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Research on the Reconstruction and Enhancement Path of the Vitality Evaluation System of Traditional Villages from the Perspective of Multi-dimensional Coordination

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ABSTRACT

As important carriers of China's agricultural civilization and living cultural heritage, traditional villages are facing a multidimensional "deactivation" crisis under the impact of rapid urbanization and modernization. Scientifically measuring the vitality of traditional villages and exploring their classified enhancement paths are key to achieving comprehensive rural revitalization and the sustainable development of cultural heritage. This paper systematically reviews the conceptual connotation of traditional village vitality and the evolutionary logic of existing evaluation dimensions, pointing out that the traditional ternary evaluation model centered on "population, material, and intangible heritage" has limitations in responding to the digital era and modern governance needs. On this basis, this paper innovatively proposes the theoretical logic for reconstructing the vitality evaluation system of traditional villages, demonstrating the necessity of introducing "policy guidance" as an external guarantee dimension and "information technology" as an empowerment dimension. Combining the differentiated characteristics and common mechanisms of multidimensional deactivation in traditional villages across various regions in China (such as Xiangxi in Hunan, Beijing, and Longzhong in Gansu), this paper further introduces the concept of settlement "double repair", and proposes a multi-dimensional coordinated activation path based on classified policies. This aims to provide theoretical support and decision-making reference for traditional villages to transition from "static preservation" to "dynamic activation" in the new era.

KEYWORDS

Traditional Villages; Vitality Evaluation; Digital Empowerment; Policy Guidance; Deactivation Mechanism; Settlement Double Repair.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional villages are settlements formed early in history, possessing rich traditional resources and high historical, cultural, scientific, artistic, and social values. They are hailed as "living fossils" of rural history and "museums" of folk culture[1]. As "living heritage," traditional villages are not only static material remains but also living communities in people's real lives. Their life courses and living customs must be continued; otherwise, they will automatically decline or even disappear[2].

However, swept up by urban-rural integration, rural tourism, and modernization, traditional villages in China exhibit multidimensional "deactivation" phenomena, such as insufficient economic development momentum, weakened grassroots governance, and sluggish historical and cultural inheritance[3]. On the one hand, massive population outflow leads to "empty villages," dilapidated physical spaces, and a generational gap in the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage[4]. On the other hand, some villages fall into the trap of over-commercialization during tourism development, leading to the distortion of their cultural cores and the destruction of original landscapes[5]. Faced

with this complex dual dilemma, the protection philosophy of traditional villages across all sectors of society has gradually shifted-from a purely "frozen static protection" that treats villages as specimens to an "activation and utilization" approach that emphasizes the continuation of their production and living functions[6].

Vitality evaluation, as a foundational and diagnostic tool for accurately identifying village protection issues and implementing classified policies, is the key link connecting current problems with protection paths[7]. Currently, academic research on the vitality of traditional villages is deepening, but existing evaluation frameworks are mostly based on the traditional classification of material and intangible heritage, making it difficult to fully align with the macro-background of Digital China construction and modern rural governance in the new era. Therefore, re-examining the evaluation dimensions of traditional village vitality and constructing a more scientific, comprehensive, and contemporary measurement system has become an urgent academic proposition[8,9].

2. CONNOTATION DEFINITION OF TRADITIONAL VILLAGE VITALITY AND THE EVOLUTION OF EXISTING EVALUATION DIMENSIONS

2.1. Theoretical Connotation of Traditional Village Vitality

The term "vitality" (or living state) originated in the field of intangible cultural heritage protection in the 1980s, emphasizing the continuity of culture in the contemporary era ("living") and the evolution and development of its forms ("changing"). Introduced to the field of traditional settlements, vitality is defined as the comprehensive measurement of the continuity, inheritance, and development of traditional villages in fulfilling their functions, such as traditional agricultural production, communal living, harmonious ecology, and rural agricultural culture inheritance[10].

Specifically, the vitality of traditional villages includes three core dimensions: First, material survival, namely the integrity and authenticity of residential buildings and village street patterns[11]; second, functional continuation, referring to the maintenance and modern adaptive transformation of internal production and living functions; third, cultural inheritance, referring to the living continuation of traditional construction techniques, folk customs, and social clan networks in the lives of contemporary residents[12]. A thriving population is the prerequisite for vitality, the continuation of production and living styles is the foundation, and the dynamic inheritance of culture is the most fundamental characteristic of vitality[13].

