

Study on Rural Revitalization in Hong Kong, China Based on the Concept of Eco-Museum: The Case of Yantianzi (Yim Tin Tsai)

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Abstract

Eco-museum, as a sustainable model for maintaining the overall cultural, natural, and social landscape of protected areas, has been gradually applied to the rural revitalization vision in Hong Kong, China. In order to further explore the rural development of Hong Kong from an eco-museum perspective, this paper analyses and studies the process of rural revitalization based on theoretical analysis, with Yantianzi as a case study. The results show that although there are strengths in development potential, revitalization model, responsibility framework and social participation, there are also problems in areas of population, villagers' return and relic restoration and skills transmission, as well as a slow development process of the "growth model" of the eco-museum and a lack of industrial support. Hence, the Joint Committee, the villagers, the government and other relevant actors need to make improvements and adjustments accordingly. This paper provides feasible advice and enriches the research on eco-museums and rural revitalization with both theoretical and practical value.

Keywords: Eco-Museum, Rural Revitalization, Yantianzi (Yim Tin Tsai), Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that Hong Kong (HK), China, is often renowned as a modern cosmopolitan metropolis, there still exists vast rural areas. According to statistics, there are approximately 700 villages in HK that account for 75% of the total land territory (Li & He, 2019; LegCo of the HKSAR, 2022). As the Chinese central government has proposed and implemented the rural revitalization strategy, recently, with the establishment of the Countryside Conservation Office and Advisory Committee on Countryside Conservation, HK has also focused on the development of rural districts (Li & He, 2019). Meanwhile, the "eco-museum" model introduced in mainland China in the 1990s has also been applied to the revitalization and development of certain villages in HK.

However, studies on rural revitalization and eco-museums in China have mainly focused on mainland regions, and little attention has been paid to HK's rural areas. And the development of most rural areas in HK is still sluggish, and advanced development concepts, say, as "eco-museum" is mainly at the stage of publicity and education, leaving deficiencies in the process of practice (Choi, 2017). In view of this, the research seeks to further explore the development of rural areas in HK, China from the perspective of the eco-museum and thereby facilitate the revitalization of the region.

On the basis of theoretical analysis, this paper will take Yantianzi (Yim Tin Tsai) as an example to explore the highlights and shortcomings of its rural revitalization process under the eco-museum conception, and propose relevant feasible methods and suggestions. The methodology of this paper is mainly based on literature research and case study analysis. Through collecting and analyzing a large amount of primary and secondary sources, and innovatively comparing similar villages in HK with other cases, this paper will synthesize and draw conclusions. This study can provide more concrete cases, pathways and suggestions for the creation and development of village revitalization and eco-museums in HK, and will also provide experiences for the development of related fields in mainland China. Meanwhile, this paper will further enrich the academic research on rural revitalization and the creation of eco-museums, thus providing both practical and theoretical value.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

The concept of the 'eco-museum' has been developed and refined since its creation by Rivière and Varine in 1971 (Davis, 2016). It broadly refers to the 'dynamic' conservation and practice of tangible and intangible resources within a territory, emphasizing that the process should be carried out in situ, preserving as much as possible the

original natural and social landscape of the area, and stressing indigenous memory and social participation in order to balance the relationship between society and nature towards sustainable development (Donghai, 2008). Meanwhile, Rivière also describes the concept of the 'eco-museum' as evolving and site-specific and describes it as infinitely diverse (Donghai, 2008).

In the rural area of Europe and the Americas, the concept of eco-museum has been widely applied in realizing sustainable development and heritage conservation. By surveying five eco-museums in Piemonte and Liguria, northern Italy, Corsane et al. (2007) find that four of the five sites appear to meet the philosophical criteria of most eco-museums including heritage conservation, social participation, and local democracy. Meanwhile, they acknowledge that wide variation in eco-museum practice is inevitable. Similarly, Terzić et al. (2014) use the "Ibar Valley" in Serbia as an eco-museum case study, arguing that by comparison with other similar tourist destinations in the region, it excels in many aspects including management, conservation, and the design of sustainable tourism products. Additionally, by reviewing and analyzing the development of numerous eco-museums in Canada and the United States, Sutter et al. (2016) contend that eco-museums should be accessible entities that are not linked to political or other beliefs or perspectives. This makes eco-museums uniquely positioned to promote creative change and adaptation with the goal of sustainability.

