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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Rural Festivals and Rural Cultural Spaces Creation: A Case Study of the “Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival”

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**ABSTRACT**

The “Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival”, a three-year artistic program, represents a pioneering effort to revitalize rural areas using art as a catalyst. This initiative is designed to explore and address various social issues arising from urbanizing. While rural festivals, including the “Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival”, play a pivotal role in promoting regional economic development through the creation of cultural spaces, they face the challenge of homogenizing their tourism destination image. This article applies design strategy concepts to explore the impact of rural festivals and cultural spaces on the cultural benefits of the host region, using the “Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival” in Hong Kong as a case study. Utilizing methods such as desk research and data analysis, this study examines and discusses the significant issues within the field of research regarding the influence of rural festivals and cultural space development. Furthermore, we present the following research focus and development directions for the study of the impact of rural festivals and cultural space development.

**KEYWORDS**

Rural Festivals; Rural Cultural Spaces; Artistic Intervention; Design Strategies

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### 1. Introduction

The development and revitalization of rural areas in China carry great practical significance, particularly due to their inherent ecological, scenic, economic and cultural values. These values are an integral part of the national strategy for coordinated urban-rural development. At the same time, in recent years, rural areas across China have witnessed a burgeoning interest in rural tourism and artistic revitalization initiatives. Many rural regions have used media such as art festivals, rural festivals, and the creation of rural cultural spaces to revitalize their rural vitality by utilizing local resources (Wang, 2021). However, due to certain weaknesses in related strategies and sustainability, there remains significant room for improvement in terms of local impact, environmental considerations, and social aspects of such events. In addition, there has been limited research on the impact of rural festivals and the creation of rural cultural spaces on the regions that host them (Geng & Zhang, 2023).

To address these gaps, this paper draws inspiration from successful cases in other regions that have developed urban-rural economic coordination. As discussed by the author in this paper, the “Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival” in Hong Kong stands as an exemplary reference point. Therefore, the author's objective is to compile data from previous editions of this festival and, through comprehensive literature analysis and survey questionnaires, elucidate the causal relationships, regional revitalization models, and the localized impact of artistic intervention in the Yim Tin Tsai rural area. Framed within the context of design strategy intervention, this study seeks to explore the influence of rural festivals and cultural spaces on the cultural utility of the hosting region, as well as to analyze the existing issues in research related to the impact of rural festivals and the development of cultural spaces.

**2. Methodology**

In this paper, two common research methods used in social science research, literature analysis and questionnaires, have been used. Literature analysis is a method of understanding a topic or issue by reviewing and studying relevant literature. In this paper, literature analysis involves finding and studying literature on rural festivals, arts festivals and related socio-cultural phenomena. By analyzing the literature, researchers are able to sort out the situation and shortcomings of existing research, thus providing a reference for further research. In addition, literature analysis can help the researcher to understand the latest research progress in a certain field and provide background and foundation for the study. Whereas questionnaire survey is a method of collecting data and information by designing questions and sending them to the target audience to answer. In this paper, questionnaires were used to collect community members' perceptions, participation, and attitudes towards rural festivals and arts festivals, thus helping the researcher to obtain first-hand data for quantitative and qualitative analyses. The advantages of this method are that it can reach a wider audience, and the data obtained is more intuitive and accurate.

**3 The Impact of Rural Festivals and Rural Cultural Spaces**

**3.1 Rural Festivals as a Driving Force for Regional Cultural and Artistic Development**

The rural festivals exhibit distinct features of public engagement and serve as examples of essential elements within rural cultural spaces and folk traditions, primarily through their active public participation and communal ceremonial performances. The historical and cultural essence of rural festivals unfolds across three essential dimensions: their capacity for entertainment, religious significance, and stimulation of consumption. Through an analytical lens that encompasses both traditional and contemporary festivals, as well as the metamorphosis of historical and cultural heritage, we gain a nuanced understanding of how cultural traditions align with modern life within the context of rural development. This research invites reflection on how rural areas can broaden the horizons of people's daily lives by incorporating traditional or religious festivals, thus creating cultural mechanisms that facilitate effective dialogue with contemporary society. Through this approach, rural areas are positioned not only to address the burgeoning spiritual needs of modern individuals but also to provide a portal for individuals constrained by limited time and resources to participate in novel cultural experiences, increasing their choices and, consequently, enriching their prospects for personal growth. In short, rural festivals transcend their role as simple forms of entertainment; they emerge as the most significant tools for cultural exchange in the human cultural landscape.

