



Integration of Traditional Culture Elements and Construction of Space Narrative in Urban and Rural Design in China

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SUMMARY: *This study examines the integration of traditional cultural elements and spatial narratives in contemporary Chinese urban and rural design, a critical discourse amid rapid modernization and urbanization. Utilizing secondary data and a qualitative multiple-case study approach, the research comprehensively analyses five exemplary Chinese projects that received the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Award for "New Design in Heritage Context" between 2020 and 2025. The findings reveal that strategically incorporating traditional street morphology, classical architectural typologies, and local craftsmanship and materials effectively fosters historical storytelling, continuity of historic characterization, and cohesive spatial narratives. Furthermore, these award-winning projects demonstrate how blending traditional cultural elements with modern public space revitalization significantly enhances community identity and social cohesion. Ultimately, this integration offers a sustainable framework, elevating community identity and place attachment while seamlessly showcasing innovative contemporary design.*

KEYWORDS: *Integration of culture and spatial design; Traditional cultural element; Contemporary building designs; Spatial narrative and community identity*

1 Introduction

Traditions and philosophies followed in different parts of the world have a profound impact on the artistic expressions (Barasch, 1985; Ye, 1985; Honour & Fleming, 2005; Li, 2009). Urban and rural planning has no exceptions, as it has been significantly affected by the cultural heritage and philosophies followed by the inhabitants of the area (Rapoport, 1969). Spatial planning and design interventions in both urban and rural environments serve as tangible mediums through which a nation's cultural legacies are manifested and communicated via visual typologies and spatial configurations (Hillier & Hanson, 1984). The analysis of Chinese urban and rural planning could reveal that cultural elements are an essential part of the planning and execution in different architecture (Knapp, 2000). Integrating modern spatial narratives with traditional cultural elements and philosophies in urban and rural design necessitates the strategic deployment of historical narratives, architectural motifs, and artistic forms that crystallise the region's unique identity and historical lineage (Cullen, 1961; Ai, 2009).

Although contemporary design methodologies and architectural paradigms in China have evolved significantly from historical precedents, traditional cultural elements and philosophical tenets continue to resonate within emerging architectural expressions (Wang, 2010). Chinese

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practitioners working on the architectural design perceive the integration of contemporary methodologies with historical tenets not merely as a technical hybrid, but as a vital mechanism to safeguard cultural legacies and philosophical values. By doing so, they re-enchant modern environments with native meanings, thereby fostering a critically resilient, identity-preserving built environment (Zhu, 2025; Cai & Yuan, 2017). While many spatial practitioners view the reconciliation of contemporary design with traditional cultural philosophies as a formidable challenge, an emerging consensus within the field frameworkizes this convergence as an unprecedented opportunity—a critical conduit for driving holistic cultural and environmental sustainability (Dessein et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2024).

Specifically, Zhao et al (2014) argued that weaving traditional cultural motifs and philosophical tenets into contemporary spatial narratives not only elevates the aesthetic and experiential dimensions of the built environment but also serves as an indispensable conduit for safeguarding cultural continuity and historical preservation. Furthermore, the impetus for this integration is increasingly accelerated by a global paradigm shift toward sustainability, as contemporary planning frameworks worldwide seek to leverage indigenous ecological wisdom to combat modern socio-environmental crises (Qiu, 2010).

Traditional Chinese cultural elements serve as an essential epistemological framework for securing sustainable urban and rural planning. These elements are deeply anchored in foundational philosophies which systematically advocate for a symbiotic, harmonious integration of human settlements and the natural ecosystem (Wang, 1992). Crucially, Lin (2002) demonstrated that integrating these traditional philosophies into contemporary spatial narratives establishes a seamless interconnection among humanity, nature, and architecture. Consequently, built environments transcend mere utilitarianism, effectively synthesising the pragmatic, ecological, and spiritual imperatives of the community

Recognizing the profound impact of traditional Chinese philosophies on spatial configuration, this research aims to critically evaluate the confluence of traditional elements and contemporary spatial narratives within China's urban and rural design framework. Specifically, it investigates the mechanisms through which vernacular architectural design and philosophical tenets are integrated into contemporary planning paradigms, examining their efficacy in safeguarding cultural legacies and catalysing broader community engagement. Ultimately, the insights generated from this study seek to advance the discourse on preservation of cultural heritage and socio sustainability by pioneering an intersectional approach that seamlessly synthesises cultural identity with spatial narratology.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Integration and Spatial Design