In the 1990s, China introduced the eco-museum concept into the conservation and development of traditional villages, gradually establishing three generations of over 50 eco-museums with Chinese characteristics (Ouyang & Yang, 2021). More recently, in order to further integrate the eco-museum vision into the conservation and development of traditional Chinese villages, numerous scholars have conducted corresponding studies in this regard. Tang and Wang (2017) summarize four paths for rural revitalization in China today based on the concept of ecological museums and propose corresponding countermeasures in terms of indigenous people, process management, resource integration, and village construction. From a theoretical perspective, Ao (2021) argues that eco-museums have a positive impact on the inheritance of traditional rural culture, the sustainability of the ecological environment, and the coordinated development for rural revitalization. Li and Salim (2021), on the other hand, focus on the shortcomings of eco-museums in China (especially on the mainland) and point out that the creation of eco-museums in China today is a "top-down" model of "falloff", which always lacks the social participation of dwellers.

There are relatively few relevant studies in the academic field on rural development and eco-museum building in HK. Li and He (2019) classify four models of rural development in HK from a post-production perspective, namely, joint conservation by social elites (Lai Chi Wo), spontaneous conservation by villagers (Yantianzi), fragmented conservation (Tai O Village), and rural gentrification (Lamma Island). In the study on the creation of an eco-museum and rural development in Lai Chi Wo, Choi points out that "eco-museum" is still a novel concept in HK and not well known by the public, and that although Lai Chi Wo was not initiated as an eco-museum, it has the potential to become such (Choi, 2017).

In summary, contrary to traditional museums, eco-museums are dynamic and comprehensive models emphasizing social participation, thus contributing positively to rural redevelopment. However, compared with other regions, there is still much room for improvement in the research and practice of eco-museums in the revitalization of traditional villages in HK China.

3. Background Information on Yantianzi

3.1 General Overview and History of Yantianzi

Yantianzi, located on the island of Sai Kung in the New Territories of HK, is named for the salt field industry. Indeed, with a history of nearly 300 years, Yantianzi, one of the few Hakka villages in HK with a Catholic character, used to have a thriving population (Zhang, 2021). Indeed, with a history of nearly 300 years, Yantianzi, one of the few Hakka villages in HK with a Catholic character, used to have a thriving population. However, in the 1960s, due to the decline of the salt-making industry, the inhabitants gradually moved away from the island (Yang, 2020). By 1997 the whole village (including the local school) had been relocated and Yantianzi was reduced to a deserted and uninhabited site (Yanguang Conservation Center, 2022).

In 2003, several villagers joined together to raise funds to establish a village committee and a visitor center and began to restore the village (Yanguang Conservation Center, 2022). In 2008, the overall restoration of Yantianzi commenced, and in 2011, the first full-time resident was reintroduced to the island. 2019 saw the organization of the Yantianzi Arts Festival organized by the HK Tourism Commission (Xiao, 2021). With the efforts of all parties involved, the tourism industry in Yantianzi is gradually under development.

3.2 *The Natural and Human Resources of Yantianzi*

In terms of natural resources, Yantianzi has a beautiful landscape with different types of ecological areas, including shrubland, small second-growth forests and mangroves. With the enhancement of the island's environment, Yantianzi is gradually inhabited by various rare animals, including egrets, blue phoebes, and turtledoves (Xiao, 2021).

Regarding cultural heritage, Yantianzi has the century-old St Joseph's Church, which was awarded Grade II status by the HK Antiquities Advisory Board in 2011 (Zhu, 2022). Besides, there are also historical sites such as the Chengpo Academy, Han Dynasty ruins, the former residence of Father Joseph, and a large number of Hakka village buildings (Yanguang Conservation Center, 2022).