**3.2 Artistic Creation in Rural Cultural Spaces**

The artistic creation of rural cultural space involves applying artistic and cultural creativity as a medium to shape, refine, and enrich the social environment and cultural atmosphere of rural areas. We substantiate this concept from various angles, including its effects, research, sources, and characteristics, as shown in Figure 1. In the background of rapid urbanization, rural areas are confronted with a multitude of social challenges, such as cultural decline, population migration, and the homogenization of tourist destinations. As a result, artistic creation has emerged as an essential methodology for promoting rural revitalization and cultural preservation.



**Fig. 1** Conceptual Explanation of Rural Cultural Space (Self-drawn)

The artistic creation of rural cultural spaces encompasses several vital aspects, primarily including landscape design, public art installations, and cultural event planning. Integrating artistic elements into village architecture, landscapes, and cultural activities serves to enhance the aesthetic value and cultural significance of rural areas, thus attracting more tourists and residents to visit

and reside in these regions. At the same time, artistic creation also promotes the development of rural cultural and creative industries and local economic growth. It's important to emphasize that the creation of artistic rural cultural spaces extends beyond simple decoration or performance; it involves the exploration of the historical and regional characteristics of rural areas and the incorporation of these elements into artistic endeavors. This process results in the formation of distinctive cultural brands with a unique and captivating charm.

From the operational perspective of rural culture, the driving force behind the creation of rural cultural spaces is rooted in spiritual beliefs, often manifested in traditional deity worship and the hopeful anticipation of future happiness. These beliefs are predominantly conveyed through various ceremonial practices, underscoring the unique role that traditional festivals play in shaping rural cultural spaces.

### **3.3 The Development Challenges of Rural Festivities and Rural Cultural Space**

The rural festivals are confronted with challenges in their process of inheritance and development (Yuan & Gong, 2015). On the one hand, traditional rural festivals typically rely on the participation and transmission of local residents. However, influenced by migration and urbanization, many young people are leaving the villages, threatening the continuity of traditional festivals. In the absence of successors and participants, many rural festivals have gradually lost their original cultural essence and folk characteristics. On the other hand, the development of rural cultural spaces is suffering from the effects of homogenization. Within the framework of the flourishing tourism industry, many rural spaces are trying to attract tourists and increase economic benefits by imitating others. This has resulted in a growing problem of homogenization within rural cultural spaces. In fact, the disappearance of rural uniqueness has diminished the attractiveness of rural festivals and cultural spaces, causing rural cultural spaces to become victims of the homogenization of tourist destination images.

## **4. Yim Tin Tsai Art Festival: A Practical Exploration of Rural Festivities and Cultural Space Regeneration**

### **4.1 The Overview of the Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival**

Saigon Yim Tin Tsai, with nearly three centuries of history, is an island that blends Catholicism with Hakka culture (as shown in Figure 2). The island's residents are mainly from the Chen clan of the Hakka ethnic group. Although many residents have left Yim Tin Tsai due to urban development, the small island still preserves valuable natural ecology and historical landmarks. St. Joseph's Chapel restoration project in Yim Tin Tsai and the Yim Tin Revitalization Project received the Asia-Pacific Cultural Heritage Conservation Excellence Award and the Cultural Heritage Conservation Outstanding Award from UNESCO in 2005 and 2015, respectively. These awards confirm the cultural value and distinctive characteristics of Yim Tin Tsai.

The Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival is a three-year flagship program organized by the Tourism Commission, with its central theme revolving around the elements of heaven, earth, and humanity. The festival aims to provide participants with a novel experience that seamlessly blends art, religion, culture, historical landmarks, and green elements. The festival's curatorial team invites artists and young talents to collaborate with the Yim Tin Tsai villagers to create an open-air museum that will transform Yim Tin Tsai into a unique cultural center.



**Fig. 2** Current Situation of Saigon Yim Tin Tsai

#### 4.2 The Characteristics of Festival Activities

The cultural tapestry of Yim Tin Tsai is steeped in traditional festivals, Catholic religious beliefs, and clan relationships, which collectively underscore its distinct religious character. The connection between Yim Tin Tsai and Catholicism is evident in its rich religious and cultural traditions. In recent years, Yim Tin Tsai has expanded the influence of its village culture by utilizing its vibrant religious and cultural activities, local history, and distinctive atmosphere. Yim Tin Tsai has also improved its villagers' lives through various cultural and religious activities. For instance, every first Sunday in May, even those who have moved away return to Yim Tin Tsai to participate in the Feast of St. Joseph, and then they return home to reminisce about past happy times.