The convergence of traditional cultural legacies and contemporary spatial narratives can be theoretically anchored within the frameworks of sustainability, heritage preservation, and cultural identity. Applied to urban and rural planning, this intersection mandates the strategic embedding of historical and cultural motifs to fashion spaces that encapsulate collective memory and regional identity. Empirical evidence suggests that infusing cultural and philosophical tenets into modern spatial configurations is primarily driven by the imperative to cultivate a sense of place and belonging among residents, thereby consolidating a shared collective identity (Xu et al., 2022). Conversely, alternative scholarship underscores that an effective synthesis of cultural tradition and contemporary design serves as a potent catalyst for stimulating cultural tourism and unlocking higher macroeconomic development targets (Zhu et al., 2024). Furthermore, as elucidated by Remm (2011), this integrative dynamic can be

interpreted through the lens of spatial semiotics. By transforming abstract cultural variables into distinctive visual typologies, the resultant architecture, patterns, and icons function as non-verbal communicative instruments that actively transmit the socio-historical narratives embedded within the built environment (Zhang & Yi, 2012).

2.2 Traditional Elements Found in the Contemporary Architectural Design

China possesses a globally significant architectural heritage that is profoundly intertwined with the nation's historical culture and philosophies (Qin, 2005). As Mao (2008) asserted, these philosophical underpinnings have fundamentally shaped the evolution of indigenous architectural styles, linking specific cosmic motifs, design patterns, and spatial methodologies to deep cultural tenets. In contemporary practice, urban and rural designs increasingly assimilate these traditional iconography and vernacular methodologies (Hu et al., 2009). This integrative synthesis, visibly unfolding in current regional planning, serves as a crucial conduit for safeguarding cultural identity; nevertheless, such traditional elements undergo strategic adaptation to accommodate modern functional exigencies and contemporary community needs (Zhang, 2015).

The core spatial principles of traditional Chinese architecture, which Liang (1954) demonstrated as symmetry, spatial hierarchy, and ecological harmony with nature, continue to manifest discernibly within contemporary design paradigms. Complementing this macro-level argument, Fan and Zhao (2011) observed that micro-architectural elements, including *dougong* (wooden bracketing systems), courtyard typologies, and tiled roofing, remain profoundly informed by classical cosmological frameworks. Critically, both studies underscore that the systematic incorporation of these heritage elements across diverse urban and rural projects transcends mere aesthetic revivalism; rather, it fulfills a profound socio-cultural mandate to cultivate collective pride and fortify the nation's historical identity.

2.3 Spatial Narrative and Urban-Rural Identity

As Kurt (2021) asserted, spatial narratives—particularly their storytelling dimensions—have been increasingly interwoven into contemporary architectural design, a trend that continues to gain momentum. Expanding on this, Kim et al. (2023) highlighted that these cultural narratives are deeply anchored in local folklore, vernacular symbols, and historical milestones, which collectively engender a highly immersive spatial environment. Furthermore, Chen and Liu (2021) demonstrated that urban and rural structures built upon these narrative foundations foster heightened community engagement and place attachment, thereby serving as vital catalysts for cultural education and transmission.

2.4 Opportunities and Challenges Emerging Because of the Integration of Traditional Culture and Spatial Design

The resurgence of traditional cultural elements in China's contemporary spatial design has catalyzed substantial socio-economic growth, particularly within rural territories. By embedding indigenous philosophical and aesthetic heritages into the built environment, rural regions have successfully captured the expanding global demand for experiential cultural tourism. As Guo and Li (2024) argued, this adaptive reuse and innovative reinterpretation of heritage iconography not only rejuvenates vernacular landscapes but also effectively safeguards cultural vitality against the homogenizing forces of rapid urbanization and globalization.

Nevertheless, this state-led integration process has drawn intense scholarly criticism. Ma et al. (2025) cautioned that fusing historic cultural motifs with contemporary functionalities often

results in a severe loss of cultural authenticity and precipitates hyper-commercialization. This diagnostic critique is particularly directed at recent government-sponsored reconstruction initiatives, which frequently generate superficial heritage simulacra. Corroborating this concern, Lei et al. (2024) censured the paradigm as an excessive commodification of cultural heritage. They posited that while such top-down initiatives temporarily bolster tourist arrivals and regional economic targets, they ultimately dilute the historical significance and ontological depth of these historic values.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the integration of traditional cultural elements and the construction of spatial narratives within contemporary urban and rural design in China. Grounded in an interpretive research philosophy, this methodology facilitates a nuanced understanding of how traditional philosophies tenets are structurally synthesized into modern spatial design. A qualitative approach is uniquely suited for this inquiry, as it unpacks the dialectical interplay between traditional cultural elements and contemporary architecture, illuminating how these historical legacies are visually and structurally manifested in modern environments.

