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Paddy Field Landscapes in the Context of Rural Revitalization: A Case Study of Xiangling Village, Huizhou, Guangdong Province, China

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Abstract In the process of promoting the rural revitalization strategy, paddy filed landscapes, as the most representative form of productive landscape in rural areas, not only serve the function of grain production, but also hold significant value in ecological protection, cultural inheritance, and industrial integration. Taking Xiangling Village in Huizhou, Guangdong Province as the research object, this study analyzes the current status and existing problems of the paddy field landscapes through field research. Combining with the overall requirements of rural revitalization of "vibrant local industries, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, sound governance, and affluent living", this study proposes paddy field landscape design strategies from four dimensions: industrial integration, ecological optimization, cultural empowerment, and spatial reconstruction, and constructs specific design plans to provide practical reference for the landscape improvement of similar rural areas.

Keywords Rural revitalization, Paddy field landscape, Landscape design, Xiangling Village, Huizhou
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As the issue of "agriculture, rural areas, and farmers" has always been a core issue in China's social development, the rural revitalization strategy has clearly defined its overall requirements of "vibrant local industries, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, sound governance, and affluent living". As a carrier of rural regional characteristics, the rural landscape is an important path to achieve "pleasant living environments" and "social etiquette and civility" through optimized design. Paddy field landscapes, being the most widespread form of productive landscape in southern rural, integrate the three dimensions of production, ecology and culture, which not only ensures national food security, but also regulates regional climate, conserves water sources, and carries the memory and inheritance of farming culture.

Located in the northeastern part of the Pearl River Delta in Huizhou, Guangdong, Xiangling Village has long relied on rice cultivation as its traditional leading industry. However, the village currently faces challenges such as monotonous functions of paddy field landscapes, insufficient ecological benefits, and a lack of cultural distinctive features, which have hindered its effective support for rural revitalization and development. Against this backdrop, exploring suitable paddy field landscape design models for Xiangling Village has become crucial for promoting industrial upgrading, ecological improvement, and cultural inheritance in the village.

The study of paddy field landscapes in southern hilly regions of China can be theoretically supported by enriching the theoretical framework of productive landscape design within the context of rural revitalization, breaking through the cognitive limitations of traditional rice fields as "production only," and establishing a four-dimensional (production-ecology-culture-experience) integrated paddy field landscapes. Thus, this study proposes actionable design solutions to address the specific issues of the paddy field landscapes in Xiangling Village, with the aim to help the village revitalize its paddy field resources and achieve "paddy field +" industrial integration (such as paddy field tourism and farming-based research and learning) to increase villagers' income. In the meantime, landscape optimization can improve the rural ecological environment and preserve Hakka farming traditions, offering a practical model for the revitalization of similar villages in Huizhou and Guangdong.

1 Literature review on rural landscape and paddy field design

1.1 Current research status in China

The research on the paddy field landscapes in China began in the early 21st century, focusing on the ecological functions of rice paddies (such as wetland effects and biodiversity conservation) at the beginning. In recent years, aligned with the rural revitalization strategy, research has shifted towards the integration of paddy field landscape and industry. For example, Ziquejie Terraces in Hunan and Hani Terraces in Yunnan have achieved the transformation of "agriculture + tourism" through landscape design. However, there is still a lack of specialized research on small-scale rural paddy fields in southern hilly and plain areas.

In 2010, the Honghe Hani Terraces in Yunnan were designated as a "Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS)" selected by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and were successfully inscribed on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List in 2013. The terraces are not only a breathtaking natural landscape, but also a dynamic and continuously evolving agricultural and cultural system.

Zheng Wenjun[1] systematically expounds the connotation, principles, and methods of landscape design for sightseeing agriculture, emphasizing that its essence lies in using agriculture as the foundation and tourism as the engine to reconstruct rural spaces in an ecological, artistic, and humanistic manner.

Wang Yuncai[2] emphasizes that in the context of rural revitalization, the restoration and improvement of ecological functions of farmland are the cornerstone of its sustainable development. What he proposes is not a single technical list, but rather a comprehensive technical system and application framework grounded in the landscape ecology principles, aiming to rebuild the resilience and self-sustaining capacity of farmland ecosystems.

1.2 Current international research status

International research on paddy field

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landscapes (such as Japan and the Netherlands) focuses on the integration of ecological agriculture and landscape aesthetics. A notable example is Japan's Echigo-Tsumari Art Festival, which combines rice fields with art installations, creating a semi-natural ecological landscape emcompassing villages, forests, farmland, ponds, and stream. The landscape is not a pure wilderness, but a sustainable ecosystem formed through long-term interaction between human activities and natural processes, characterized by high biodiversity and cultural value. Its essence lies in "coexistence" and "moderate intervention".

