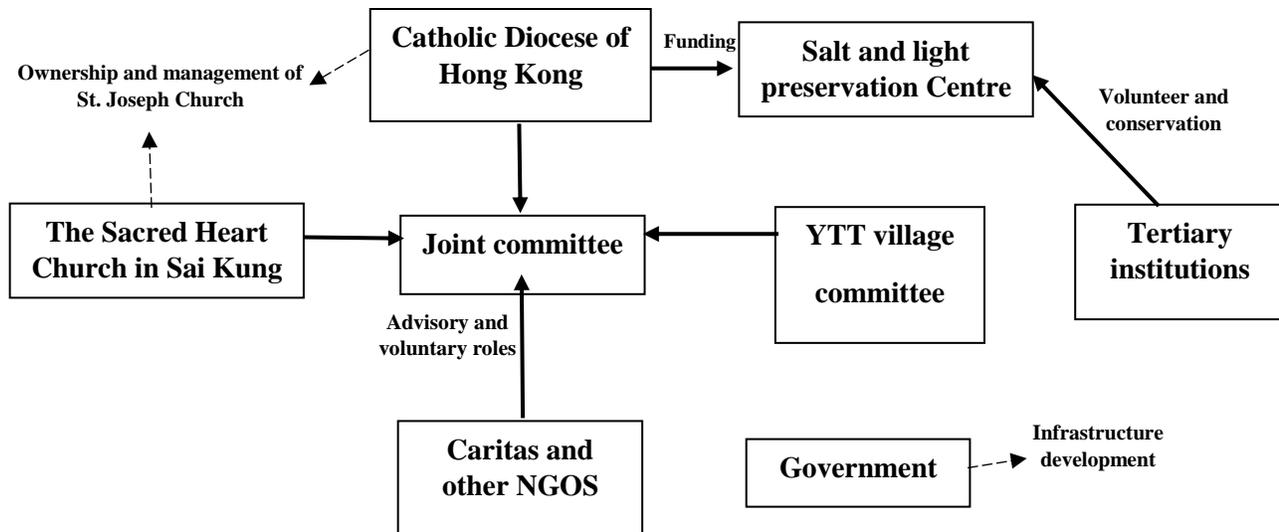


Fig. 3. The community participation model of Yim Tin Tsai. (Source: Author's own production)

Mr. SHEK Kwo Fung has studied the community participation model in Yim Tin Tsai in “Community participation for cultural heritage tourism in the Catholic Hakka village in Yim Tin Tsai, Hong Kong”. This study showed that the community participation pattern in Yim Tin Tsai is spontaneous in Arnstein’s ladder: the people are voluntary, active, and self-managed, participating in and leading the whole development process; They are given a high degree of empowerment; External forces provide assistance services instead of controlling the development of Yim Tin Tsai (Shek et al., 2018).

This shows that the residents of Yim Tin Tsai have taken control of the community participation. They are the dual subjects who revitalize the local culture and determine the direction of its development. They are from the past of Yim Tin Tsai; they also determine the future of it. The cooperation with other institutions and strong economic support has provided assistance to the development of Yim Tin Tsai and ensured the effective operation of community participation.

#### **4.4 Application of the Eco Museum concept in the restoration of Yim Tin Tsai**

The application of the Eco Museum concept in the restoration of Yim Tin Tsai would be described below in terms of the five components of an Eco Museum: region, heritage, inhabitants, education, and democratization of operation.

In terms of region, Yim Tin Tsai fully protects and utilizes its regional resources, protecting the original natural ecological environment through conservation policies; preserving the important freshwater resource of the living spring wells; restoring local religious architecture and distinctive Hakka architecture to preserve local characteristics; retrieving the centuries-old salt-making techniques and rebuilding the natural salt fields to create its unique value.

In terms of heritage, Yim Tin Tsai has preserved and revitalized local tangible and intangible cultural heritage and vividly reshaped historical memories.

In terms of the inhabitants, the indigenous people of Yim Tin Tsai are the most important subject of the Eco museum's operation, as they return to their hometown to work together to revitalize it.

In terms of education, the natural salt fields provide a valuable educational resource for visitors to learn about the salt-making process; The Heritage Exhibition Center offers regular training courses that are educative.

In terms of the democratization of operation, the community participation in Yim Tin Tsai is led by the indigenous people. With participation or assistance from various parties, the organizations are closely linked and have their own responsibilities, resulting in a democratized operation.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In the late twentieth century, the British scholar Peter Davies began to explore how to evaluate a "successful Eco Museum" by using a sample of five Italian Eco museums (Yu, 2006). The findings indirectly suggest that indicators of success should focus on the way local people apply the Eco Museum concept and how effectively the community operates to manage and preserve their own cultural and social heritage.

The restoration of Yim Tin Tsai fully preserves and utilizes the regional resources, tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The community participation model is led by local residents, in collaboration with other institutions, and supported by external forces. Yim Tin Tsai has created significant economic and social reaction benefits by showcasing local characteristics and attracting tourists through tourism. Yim Tin Tsai's application of the Eco Museum concept, which achieves restoration and sustainable development, starts from tapping local resources and cultural values, then leads to the active participation and management of the indigenous people; eventually, they all work together. The practice of Yim Tin Tsai has implications for today's rural revitalization.

However, Mr. Yu Fuye has expressed his concern about the development of Eco museums. He offered his opinion on the situation of the Ironbridge Valley Museum, which is secularized by a pragmatic approach to issues from a consumer's point of view: 'In the process of development, all Eco museums inevitably have to maintain a balance between community development and the public's vision, and between the cultural identity of the region and commercial revenue' (Yu, 2014). Eco-museums in China should take the road of "localization", based on the national conditions and the actual situation, from a practical point of view; On the other hand, we should learn from the lessons and successful experiences of ecological museums at domestic and global level, actively respond to the relevant domestic policies, solving practical problems in a diversified and creative way.

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