

BOOK, CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

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Wuling Ganlan: splendid archi-tectonic legacy of Asian wooden architecture

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Over the last two decades, people have realised the importance of conserving and managing cultural heritage, as heritage tourism has risen to unprecedented levels in the context of globalisation, especially in the developing world and less developed regions (Timothy and Nyaupane 2009). Indeed, these heritage landscape attractions have successfully brought income to some poor areas, while at the same time, much of this superficial tourism has caused irreversible destruction in local historic built environments, which have been reduced to places in which standardised products and services are marketed. Through a series of IASTE conferences (International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments), questions about the impact of tourism on heritage and how to use traditional cultures to motivate the regeneration of built environments were discussed from different perspectives. These academic discussions have shown that there is an increasing demand for built heritage, which ensures the preservation of local cultural traditions and requires a new understanding of the role of cultural heritage in preventing the homogeneity of modern tourism from erasing all that is particular (AlSayyad 2001).

Since 2017, the implementation of a rural revitalisation strategy in China has resulted in rural regeneration programs unparalleled in the West when considering their magnitude, continuity, and scope of intervention, which have aimed at improving the physical, economic, social, and living conditions in villages (Zhou, Li, and Xu 2020). Historical resources on Chinese rural districts are

numerous and they mostly draw on its profound cultural appeal to connect the rural to tourism (Chang 2000). Vernacular heritage tourism has thus been treated by local authorities as an important solution to alleviate poverty and help communities economically develop (UNWTO 2005). The arrival of agencies, entrepreneurs, artists, and tourists in rural areas subject to economic backwardness has dramatically changed the fragile built environment and caused many problems. Because China is large and culturally diverse, each region faces unique problems in addressing its heritage, and the way these issues have been approached has varied from place to place. Among the most recent and noteworthy projects is the constellation of villages located along the Longtan River in the Wuling Mountain Region (Hubei Province, Xuan'en County), a valley that has been inhabited since ancient times by the Tujia people, one of the ethnic minorities of China. The archetype of pile dwellings made of woods or bamboo is referred to as Ganlan in Chinese. Tujia stilt houses are representative of Ganlan wooden architecture in the Wuling region. Many of these Tujia villages are now included in the List of Outstanding Minority Villages as cultural relics and made accessible as open-air museums to incoming tourists.

The Wuling Ganlan exhibition emerged out of an international research workshop co-organised by Southeast University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Chongqing University, and Università Iuav di Venezia in 2019. Lianghekou is one of the best-preserved Tujia villages in the valley, and the interuniversity workshop chose it as a case study and produced design proposals for its regeneration. The projects produced by professors and students were organised in an exhibition entitled 'Lianghekou: A Tujia Village of Re-Living-Together', and it was selected as the collateral event at the 17th

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Fig. 1 The Wuling Ganlan exhibition (Source: Yilong Zhao)

International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale – Venezia.¹ On an international level, on the day of the opening ceremony of the Biennale, a grand live broadcast activity connected the village of Lianghekou to Venice. All original inhabitants were invited back to their homes in the ancient village to interact with people at the exhibition site and witness the potential for the revival of their traditional culture. After the Biennale, all the exhibition material was shipped back and redesigned for a new exhibition. Both exhibitions have aimed to contribute to the contemporary regeneration of rural heritage through real connections with local people living in the villages, as well as through the revitalisation of local culture rather than its abandonment. Consistent with this purpose, the exhibition returned to the Tujia valley in western Hubei and was set up as a permanent part of the local tourism project. The venue for this exhibition has been the Sino-Italian International Architecture Study Camp, hosted in a contemporary Tujia-style building adjacent to a key component of national heritage, the village of Pengjia, as an intentional metaphor for positioning the new in the old.