3.2 Multiple Case Study Strategy

To derive robust and contextually rich findings, this research employs a multiple case study strategy. To mitigate selection bias and maintain methodological objectivity, the case selection was governed by a rigorous three-tiered criterion. First, the chosen projects must be geographically located in China and have officially received the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for New Design in Heritage Contexts between 2020 and 2025. Second, the projects must exhibit verifiable evidence of synthesizing traditional culture with modern spatial characterization. Third, comprehensive documentation regarding the projects' design philosophies and execution processes must be accessible in the public or academic domain.

Table 1: Project examples that integrate traditional culture and spatial narrative into urban and rural design (UNESCO, 2021; 2022; 2023; 2025)

No.	Location	Name of the project	Year	Inscription
1	Shenzhen	Shajing Ancient Fair	2021	The design work started on September 2019 and finished on December. The main aim of the project is to improve the well-being of the residents in multiple dimensions of sustainability – economic, social and environmental.
2	Zhejiang	Songyang Culture Neighborhood	2021	The project started from 2017 and was completed in 2020. It is built in a contemporary material palette with appropriate massing and scale, the elegant new walkway and structures create a refined counterpoint between old and new.
3	Nanjing	Xiaoxihu Block	2022	The project started from 2015. A unified design vocabulary employing both sleek contemporary construction and traditionally-inspired architecture gives the project a distinctive signature while harmonizing with the existing built environment.
4	Luoyang	Erlitou Site Museum of the Xia Capital	2023	The construction was completed in 2019. Inspired by important archaeological discoveries including the earliest bronze workshop in China, and many earth-built palaces found on site, the museum was constructed using age-old building materials such as rammed earth, and was adorned with bright copper and bronze fittings.
5	Yunnan	Yong'an Village	2025	The project was designed in 2019 and was completed on September 2020. In the project, the building was constructed with locally sourced materials such as dry-stacked stone, rammed earth and straw-reinforced, the new, the work demonstrated the careful levelling and colourisation complementing the alpine canyon setting.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analytical framework synthesizes three complementary qualitative methodologies: content analysis, comparative analysis, and narrative analysis. First, content analysis was executed to systematically code the secondary data literature, grouping recurrent themes, design philosophies, and architectural arguments into cohesive conceptual clusters. Second, comparative analysis was deployed across the selected cases to map the cross-project similarities and structural divergences in their cultural integration approaches. Finally, narrative analysis decoded the spatial storytelling mechanisms embedded within the layouts, clarifying how visual forms and structural patterns translate historical trajectories into the built

environment.

4 Findings, Analysis, and Discussions

4.1 Continuity of Historical Characterization

When integrating traditional cultural elements into contemporary spatial design, a primary imperative is the preservation of historical architecture and vulnerable heritage structures (General Office of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development & General Office of the National Development and Reform Commission, 2024). It is particularly evident in urban regeneration paradigms, where conventional practices of large-scale demolition and reconstruction are increasingly supplanted by the strategic embedding of modern functional spaces that simultaneously respect and safeguard the authentic texture of traditional neighborhoods.

The continuity of a neighborhood's historic identity relies fundamentally on the holistic conservation of its spatial configuration and morphological stratification. In the regeneration design of the Songyang historical neighborhood in Zhejiang, on the design drawings, the architects removed the constructions which were inconsistent with the historical character to reinforce the traditional axis-and-wing layout, while reopening block "interstices" and narrow alleys to enhance public accessibility and connectivity (Jiakun Architects, 2022). Concurrently, a hierarchical preservation framework was applied to various relics dating back to the Tang Dynasty—safeguarding landscape artifacts such as centennial trees, memorial archways, and water towers—to exhibit a continuous and superimposed chronological section of the site's history (Jiakun Architects, 2022). Similarly, the Shajing Ancient Fair in Shenzhen completely retains the traditional comb-like layout and fishbone-shaped street network typical of Cantonese settlements, famously characterized by the pattern of "rivers and streets interconnecting the market, with seven neighborhoods standing abreast" (Wang et al., 2024). Utilizing a "weaving" urban regeneration strategy, the designers reordered the structural skeleton along a "dot-line-network" trajectory, selectively removing low-value structures to liberate public spaces while rigorously maintaining the original orientation of historic alleys. Adhering to the principle of "maximizing conservation through hierarchical classification," this spatial intervention ensures that the region's socio-historical lineage remains discernibly legible within the physical stratification of the space (Wang et al., 2024).