As for intangible cultural heritage and traditional skills, Yantianzi has preserved and restored the old salt-making technique of the water flow method, becoming the only "living salt field" in HK (Zhu, 2022). In addition, as a meeting point of Catholic and Hakka cultures, Yantianzi has a unique cultural character. It is also home to the annual Catholic feast of the Lord's Supper. Yantianzi has preserved the art of Hakka steamed bun, with teahouses selling snacks such as tea kuey teow, as well as the Catholic culture, with the annual celebration of the "Lord's Birthday" (Chen & Zheng, 2020; Yanguang Conservation Center, 2022).

3.3 *The Status Quo of Revitalization and Governance in Yantianzi*

The village revitalization process in Yantianzi has adopted the eco-museum concept from the very beginning and emphasized the community participation of the local people, namely, that the community operates with the fourfold mission of preservation, display, research & education, and promotion (Zhu, 2022; Zhang, 2022). Today, the revitalization and development of the village of Yantianzi has developed a six-party governance system involving the Government, the Catholic Diocese, the Conservation Centre, third-party organizations, the villagers' village committee and the Sacred Heart Church in Sai Kung.

The Government is responsible for infrastructure facilities; the Yan Kwong Conservation Centre undertakes voluntary conservation work and collaborates with the Yantianzi Village Committee to explore and promote the traditional Hakka culture; the Catholic Diocese hosts religious affairs and collaborates with the Sacred Heart Church in Sai Kung to manage the St Joseph's Chapel; and third-party organizations, including NGOs and universities, serve in an advisory role. Meanwhile, the Joint Committee is held among these six agencies to deliberate on important issues and directions for the restoration and revitalization of this area (Zhu, 2022; Zhang, 2022).

4. Analysis of the Revitalization of Yantianzi Village from the Perspective of Eco-Museum

4.1 *Strengths and Highlights of the Rural Revitalization in Yantianzi*

4.1.1 Promising Development Potential

As aforementioned, Yantianzi, as a rare island village with a fusion of Hakka and Catholic cultures, is endowed with rich natural resources, as well as tangible and intangible historical heritage. These conditions provide a good foundation for the creation of an eco-museum and the rural revitalization there. Additionally, the two core themes of "ecology" and "tourism" are in line with the leisure needs of HK workers living in a fast-paced urban area. Hence, Yantianzi has promising development potential.

4.1.2 Excellent Revitalization Model

Different from the aforementioned HK village "Lai Chi Wo", Yantianzi has introduced the advanced "eco-museum" concept for revitalization from the very beginning (Choi, 2017; Zhang, 2022). Compared to the traditional museum approach of relocating the villagers and adopting static protection, Yantianzi's revitalization is based on the eco-museum model, which emphasizes in-situ conservation and preservation with minimal "destruction" (Donghai, 2008). Thus, the eco-museum model is particularly beneficial for the preservation of the village's intangible heritage, as opposed to the static model. Under this model, the memory features, customs, and techniques of traditional villages can be preserved and passed on in the most vivid way. Thus, the traditional salt-making techniques, related to Christianity and Hakka traditions of Yantianzi can continue and even develop.

4.1.3 Clear Responsibility Framework

Compared to other Chinese eco-museum projects which usually lack a clear delineation of roles (Li & Selim, 2021), Yantianzi has done an excellent work of defining the roles of all parties and forming a clear framework of responsibilities for implementation. With the collaborative efforts of the government, the Catholic Diocese, the Conservation Centre, third-party organizations, the villagers' village committee, and the Sacred Heart Church, the eco-museum in Yantianzi has taken shape and achieved some achievements. For instance, the restoration of

St Joseph's Church in Yantianzi was awarded the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Asia-Pacific Heritage Conservation Award (Lin, 2020).

4.1.4 Active Community Participation

At present, most of the ecological museums in China follow the government-led 'top-down' development model, which is known as the 'decay model' because of the lack of social participation of indigenous people and the difficulty of achieving true sustainability (Xue, 2016; Li & Selim, 2021). In contrast, the eco-museum in Yantianzi was initiated by the villagers incipiently, and the villagers' committee has always played an active role in village revitalization and development. This 'growth pattern' is more in line with the 'local community participation' inherent in the concept of eco-museum, rendering it more conducive to achieving a balance between society and the environment as well as more rooted in long-term development.