The Wuling Ganlan exhibition was curated by Tong Zhang with the purpose of showcasing vernacular architecture and promoting a living culture; thus, the curator proposed an immersive spatial journey through the representation of the Tujia indigenous lifestyle (Fig. 1). Old components of Tujia stilt houses, which had been directly recycled from local houses and reassembled into characteristic construction units, served as oversized exhibits as

well as means of creating exhibition spaces. The exhibition hall was an enclosed space, and the curator emphasised exhibiting the items in a dim atmosphere. All the background walls were painted in dark colours, and the wooden construction units and old utensils retained their original appearance and were not renovated; moreover, the hall was equipped with a customised lighting system. This dim atmosphere reminded people of the interior of Tujia traditional dwellings and provided an air of mystery to the ethnic colourful brocades, everyday artifacts, and furniture pieces.

The exhibition consisted of five themes: 'From Lianghekou to Venice', 'Pleasant lifeworld and natural environments', 'Ganlan wooden architecture', 'The Xuan'en No.1 granary', and 'Firepit customs'. The spatial arrangement clearly presented each theme within its own exhibition area, and the tour was progressive, taking visitors through the five themes, which built on each other. This layout was conducive to visitors understanding the exhibited content. The first part of the exhibition introduced how the project came about over time and emphasised the future of Ganlan wooden architectural heritage in a global context. The scenography of the second part of the exhibition included photos and models of the enjoyable lifeworld of the Wuling Mountains, focusing on various elements of their natural and cultural landscape. Rice farming, indigenous clothing and handicrafts, music, ethnic ceremonies, and festivals were important components of the exhibition's appeal for rural tourism (Cohen 2001). The information of Ganlan wooden architecture, including built forms, structural frames, and construction techniques was displayed in the third section of the exhibit as its centrepiece. Six oversized models and printed screen panels showed the characteristics of Tujia vernacular stilt houses. These contents reflected the self-adaptability of Ganlan wooden architecture as one of its intrinsic construction features, as put forward and amplified in a design proposal for the village of Lianghekou. That design was experimental and addressed the extremely different living conditions of the Tujia people and the need to reconstruct public spaces flexibly, using the variability of tectonic wood architecture to meet the three facets of the Tujia people's needs in Lianghekou, i.e., their everyday life, market, and ceremonies. Unfortunately, some technical construction terms and certain indigenous names for architectural elements, which would have been necessary for visitors to know to better understand the ingenuity of the Lianghekou project, appeared in the back of the display because of spatial restrictions on the exhibition layout. This conceptual discontinuity made it difficult for visitors to serendipitously read and comprehend these well-made models during their visit. In the fourth section of the exhibition, the Xuan'en No.1 granary was

¹ The 17th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice ran from 22 May to 21 November 2021. The Lianghekou exhibition was one of the official collateral events, and the exhibition was held at the Palazzo Zen, Cannaregio, in Venice. The organising Institution Fondazione EMGdotART hosted it.



Fig. 2 The firepit custom theme in the exhibition (Source: Yilong Zhao)

featured as an excellent example of Ganlan wooden architectural heritage. An exquisite model of the granary was displayed in a glass showcase, showing the cross-section of the building structure and the scenario of how people worked in it. The choice of this granary as a case study presented both advantages and disadvantages. It was confusing for visitors to understand why the granary existed because it did not look like the Tujia stilt houses that were shown in the third part of the exhibition. However, in the building of this granary, a column-and-tie framework was adopted, based on the traditional Tujia wooden construction techniques; moreover, the granary constituted a uniquely large space that accommodated twelve storage rooms. In light of the renovation of Ganlan wooden architecture, this atypical building offered an excellent example showing the possibility of using traditional construction techniques to create a large contemporary space. The fifth part of the exhibition created an impressive spatial experience through the reconstruction of a firepit room (Fig. 2). In similar exhibitions in the past, the firepit was regarded as an architectural element rather than a holistic living space that reflected the habitus of a lifestyle based on floor-seating. In this exhibit, visitors could visualise the way in which people used the firepit space because all architectural elements, utensils, and implements were made to adapt to lifestyle based on firepit-related customs. At the end of the exhibition, several summary videos, which review the whole process of the exhibition activities, engaged the audience in an open discussion and thinking about possible solutions for people to live together in those traditional cultural heritage sites.