The "Rice Paddy Park" in Netherland emphasizes ecological cycling and recreational experiences, advocating for efficient and productive farmland (food landscape) as a core component of urban green infrastructure. This approach enables the land to simultaneously serve multiple functions such as food production, climate regulation, rainwater management, recreational activities, and urban beautification.

The rise of Agritourism in the United States is a kind of business model which can enhance the brand value of agricultural products, and educates the public about agricultural knowledge by providing visitors with immersive experiences of recreation, education and hands-on participation. However, most research is based on large-scale farming operations, which has low adaptability to the current situation of "decentralized management of small farmers" in rural areas of China.

2 Related concepts and theore–tical foundations

2.1 Core Concepts

The 2018 *Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization* (2018−2022) clearly states its core essence as "vibrant local industries, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, sound governance, and affluent living", emphasizing the comprehensive and coordinated development of rural economy, ecology, culture, and society. The principle serves as the fundamental direction for the current paddy field landscape design.

The paddy field landscape is a composite landscape system centered on rice cultivation, consisting of rice fields, ridges, irrigation systems, surrounding village buildings, and natural vegetation. It serves multiple functions: productive (grain production), ecological (soil and water conservation, climate regulation), cultural (carrier of farming traditions), and experiential (leisure tourism, hands-on farming activities).

2.2 Theoretical basis

2.2.1 Landscape ecology theory. The theory emphasizes the interaction between landscape pattern and ecological processes, and guide the rational layout of "patches, corridors and matrices" in rice field landscape design, such as constructing ecological corridors through vegetation belts on field ridges to protect rice field biodiversity.

2.2.2 Sustainable development theory. This theory requires that landscape design balances economic benefits (grain production, industrial income increase), ecological benefits (reduced fertilizer and pesticide use, water-saving irrigation), and social benefits (rural employment, cultural preservation), in order to achieve long-term sustainable operation[3].

2.2.3 Rural culture theory. The theory emphases the exploration and preservation of regional culture. The paddy field landscape design of Xiangling Village should be integrated with elements of Hakka agricultural culture (such as traditional irrigation tools and Hakka farming practices) should be integrated to avoid landscape homogenization.

3 Analysis of current status of paddy field landscapes in Xiangling Village, Huizhou, Guangdong Province

3.1 Overview of Xiangling Village

Xiangling Village is situated in Shiba Town, Boluo County, Huizhou City, in the hilly and plain area of the middle reaches of Dongjiang River. The village covers a total area of about 3.2 km^2, with a cultivated land area of 80 hm^2, including 57 hm^2 of rice fields, accounting for 70.8% of the cultivated land area. The villagers are mainly Hakka. With a rice cultivation history spanning over 300 years, the village traditionally grew the "Simiao rice" and now primarily cultivates hybrid rice on a large scale.

The village's economy is primarily agriculture-based. In 2023, the annual per capita income of villagers was approximately 18 000 yuan, which fell below the average level of Huicheng District (26 000 yuan). The paddy field landscapes are predominantly characterized by a "contiguous monoculture" model, lacking integration with rural tourism and cultural experiences. As a result, its ecological and cultural value remains underutilized.

3.2 Research on current status of paddy field landscape

Through field visits, villager interviews (with a sample size of 50 households), and landscape status mapping, the following four core issues were identified in the paddy field landscapes of Xiangling Village: (i) Functional singularity. The paddy fields only serve grain production purposes, lacking recreational, experiential, or cultural display functions. There are no recreational facilities around the rice fields, resulting in inadequate room for villagers and tourists to stay. (ii) Insufficient ecological benefits. Long-term use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has caused soil compaction and water eutrophication. The vegetation along field ridges is monotonous (mostly weeds), supporting low biodiversity. The irrigation system is a traditional earthen canal, which causes serious waste of water resources. (iii) Lacking in cultural characteristics. Traditional farming facilities (such as dragon bone waterwheels and threshing grounds) have not been preserved. The rice paddy landscape lacks Hakka cultural symbols (such as architectural elements of Hakka walled villages, farming proverbs). Young villagers demonstrate weak awareness of traditional agrarian culture. (iv) Disorganized spatial layout. There is no transitional space between rice paddies, villages, and roads. There is no landscape nodes (such as observation deck, rice paddy walkway), either. The production channel and leisure path are mixed, which compromises safety.

3.3 Analysis on the causes of problems

(1) Confined industrial positioning. The village collective's positioning of rice paddies still remains confined to "grain production", without realizing the diverse value of the landscape. There is also a lack of operational thinking and financial support for the integration of the "paddy field +" industry[4].

(2) Weak ecological awareness. Villagers have long relied on traditional farming practices and possess limited knowledge of green agricultural techniques such as ecological planting and water-saving irrigation. Furthermore, there is no incentive or punishment mechanism in place to encourage ecological protection.