4.2 Weakness and Shortcomings of the Rural Revitalization in Yantianzi

4.2.1 Shortage of Inhabitants, Difficult Population Returns

As relevant studies have concluded, "an eco-museum = territory + heritage + memory + population", a sufficient number of inhabitants is indispensable for the revitalization of the countryside and the creation of an eco-museum (Choi, 2017; Li & Selim, 2021). Yantianzi lacks a permanent population compared to other rural areas in Mainland China or HK. The villagers' return to Yantianzi has been hampered by geographic remoteness, the dilapidated state of the settlement, the lack of return mechanisms, and the inadequate allocation of labor resources (Lin, 2020). However, if there lacks enough population, and only commuters "come to the island by day and leave by night", then the Yantianzi Eco-Museum may be reduced to a superficial shell, which cannot really protect the overall social milieu, let alone further transmission, revitalization and development of the cultural memory in there. Therefore, whether or not the eco-museum in Yantianzi can be truly realized in a dynamic way depends to a large extent on the ability to deal with population shortages and population returns.

4.2.2 Problems of Relic Restoration and Skill Transmission

Although Yantianzi has many historical architectural relics, apart from some landmarks, most Hakka houses in the village have fallen into disrepair and are in a decaying state (Xiao, 2021). Besides, Yantianzi, located in the coastal area, has been affected by several natural disasters such as typhoons in recent years (Xiao, 2021). Many villagers and their descendants are still skeptical about the restoration of Yantianzi due to the lack of funds, the high cost of restoration, the large amount of human, financial and material resources that will always be needed for maintenance after restoration, and the fact that the socio-economic and cultural values have not yet been highlighted (Lin, 2020; Xiao, 2021). Thus, fewer villagers are willing to participate in the restoration work on the ground.

In addition, nevertheless, Yantianzi has established "shelters" such as sea salt-making workshops, heritage galleries, and traditional teahouses to perpetuate the salt-making process, Hakka, and Christian cultural memories and traditions (Lin, 2020). As the older generation of villagers age and Yantianzi lacks attraction for young people, most of the villagers' descendants have chosen to work and live in urban areas and are not actively involved in rural revitalization. As a result, these traditional skills and memories are still in danger of vanishing.

4.2.3 Slow Development Process and Inadequate Industrial Support

Despite the fact that Yantianzi Eco-Museum is following a 'growth model' with active community participation, it also encounters difficulties in raising funds and the slow pace of construction, especially in its early stages (Li & Selim, 2021). Studies point out that the ecological and cultural conservation work of Yantianzi Eco-Museum is only at the educational and publicity stage, and lacks the permanent presence of professionals to put into practice (Zhu, 2022).

A significant gap also exists even for the essential tourism industry in Yantianzi compared to other similar cases. In 2016, for example, Yantianzi received a total of only 37,108 visitors (Lin, 2020). While Yuanjia Village in Xianyang City, which also follows an autonomous approach and villager participation, received a total of 1,055,000 visitors merely from 1-7 October in the same year (Xue, 2016). Indeed, the tourism industry in Yantianzi is still in the traditional and homogeneous "visiting" mode, lacking a clear and unique development approach. Also, due to the fear that community participation by enterprises would trigger an uneven benefit distribution (Zhang, 2022), Yantianzi is still lacking sufficient external capital investment and effective cooperation with relevant enterprises.

Furthermore, the eco-museum model does not stress economic progress, but in order to attract villagers back to the area and achieve sustainable rural revitalization, it is necessary to obtain economic benefits and develop

complementary tourism-related industries. Hence, other industries related to tourism (catering, handicrafts, leisure) in Yantianzi have not been effectively improved and remain in a long-term state of decline.

5. Measures and Suggestions for Optimizing the "Eco-Museum" of Yantianzi Village

5.1 Central Body for Responsibility and Decision-Making

The Joint Committee, responsible for providing and setting the development direction for the Eco-Museum and its revitalization, is the central body for responsibility and decision-making. For this important body, this paper proposes suggestions in the following two aspects.