4.2 Fusion of Tradition and Modernity

Inserting contemporary interventions into historical environments requires a calibrated dialogue between the past and the present, balancing tradition and modernity through material translation, structural juxtaposition, and scale control. In the rejuvenation of the Shajing Ancient Fair, vernacular green bricks and weathered timber were localized within the building envelopes to cultivate a hybridized, patchwork texture. Within the "Media Box" exhibition space, a modern insertion fabricated from black steel plates and translucent acrylic was juxtaposed against rammed-earth historic walls, deploying an evolutionary design methodology where the "new emerges from the old" to stimulate a highly expressive spatial dialogue (Zhang and Han, 2020). Similarly, in the Nanjing Xiaoxihu regeneration initiative, historic row houses were vertically extended using lightweight steel frameworks, ensuring a sharp structural differentiation from the pre-existing brick-concrete configurations. The project carefully integrated steel and glass components into the traditional brick-and-timber matrix, utilizing lightweight transparent volumes to link the historic and contemporary structures; this balanced scale disparities and accommodated modern programmatic requirements without compromising heritage integrity

(Han et al., 2024). In the Songyang project, architectural heritage from diverse historical epochs were treated as opportunistic assets, systematically interconnected via a meandering, continuous gallery of varying widths. Standing at a single-story height that remains uniformly lower than the eaves of the heritage structures, this low-profile gallery establishes a distinct contemporary identity while simultaneously contextualizing the historic buildings as "exhibition stage" (Jiakun Architects, 2022).

4.3 Storytelling through Public Spaces

Public spaces serve as the primary arena for activating spatial narratives and revitalizing collective memory. Through sequential organization, visual guidance, and scenic reconstruction, abstract historical and cultural information is successfully transfigured into perceptible, participatory episodic experiences. The Erlitou Site Museum of the Xia Capital constructs a dynamic, introverted-yet-extroverted spatial sequence. Moving from an entrance courtyard flanked by three-slot colonnades to a central hall where a *jue*-shaped traffic core anchors a monumental skylight, and finally through the long ramps of the tail hall leading toward an open-air roof platform, the layout systematically guides visitors from contemporary realities into a mystical domain symbolizing the "earliest China". This sequential journey culminates on the open roof, where visitors merge with the expansive geographical landscape of the broader archaeological site, transforming the exhibition into an immersive, historical narrative experience. Within this narrative, the architecture itself operates as a vital symbolic carrier that communicates the dawn of Chinese civilization (Wang et al., 2024). In parallel, the Shajing Ancient Fair rejuvenation project established an innovative, "defamiliarized" vantage point overlooking the ruins via an elevated skyway system, rendering ordinary village typologies intensely dramatic, while the Longjin Pavilion structured a classic waterfront spectacle of "seeing and being seen". Concurrently, the "Time Drifting" urban site-specific exhibition carried out in the village directly embedded installations, murals, and other artistic expressions into historic walls, civic squares, and riverbanks; this synthesis seamlessly blended deep-rooted historical descriptors—such as oysters, salt, and the sea—with contemporary art, inviting residents and visitors to internalize the narrative of the fair's rebirth as they wander through the space (Han and Zhang, 2023). Ultimately, across these cases, public space evolves into a physical interface where history and reality converge, transforming traditional culture into an immersive narrative experience through strategic spatial choreography.