2.2. Review and Comparison of Existing Vitality Evaluation Dimensions

Currently, the academic community has conducted extensive beneficial explorations into the quantitative evaluation of traditional village vitality, and the selection of evaluation dimensions shows a trend from singular to pluralistic:

The "Human, Physical, and Event" Ternary Structure Model Based on cultural ecology theory, many scholars view traditional villages as an organic whole composed of human systems, residential systems, and social systems, constructing a three-dimensional evaluation model of "population vitality-material heritage vitality-intangible heritage vitality." For instance, some scholars have measured 24 traditional villages in the Xiangxi region from three dimensions: the vitality of village residents (human), the integrity of material cultural heritage (physical), and the continuity of intangible cultural heritage (event)[14]. Other researchers have built similar evaluation indicators for villages in Yongzhou, Hunan.

The "Space, Culture, Society, and Economy" Four-dimensional Expansion Model With the macro-level expansion of research perspectives, evaluation systems began to incorporate social and economic dimensions. Some researchers constructed an evaluation system comprising 32 indicators from four levels: spatial vitality (spatial pattern and landscape), cultural vitality (historical buildings

and skill inheritance), social vitality (infrastructure and social participation), and economic vitality (population structure and industrial development)[15]. Targeting the high urbanization level in Beijing, other scholars extracted vitality evaluation factors from three levels: economic development, social governance, and cultural identity.

Specialized Evaluations Based on Specific Regional or Landscape Characteristics For specific regions, such as the Tunpu villages in central Guizhou, some scholars constructed an evaluation system encompassing development foundation, development conditions, and development potential from a dynamic perspective of the "past-present-future" evolution of material cultural landscapes. For the loess hilly and gully region in Longzhong, Gansu, researchers integrated regional ecological environment, local cultural protection, village economic vitality, protection and development mechanisms, and villagers' aspirations into the evaluation framework[16].

2.3. Reflection on the Limitations of Traditional Evaluation Systems

Despite these rich contributions, faced with the grand context of China's vigorous promotion of rural revitalization, digital rural construction, and governance modernization, existing evaluation frameworks still reveal certain limitations: First, there is a lack of measurement for "information technology (digital empowerment)." Modern information technology (such as digital archives, smart tourism platforms, and 3D modeling) has become a crucial engine for activating traditional culture and breaking physical spatial limitations[17]. However, traditional evaluations are mostly confined to offline physical restoration and the statistics of inheritors, failing to consider it as an independent empowerment dimension. Second, there is insufficient representation of "policies and mechanisms (external guarantees)." The vital protection of traditional villages is a complex social engineering project that relies highly not only on endogenous power but also on the supply of external systems (such as "multi-plan integration," financial funds, and property rights circulation systems)[18]. Although some models include social governance, they often confuse it with village regulations or resident participation, failing to highlight the guiding role of top-level policy design and contiguous protection mechanisms.

3. THE RECONSTRUCTION LOGIC OF THE VITALITY EVALUATION SYSTEM UNDER THE DUAL-DRIVEN FRAMEWORK OF "DIGITAL-POLICY"

Addressing the limitations of existing evaluation models, a theoretical upgrade must be achieved when constructing a future-oriented vitality evaluation system for traditional villages. This paper proposes that on the basis of the traditional "industrial economy (endogenous power)" and "cultural inheritance (spiritual core)," "policy guidance" should be innovatively introduced as an external guarantee dimension, and "information technology" as an empowerment dimension, jointly building a multi-dimensional coordinated measurement framework of "four major dimensions." [19] The inherent logic of this reconstruction is as follows:

3.1. The Necessity and Scientific Nature of Introducing the "Policy Guidance" Dimension

The protection of traditional villages in China features a typical "top-down" government-led characteristic. Village vitality protection is not just a spontaneous behavior of villagers; it highly relies on the allocation of public resources, the perfection of laws and regulations, and the coordination of grassroots governance[20].