Yim Tin Tsai has successfully integrated the Catholic faith into its local culture, creating a distinctive religious and cultural landscape. This has not only enriched cultural experiences but also elevated the local status and influence of Catholicism. These developments are beneficial in establishing a robust cultural image for the village and increasing the cultural impact of Yim Tin Tsai. Yim Tin Tsai is the physical and emotional anchor for its residents. For Catholics, it's a place of peace where their hearts find solace and bring them closer to God. Their hearts find rest here, and God becomes their spiritual and emotional refuge. Yim Tin Tsai is essentially their home. Therefore, at the Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival, artists have created several art installations related to Catholicism around St. Joseph's Chapel, such as "The Wall of Sanctification" (Figure 3). Situated on the old St. Joseph's Chapel site, this piece juxtaposes stone walls and steel panels in the sunlight, seamlessly blending the ruins and pews into the natural surroundings. This allows visitors to experience the serenity of Yim Tin Tsai and imagine the atmosphere of days gone by. "The Wall of Sanctification" encourages visitors to pause, contemplate, and sit in meditation. In fact, the artwork serves as a memorial to the missionaries who once served in Sai Kung and Yim Tin Tsai and adds a new dimension to the old St. Joseph's Chapel with its intriguing shape against the backdrop of the ruins. In addition, the artwork "The Good Shepherd" (shown in Figure 4) is positioned on the steps in front of the church. This piece, strategically placed according to the flow of visitors ascending and descending the stairs, conveys two different meanings when viewed from above and below.

In summary, these artworks exhibit both religious and folkloric characteristics, blending elements of local culture with external cultural influences. They offer multifaceted perspectives on the relationship between the local residents' way of life and their religious beliefs. These creations serve as windows for residents to explore, understand, and appreciate the beauty of their hometown, fostering a deeper connection to their origins.



**Fig. 3** The Wall of Sanctification



**Fig. 4** The Good Shepherd

#### 4.3 The Culture Locality of Rural Festivals and Cultural Space Regeneration

"Culture Locality" is a method that involves managing the relationship between art and a specific environment. In the case of Yim Tin Tsai, it emphasizes the role of the arts festival, an imported concept, in better reflecting and integrating Yim Tin Tsai's local culture into its traditional heritage. This transformation serves as a catalyst for the revival of traditional rural culture. The vision of the Yim Tin Tsai Arts Festival extends beyond its immediate surroundings, encompassing a broader spectrum of cultural and life needs, thus reflecting a more diverse cultural and life perspective (Xu & Huang, 2018).

The original inhabitants of Yim Tin Tsai are the Chen clan of the Hakka people, and to this day, the village retains a strong Hakka identity. Traditionally, men are responsible for fishing at sea, while women tend to the fields. The sight of stone pedestals on the pier as the fishermen return to shore with their valuable catches symbolizes gratitude, signifying their safe return home. The art festival organizers acknowledged the significance of integrating the local natural and cultural environment into artistic creations, thereby enhancing Yim Tin Tsai as a more suitable and inspiring stage for artistic expression. On the one hand, the ever-changing natural landscape of the island and the mountainous village area provide artists with rich ecological materials and space. On the other hand, the artworks are closely intertwined with the local environment, seamlessly blending into the landscape and nature.

This cultural space, distinct from urban structures, inspires entirely new creative ideas. For example, in the "Flowing Waves-Wandering Clouds" (shown in Figure 5), the artists reimagined three old trees that had fallen during Typhoon Mangkhut as

representations of waves and clouds. This artwork conveys the relationship between residents and nature, depicting their struggles against wind and waves and their dance with rain and clouds. The artwork also represents the human spirit: “Even when great trees fall, the original intention remains unbroken.” As viewers, we are offered a unique experience that differs from viewing artwork in a traditional gallery setting. Through immersive experiences in nature, the elements of faith, culture, aesthetics, and more produced in this region are communicated directly to the audience in artistic form, resulting in a unique rural cultural space.



**Fig. 5** Flowing Waves-Wandering Clouds

## **5. Strategies for Rural Cultural Revival with a Focus on Festival Activity Design**

The rural festivals and the rural cultural spaces can be regarded as an embodiment of the intangible cultural heritage that reflects the characteristics of the regional society, economy, and culture. They play a crucial role in promoting and inspiring the revitalization of rural culture. Therefore, this study proposes strategies for rural cultural revitalization that focus on reconstructing psychological processes, creating regional brands, enhancing cultural experiences, and optimizing content structures. These strategies serve as a reference for revitalizing other rural areas and breathing new life into them.

### **5.1 Reconstruct the Psychological Process**

In the rural cultural revitalization strategy centered on festival activities and incorporating design strategies, the first and foremost point is obviously to focus on reconstructing psychological processes. This strategy emphasizes the importance of reshaping the attitudes and perceptions of residents and participants through carefully planned and innovative design in the process of rural cultural revitalization. Based on the CUIT model of the rural festival experience constructed in this paper (shown in Figure 7) (Zhou et al., 2016), we can find that the spectator's experience can be expanded in terms of event intensity and can spontaneously evolve in spatial dimensions. Space and people co-create each other, and this interactive relationship allows for the reshaping of people's psychological processes. Therefore, in the context of constructing psychological processes, the primary task is to create vibrant festival activities through innovative design that ignites strong interest and emotional engagement of participants.