4.4 Spatial Narrative in Urban and Rural Design

In rural contexts, spatial narratives tend to align more closely with the authentic states of everyday life, becoming deeply intertwined with localized construction processes, regional iconographies, and broader community development. The "Heart of Yongan" community center utilizes a free-flowing, continuous gallery as its primary narrative thread. Probing downward from the entrance and extending seamlessly to the gable wall of the assembly hall, this gallery links the entry threshold, open-air gray spaces, the inner plaza, and communal gathering spaces in a singular, fluid motion, allowing villagers to experience the rhythmic cadence of the space as they walk (Yuan and Gao, 2021). At the lowest point of the roof's dip, the design incorporates a large local banyan tree. This gesture revives the ancient settlement archetype of "gathering around a tree," rendering the banyan tree the *genius loci* of the site and the core vessel for collective memories, thereby articulating a rustic narrative of village assembly, deliberation, and shared community life (Yuan, 2021). Furthermore, the construction extensively utilized local rammed-earth techniques and dry-masonry shale pieces sourced from nearby riverbeds, executed through a collaborative building process with the villagers themselves. This co-creation process stands as a vivid rural narrative in its own right: the architecture is not merely

a static final product, but a living narrative medium that records community participation, perpetuates vernacular craftsmanship, and solidifies local consensus. As an evolved rural settlement, the core narrative of the Shajing Ancient Fair is firmly anchored within the "everyday life site" (Zhang and Han, 2020). By preserving the mottled traces of daily life on old wells and weathered walls, and repurposing ruins and historical dwellings at the village gateway for modern functions, the project positions the local residents as the primary protagonists and narrators of the space, allowing the regenerated environment to blend into their ongoing daily narratives.

Taking a broader spatial perspective, the Erlitou Site Museum of the Xia Capital breaks away from the constraints of standalone architecture by pioneering a tripartite development framework that integrates the museum, visitor center, and archaeological site park. By absorbing surrounding villages into this overarching narrative, the blueprint illustrates how a museum can function as a strategic catalyst to drive cultural tourism, improve local infrastructure, and boost rural employment (Li, 2021), thereby expanding the story of heritage conservation into a macro-narrative of rural revitalization and sustainable development. Consequently, spatial narratives in rural design manifest a diverse array of possibilities: they can represent a ritualized path experience, a collective inscription of the construction process itself, a creative reinterpretation of vernacular iconographies, or an integrated narrative driving community development and cultural identity (Mu et al., 2021).

5 Conclusion

Based on the systematic analysis and empirical discussions presented in this study, it is evident that urban and rural designs in China manifests its prioritised idea of integrating traditional cultural elements within contemporary spatial narratives. Synthesizing secondary data with a five-case matrix—comprising the Songyang Culture Neighbourhood, Shajing Ancient Fair, Erlitou Site Museum, Nanjing Xiaoxihu, and the Yongan Community Center—the findings reveal that vernacular components, including traditional street morphologies, classical architectural typologies, and local craftsmanship and materials, are systematically embedded within modern development frameworks. By deploying an intersectional design philosophy, practitioners have effectively reconciled historical continuity with modern functionality. This integrative paradigm has generated profound structural impacts, not only elevating community identity and place attachment but also fostering long-term socio-ecological sustainability across the regional built environment. Throughout this process, diverse stakeholders have successfully established a communicative matrix that projects rich cultural values through innovative architectural forms.

This research offered a range of implications. First, practical implications. Integrating heritage elements into contemporary urban-rural design provides an effective operational methodology for securing spatial and contextual continuity, ensuring that historical narratives remain legible within modern human settlements. Second, cultural implications. Anchoring modern spatial configurations within traditional philosophical frameworks serves as an ontological anchor that strengthens community cohesion, solidifies collective memory, and mitigates the placelessness associated with global homogenization. Third, economic implications. The synthesis of heritage assets and contemporary design acts as a powerful catalyst for economic revitalization. Specifically, it leverages the universal demand for experiential cultural and rural tourism, creating robust commercial opportunities that bolster regional macroeconomic development.

Despite its insights, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the empirical dataset relies exclusively on secondary sources, which introduces an element of

interpretative subjectivity and lacks quantitative validation. Second, the geographic and institutional scope of this study is strictly confined to the Chinese socio-political context, meaning the findings cannot be readily generalized to other global planning paradigms with different governance systems.

To address these limitations, future scholarship should adopt a mixed-methods approach. Integrating secondary data with primary empirical sources—specifically through semi-structured interviews with architects, planners, and policymakers—would add significant qualitative depth. Furthermore, incorporating quantitative tools, such as space syntax, structural equation modeling (SEM) for community satisfaction, or economic impact metrics, is highly recommended to enhance objective evaluation and provide rigorous data-driven evidence regarding spatial narrative performance in urban and rural design.

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