Policy funds are the starting capital for village activation. Traditional village protection involves massive engineering. Whether it is building restoration or infrastructure upgrades, huge amounts of

funding are required[21]. Due to the "quasi-public good" attribute of traditional villages, market capital is often reluctant to intervene in the early stages[22]. The proportion of government special funds and the participation rate in contiguous demonstration policies directly determine whether a village can survive its "start-up period."

Systems and planning are the yardsticks for resolving the contradiction between protection and development. In rural construction, due to imperfect homestead systems and construction controls, the phenomenon of villagers tearing down old houses to build new ones often leads to the destruction of ancient buildings[23]. Measuring the "implementation rate of protection plans" and the "coordination degree of grassroots governance" can accurately reflect the effectiveness of top-level policies in the "last mile" of implementation, which is a fundamental barrier against the deactivation of villages caused by constructive destruction.

3.2. The Contemporary Demand for Introducing the "Information Technology" Dimension

In the digital age, information technology is not only a recording tool but also a catalyst for cultural production and industrial upgrading. Incorporating it into the vitality evaluation is an inevitable demand of the times.

Breaking the generational inheritance gap of intangible cultural heritage. Traditional techniques and folk customs often rely on "oral teaching and heart-to-heart transmission," facing the risk of "the art dying with the person." The coverage of digital archives and the construction of digital museums can permanently preserve and immersively reproduce cultural genes through VR/AR and 3D modeling, transforming static culture into dynamic digital assets[24-27].

Enhancing the smart operation efficiency of the cultural tourism industry. For tourism-oriented villages, the application level of smart tourism platforms and data monitoring and warning capabilities are directly related to whether the village can effectively expand its tourist market, enhance tourist experience, and avoid the destruction of ancient village ecology caused by overloaded development[28]. Information technology, as an empowerment tool, can close the loop from culture to industry.

3.3. Constructing a New "Policy-Economy-Culture-Technology" Four-dimensional Measurement Model

Based on the above logical reconstruction, a scientific and contemporary vitality evaluation system for traditional villages should include the following four core dimensions[29-33]:

Policy Guidance (External Guarantee): Covers indicators such as the implementation rate of protection plans, the intensity of policy funding, and the coordination degree of grassroots governance, focusing on evaluating the effectiveness of top-level design and grassroots execution.

Industrial Economy (Endogenous Power): Covers indicators such as the contribution rate of cultural tourism integration, the growth rate of village collective economic income, and the employment absorption rate of characteristic industries, focusing on evaluating the village's self-sustaining ability and capacity to retain original residents.

Cultural Inheritance (Spiritual Core): Covers indicators such as the restoration rate of traditional buildings, the participation degree of intangible cultural heritage inheritors, the frequency of folk activities, and the degree of clan cultural identity, evaluating the survival status of the village's "form" and "soul."

Information Technology (Empowerment Tool): Covers digital archive coverage, the application of smart cultural tourism platforms, and data warning capabilities, evaluating the village's level of embracing modern technology to achieve cultural innovation and transformation. These four

dimensions support each other: policy provides a safety net for economy and culture, culture provides characteristic resources for the economy, the economy feeds back funds to culture, and information technology permeates comprehensively, forming a rigorous measurement closed loop of "diagnosis-attribution-classification."

4. DIFFERENTIATION CHARACTERISTICS AND MECHANISM ANALYSIS OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEACTIVATION IN TRADITIONAL VILLAGES

By leveraging the aforementioned diversified vitality evaluation perspective and synthesizing the empirical research data of Chinese scholars in regions such as Hunan, Beijing, Gansu, and Guizhou, the differentiation characteristics and underlying mechanisms of the current deactivation of traditional villages in China can be clearly identified.

4.1. Regional and Typological Differentiation Characteristics of Deactivation

Deactivation characteristics in highly urbanized areas (taking Beijing as an example). As a megacity, Beijing has active urban-rural element flows. Research shows that the 26 Chinese traditional villages in Beijing exhibit different trends, such as strong-strong, strong-weak, weak-strong, and weak-weak types. Among them, some villages are significantly affected by market forces (e.g., daily functions being squeezed out by over-commercialization), while villages far from the market face the problem of inheritance gaps in heritage elements. Due to the siphon effect of urbanization, "social governance factors" (such as social relations and public participation) and "economic development factors" often become the leading variables for deactivation in these villages.