It is necessary to critically discuss the multiple conceptual meanings of authenticity expressed in the exhibition. The first meaning emerged out of the comparison

between wooden and masonry materials, which put forward an oriental understanding of the authenticity of Ganlan wooden heritage assessment. The subsequent modifications and adaptations of buildings based on the local wooden construction techniques over time possessed historical and cultural values and were not merely limited to their original form and appearance. Recognising the value of 'living heritage' and honouring the fidelity of the process and skills that have been transmitted from generation to generation (Lowenthal 1994), the indigenous knowledge system derived from culture that was features in this exhibition constituted an alternative response to doubts about the authenticity of wooden architecture. However, there was a potential danger that acceptance of the inherent variability in the value of Ganlan architecture could lead to the loss of the original aesthetic quality of materials, as well as to some ambiguous criteria in the intervention to protect and manage wooden architectural heritage.

The second way in which authenticity was expressed in this exhibition was in the topological deformation of public space that emerged out the Lianghekou design proposal. Three white models showed a dynamic process by which living scene changed, representing the different spatial needs of Tujia people in daily life, at the market, and during ceremonies (Fig. 3). The reality of the life of the Tujia people and the use of construction technology overweighed the snapshots of nostalgic life or picturesque images, which have been mostly manufactured as performances without a relationship with local culture. That proposal attempted to frame the Tujia architectural heritage and local traditions in terms of authenticity by reflecting their real living culture, using indigenous architectural technologies, and representing the residents' original identities. However, as globalisation has brought about the phenomena of consuming tradition and manufacturing heritage, seeking authenticity has been unrealistic because authentic culture has been misrepresented. Many representations of local life or customs in the past have turned out to be mirages, and these simulacra have been manufactured on demand, only to be consumed by tourists (Oliver 2006). This discussion shows that the issue does not rest on the authenticity of particular modes of engagement but on differing political values. Consequently, people across the world have become anxious about genuineness, originality, or truth, while overuse has in fact debased the term and the concept of 'authenticity' itself (Upton 2001).

In conclusion, the exhibition at stake here presented a positive and confident Asian perspective, showing Ganlan wooden architecture as a unique cultural heritage in an international context. Presenting the richness of indigenous or vernacular knowledge was considered to be the