The implementation of design strategies will be pivotal in the revitalization of rural culture. By meticulously planning event content, designing suitable locations, and crafting interactive experiences, an appealing and engaging festival culture space can be established. This not only draws in more residents and tourists but also provides them with distinctive festival experiences, ultimately reshaping their psychological perceptions and deepening their connection and emotional attachment to rural culture.



Fig. 6 A Rural Festival Experience of CUIT Model

### 5.2 Creating Regional Festival Brands for Achieving Synergistic Development

In recent years, the culture and tourism industry has experienced significant growth and development, leading to a heightened focus on regional branding as a pivotal strategy for achieving synergistic growth (Liu et al., 2021). As emphasized in Barich and Kotler's (1991) research, the perception of a destination's image is often based on the preconceived interests, values, and assumptions that tourists have about tourism products and services. Given that observers often face limitations in fully comprehending the essential attributes and characteristics of a destination they haven't personally visited, potential visitors frequently rely substantially on its brand image when making judgments and decisions in such situations.

Branding not only accentuates a destination's distinctive allure and qualities but also offers a plethora of experiences and value, thus enticing a more significant number of tourists to venture forth and partake in these experiences. Therefore, the process of creating a regional festival brand plays a vital role in the achievement of synergetic growth. It is worth noting that festival activities, as an integral part of regional culture, are steeped in rich history, folklore, and tradition. Indeed, the fusion of festival activities with brand imagery to craft a rural cultural space brand (depicted in Figure 7) extends the scope of the brand, infusing the destination with additional cultural substance and emotional significance, encompassing both practical and symbolic dimensions. A distinctive regional festival brand draws more tourists to engage in festival events and fosters the preservation and advancement of local culture. Additionally, it stimulates the regional economy, enhances the living environment, and contributes to achieving more tremendous success in synergistic growth.

### 5.3 Enhancing the Cultural Experiential Sensation and Optimizing the Content Structure of Cultural Spaces

On the one hand, the fusion of world cultures and outstanding Chinese traditional culture at the spatial level is emphasized and presented in the merged content. This requires the revival of traditional rural culture to adapt to the demands of the times and the preferences of the public. On the other hand, since the content of festival activities may differ from the experiences and perceptions of the audience, it is crucial to optimize the content gradient and emphasize the core content to ensure that it resonates well with various audiences (Zhao, 2021). This helps to improve the quality of cultural experiences. In fact, ensuring that cultural activities (Li & Song, 2013) reach an essential audience, improving the quality of the experience, and enhancing the evaluation of cultural activities are fundamental requirements for the sustainable development of festival activities.

Furthermore, the sustainable development of festival activities (Lai, 2019) must occur within an appropriate cultural environment to avoid adverse effects such as limited content or a narrow audience. Therefore, efforts should be made to promote cultural content. Finally, expanding the content of cultural activities to present multifaceted festival activities and provide a multi-dimensional experience will encourage more people to participate in festival activities and thus expand their influence.



Fig. 7 A Village Festival Cultural Brand

## 6. Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that rural festivals and rural cultural spaces play crucial roles in stimulating and promoting the production and reproduction of rural culture (Fang, 2018). By analyzing the shaping of festival activities and rural cultural spaces, this paper reveals the rejuvenation of rural cultural vitality through strategies such as the individualized management of rural units, the construction of regional collaborative development platforms, the integration and expansion of traditional festivals into creative festival activities, as well as measures and feasible pathways for enhancing vibrancy in aspects like psychological processes, festival branding, and regional spaces. The systematic results of this study indicate that festival activities and rural cultural spaces are integral components in the process of cultural production and reproduction in rural areas that play a crucial role in revitalizing rural cultural vitality (Deng et al., 2016). These findings address the theoretical question (Li & He, 2019) of how rural cultural vitality can be rejuvenated through festival activities and rural cultural spaces.

However, this study has some limitations (Zheng, 2023). First, it focuses on the design of festival activities and rural cultural spaces without considering other factors that may influence rural cultural production and reproduction, such as the rural economy and population mobility. Second, it does not provide detailed methods and steps for implementing vibrancy measures and feasible pathways, which require further research and application. For future research (Barich & Kotler, 1991), it is crucial to recognize that preserving and innovating village culture is a long-term endeavor. This study has provided preliminary analysis and reflection from the perspective of festival activities and rural cultural space creation. However, future research should include a broader range of disciplines, including semiotics, design studies, sociology, and others, to conduct comprehensive research and practical initiatives. By using culture as a medium, these interdisciplinary approaches can help guide villages on a path of sustainable regeneration.

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