Deactivation characteristics in mountainous and hilly areas (taking Xiangxi in Hunan and Longzhong in Gansu as examples). In areas with complex terrain and relatively closed transportation like Xiangxi in Hunan, material cultural heritage is relatively well-preserved (e.g., the integrity index of material cultural heritage in the Xiangxi region is superior to resident vitality and intangible heritage continuity), but internal polarization within the region is severe. Tourism-oriented villages (such as Shen'ao Village and Shibadong Village) show good economic and demographic vitality but may face the hidden danger of their street patterns being destroyed. In contrast, life-service or traditional agricultural villages generally fall into a state of "severe deactivation." The hollowing out of their population numbers and structures intertwines, leading to no successors for intangible cultural heritage. In the loess hilly and gully region of Longzhong in Gansu, in addition to the above problems, the fragile ecological environment and frequent natural disasters severely restrict the living environment and vitality continuity of the villages.

4.2. Common Mechanism Attribution of Multidimensional Deactivation

Through cross-regional comparison, several common mechanisms behind the deactivation of traditional villages can be found:

"Separation of people and households" and spatial mismatch caused by population outflow (the root of the demographic dimension). A large number of young and middle-aged laborers migrate outward in search of better employment opportunities and modern living conditions, leading to the hollowing out and aging of the village. For example, in Banliang Ancient Village in Hunan, the vacancy rate of residential houses is extremely high, and the permanent residents are mostly elderly. This directly causes traditional residential houses to lack daily maintenance and accelerate structural damage, and also causes a fracture in traditional living functions (such as the mismatch between traditional stoves and modern kitchenware, leading to the alienation of internal space). People are the subjects of cultural inheritance, and the absence of subjects is the source of systemic deactivation.

Generational gaps and core distortion under the impact of modern civilization (the fracture of the event/intangible dimension). There is a significant hidden crisis in the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. The older generation of skill inheritors is gradually passing away, while the younger generation, due to weakened cultural identity or lack of economic incentives, is unwilling to take over traditional skills (such as wood carving, painted sculpture, etc.). At the same time, when some villages introduce tourism development, they conduct superficial performances of folk culture to cater to the market, causing traditional culture to lose its original social education and community cohesion functions, resulting in the risk of cultural "distortion" and "disembedding."

Lack of endogenous power and single industrial chains (the dilemma of physical and economic dimensions). Most traditional villages are dominated by the primary industry, with severe farmland abandonment. Due to the lack of support from characteristic leading industries, villages struggle to realize the "capital conversion" of resources. Even in some villages that have developed tourism, the depth of cultural tourism integration is often insufficient, the proportion of tourism income in the village collective economy is low, and the branding degree of agricultural products is weak, making it difficult to form a virtuous cycle of "culture empowering the economy, and the economy feeding back culture."

5. CLASSIFIED ACTIVATION PATHS BASED ON SETTLEMENT "DOUBLE REPAIR" AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL COORDINATION

Based on the diagnostic results of multi-dimensional vitality evaluation, the protection of traditional villages must not adopt a "one-size-fits-all" model. Introducing the concept of settlement "double repair" (repairing explicit landscape genes and restoring implicit cultural genes), combined with the dual-driven framework of "Digital-Policy," this paper proposes the following classified activation and multi-dimensional coordinated enhancement paths:

5.1. Classified Policy System Based on Vitality Evaluation

Based on vitality scores, villages can be divided into four categories: highly vital, moderately vital, low-vitality, and vitality crisis, and differentiated paths should be implemented:

Highly vital villages: Adopt the path of "innovation leadership + brand output." On the basis of consolidating existing material and intangible heritage advantages, focus on developing digital cultural creativity and high-end integrated industries, and output standardized protection and operation models.

Moderately vital villages: Adopt the path of "shoring up weaknesses + strengthening coordination." Accurately locate the leading factors of deactivation (such as insufficient endogenous industrial power or weak application of information technology), break through economic and technological bottlenecks through policy tilting in the short term, and achieve balanced linkage of policy, economy, culture, and technology in the medium term.