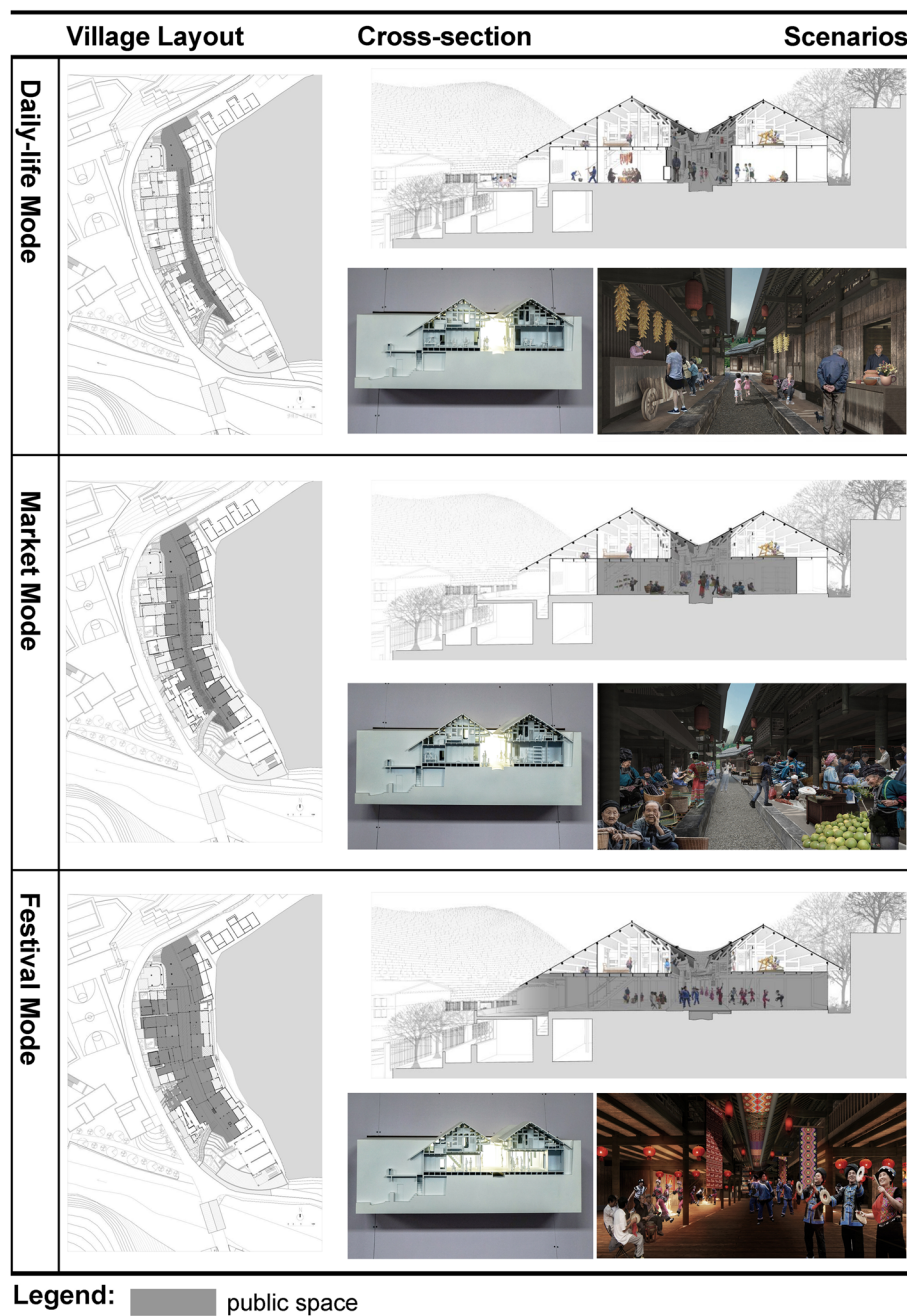


Fig. 3 The experimental design proposal of Lianghekou Village (Source: Zhang, Xu, and Wang 2022)

best way to have people understand the challenges and opportunities facing heritage sites in rural areas globally. The ambition of curators was to establish a holistic epistemology capturing the relations between construction and culture as a system based on local architectonic features and an authentic culture (Zhang, Xu, and Wang 2022) and to think about personalised heritage conservation methods and dialogue with the West. The most

impressive part of the exhibition was the information pertaining to the regeneration of the ancient village of Lianghekou. Both the experimental design proposal and the practical projects were fully in tune with the 'genius loci'.² These projects attempted to prove that culture is an endogenous motivator and constitutes a lively method for

² Context or place, the spirit of place.

the adaptive reuse of heritage. The content of the exhibit made outstanding contributions to the field of architecture. However, many issues could have been approached from a political, economic, and social perspectives. For example, who owns the heritage and who does not? How can we ensure that the Indigenous people benefit from their local culture, rather than being expelled by external capital, which leads to the gentrification of traditional villages? How can the conflict between the elderly who do not want to leave their homes and the young generations who migrated to cities be addressed? These questions have not been limited to this particular region; indeed, they have been heard throughout rural areas worldwide as an increasing number of places have been designated as heritage sites and tourism continues to grow.

Abbreviations

IASTE: International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments;
UNWTO: United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

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