Firstly, Yantianzi needs to further optimize the development of the tourism sector and related supporting industries based on the eco-museum model. As mentioned above, industrial development is inevitable for achieving sustainability. Only by revitalizing the island's industries, developing the economy, and providing sufficient employment opportunities will it be able to reintroduce residents and attract investment. Indeed, the Yantianzi area can learn from EOD-oriented projects to better build an eco-museum based on ecological protection, environmental governance and cultural conservation, with the operation of special industries as the supporting direction (Ren, 2021). On the one hand, Yantianzi needs to modify its tourism industry, taking into account its own backward conditions (for example, its remote location) and developing more appropriate tourism models without destroying the original landscape, such as targeting the establishment of sanatoriums or resorts. On the other hand, Yantianzi also requires further development of tourism-related industries. Tourism alone cannot provide sufficient employment and livelihoods for the potential returnees, and Yantianzi needs to establish supporting industries such as catering, services and even education. Only then can the eco-museum in Yantianzi be truly invigorated.

Also, Yantianzi should attract more foreign investment and further cooperate with third parties, especially enterprises. By doing so, Yantianzi will access more funds for construction and maintenance, thereby achieving the "industrial revitalization" aforementioned. Specifically, Yantianzi can learn from the collaborative case of Lai Chi Wo and HSBC in HK (Choi, 2017), to obtain sufficient development funds, attracting further investment to speed up its revitalization process without destroying the original milieu.

5.2 Villagers

The villagers, as the main body of the Eco-Museum and the direct beneficiaries of the rural revival, shoulder and enjoy the autonomy and management responsibilities of the village. Hence, villagers, especially the younger generation, should be more conscious of the cultural, social and natural significance of the creation of the Eco-Museum, and more proactive in undertaking the responsibility of the revitalization, the preservation of its relics and the transmission of skills. Simultaneously, dwellers should correctly understand the role of corporate participation in the revitalization and museum-building process of Yantianzi, and actively collaborate with enterprises for further development.

5.3 Government

At present, the Government is only responsible for the construction of infrastructure in Yantianzi. Actually, it is also the Government's responsibility and task to achieve village revitalization. The Tourism Commission of the HK has published the "Blueprint for Tourism Development in HK", in which it is proposed that tourism products and projects with HK and international characteristics, including cultural, heritage, green and creative tourism, should be nurtured and developed (Tourism Commission HK, 2017). In this regard, the HK Government should play a more proactive role in Yantianzi and other rural areas, for instance by providing specific development policies for reference or subsidies for villagers participating in rural revitalization. The government should also act as an intermediary to help villages to access development funds and cooperate with relevant enterprises as far as possible.

5.4 Social Agencies

Firstly, the Catholic Church, university institutions, NGOs, businesses and other societies should work more closely together. Specifically, the Catholic diocese could work with universities to develop an educational industry for the Yantianzi area. In contrast to the private university which has been shelved, ecological and folklore institutes or research stations are a more cost-effective and appropriate way to proceed, with more room for trial and error. Moreover, the NGOs and the relevant university institutions should work together as consultants and advisors to provide more specific advice about the flaws and future direction of the eco-museum building. The relevant enterprises should be fully aware of the development and investment prospects of Yantianzi and actively participate in the area.

6. Conclusion

Based on theoretical analysis through literature analysis and case studies, this paper evaluates the highlights and shortcomings of the process of rural revitalization under the eco-museum concept in HK, China, represented by Yantianzi, with relevant feasible methods and suggestions. The results of this study show that although the revitalization of Yantianzi has some highlights in development potential, revitalization model, the framework of responsibility, and social participation, it also has problems in the fields of population, villagers' return, relic restoration and skills transmission. Furthermore, the "growth model" development process of Yantianzi Eco-Museum currently lacks industrial support. The Joint Committee, the villagers, the government and other relevant parties need to make improvements and adjustments accordingly. It is hoped that with the joint efforts of all parties involved, the development of eco-museums and rural revitalization in HK, China will be more successful.

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