Low-vitality and crisis villages: Adopt the path of "basic guarantee + precise rescue." Prioritize solving hollowing out and backward infrastructure problems, implement rescue environmental renovations and "cultural first aid" projects, and consolidate the bottom line of survival.

5.2. Specific Strategies for Multidimensional Coordination

1) Policy Dimension: Perfecting the integration of multiple plans and the mechanism of interest sharing among multiple subjects The government should play a leading role, using the evaluation results of traditional village vitality as a scientific basis for compiling "one village, one plan," and establishing a dynamic closed loop of "evaluation-feedback-adjustment." In addition, the PPP model for traditional village protection should be explored, building a coordinated governance structure of

"government-led + villager-oriented + market participation." For example, imitating the joint-stock cooperative model of Malan Village in Beijing, villagers invest their houses and land as shares, enterprises provide funds and operations, and the government is responsible for supervision and infrastructure matching. Through the mechanism of "guaranteed income + dividend sharing," the interests of all parties are deeply bound, stimulating the endogenous initiative of community protection.

2) Economic Dimension: Deepening cross-boundary integration of "culture, tourism +" and cultivating characteristic industrial systems Industry is the blood-making mechanism for activation. It is necessary to break the single sightseeing model and develop new formats such as "culture & tourism + agriculture," "culture & tourism + research study," and "culture & tourism + wellness" based on the village's unique architectural, agricultural, and ecological resources. For example, using mountainous terraces and vacant residences to create immersive farming experience areas and boutique homestay clusters can increase the employment absorption rate of village industries, thereby attracting young and middle-aged labor back and fundamentally solving the problem of population hollowing out.

3) Cultural Dimension: Implementing settlement "double repair" to reshape cultural identity and spatial memory In the explicit space, follow the principle of "repairing the old as before," using local craftsmanship for the micro-renewal of damaged buildings and historical streets, while improving internal pipelines and bathroom facilities to enhance modern living comfort to meet modern life needs, resolving the "spatial mismatch." In implicit culture, activate public spaces such as ancestral halls and ancient stages, innovate the forms of folk festivals (such as upgrading traditional activities into regional cultural festivals), implement the dual-teacher system of "inheritor + apprentice" and cultural volunteer positions, and rebuild the cultural identity and community cohesion of rural society.

4) Technology Dimension: Strengthening digital empowerment to build a closed loop of "Digital + Culture + Industry" Fully release the multiplier effect of information technology in village activation: First, establish fully covered 3D digital archives for the rescue digital recording of endangered architectural components and the skills of old artisans. Second, build smart cultural tourism service platforms and digital museums, expanding cultural dissemination boundaries through immersive experiences such as AR/VR guides and cloud-based villages. Third, build a real-time vitality monitoring system for the village (covering population mobility, disaster warnings, building settlement, etc.), using big data to achieve intelligent upgrades from "passive rescue" to "preventive protection."

6. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS

Traditional villages are not only solidified historical relics but also living spaces that continue the bloodline of agricultural civilization. This paper breaks through the traditional paradigm where existing vitality evaluations are mostly confined to "population-material-intangible heritage." It innovatively demonstrates the necessity of introducing the dual dimensions of "policy guidance" and "information technology (digital empowerment)" into macro-evaluation models, constructing a brand new four-dimensional theoretical framework of "external guarantee (policy) - endogenous power (economy) - spiritual core (culture) - empowerment tool (technology)."

Through the analysis of the mechanisms of deactivation characteristics in typical villages across different regions in China, this paper confirms that the "deactivation" of traditional villages is the result of multiple intertwined factors such as the separation of people and households, cultural faults, and industrial scarcity. Only by relying on a scientific and contemporary measurement system for accurate diagnosis, supplemented by classified policy paths of settlement "double repair," multi-dimensional coordination, and digital empowerment, can the inherent vitality of traditional villages be truly awakened.

This study clarifies the evolutionary logic of evaluation dimensions at the theoretical level, laying a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent in-depth indicator weighting and empirical quantitative measurement of traditional villages in specific regions (such as highly urbanized and digital transformation pilot zones). In the future, how to deeply integrate this multidimensional evaluation framework with field research data and mathematical models such as the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to form locally adaptable evaluation standards will be an important research direction to promote the comprehensive transition of traditional villages from "static protection" to "sustainable living inheritance."

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