(3) Cultural inheritance gap. In the process of urbanization, the outflow of young labor force has led to a lack of successors for traditional farming skills and culture. The village collective has not included agricultural culture in the rural construction plan.

(4) Lacking in design and planning. There is no specialized rice field landscape planning in the village, and the existing landscape is naturally formed without professional design guidance. Available funds are mainly used for infrastructure (such as roads and water conservancy), and

there is insufficient investment in landscape improvement.

4 Landscape design strategies for paddy fields in Xiangling Village in the context of rural revitalization

Centered on the overall requirements for rural revitalization, this study proposes targeted design strategies for Xiangling Village across its industrial, ecological, cultural, and spatial dimensions.

4.1 Industrial integration strategy: activating the "paddy field +" diversified economy

(1) Paddy fields + agricultural research and learning. A "Research and Learning Zone" in the core area of the paddy fields can be set up to offer hands-on farming experiences such as rice planting, harvesting, and threshing. Courses on farming research and learning can be developed through the collaboration with primary and secondary schools in Huizhou. The project is expected to host 12,000 student visits annually, which can create employment opportunities for villagers (e.g., as instructors and catering staff).

(2) Paddy fields + rural tourism. "Four-season paddy landscapes" can be created, with spring featuring colorful rice varieties (which can be used to form patterns such as Hakka walled villages and scenes of the Dongjiang River Basin), while autumn holding "rice harvest festivals" (including activities like grain drying, rice hulling, and Hakka culinary workshops). Supported paddy field homestays (transforming idle houses of villagers) can be added to increase tourism revenue.

(3) Paddy fields + agricultural product processing. A "Simiao Rice Processing Experience Center" can be constructed around rice paddies to showcase traditional and modern processing techniques, and it can also launch value-added cultural products under the name of "Xiangling Simiao Rice" (such as vacuum packaged rice and postcards featuring paddy field paintings). By extending the industrial chain, it can enhance the added value of agricultural products[5].

4.2 Ecological optimization strategy: building a sustainable paddy field ecosystem

(1) Promoting green planting techniques. In collaboration with agricultural authorities, training sessions on eco-farming shall be provided to villagers to disseminate integrated models such as "rice-duck farming" and "rice-fish farming," thereby reducing dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. A "Green Paddy Field Certification Mechanism" can be established, which can grant subsidies of 200 RMB per mu to farmers adopting ecological practices.

(2) Optimizing ecological infrastructure. Conventional earthen canals shall be retrofitted into "ecological ditches" planted with hydrophytes (such as *Phragmites australis*, *Acorus calamus*) for mitigating agricultural nonpoint source pollution. A hybrid irrigation system integrating drip and sprinkler technologies can be deployed, which can elevate water use efficiency by 30%. Field ridges can be vegetated with native herbaceous species (such as *Setaria viridis*, *Cosmos bipinnatus*) to form "ecological ridges" that enhance biodiversity by attracting birds and insects.

(3) Constructing a paddy field ecological cycle. An "organic fertilizer production station" can be constructed adjacent to paddies to recycle agricultural waste (such as rice straw, livestock manure) into organic fertilizers. Rainwater harvesting ponds can be installed to collect rain water for irrigation, thereby curbing groundwater extraction.

4.3 Cultural empowerment strategy: inheriting Hakka agricultural culture

(1) Tapping and presenting farming culture. A Hakka Agricultural Culture Museum shall be established at the entrance of the paddy fields to exhibit traditional farming tools (like dragon-bone waterwheels, plows, and harrows), agricultural proverbs, and the history of rice cultivation in Xiangling Village. Cultural interpretation boards can be installed along the paddy trails to introduce Hakka farming customs, such as the "Rice Transplanting Commencement Ceremony" and "New Rice Tasting Festival."

(2) Integrating cultural elements into the landscape. Colored rice varieties can be utilized to create patterns depicting Hakka walled villages and totems, forming a "Cultural Paddy Landscape." Architectural features of Hakka design, such as gray tiles, wooden beams, and carvings, can be incorporated into viewing platforms and rest pavilions to enhance regional identity.

(3) Cultivating the main body of cultural inheritance. A "Farming Culture Inheritor" position can be created, engaging elderly villagers with expertise to conduct skill-based workshops. A "Youth Farming Summer Camp" can be organized to educate local adolescents in traditional farming techniques, thereby mitigating cultural discontinuity[6].

4.4 Spatial reconstruction strategy: creating an orderly and concrete experiential landscape space

(1) Dividing functional zones. The 57 hm^2 paddy area can be divided into four distinct functional zones: a "Core Production Zone" (ensuring food security through large-scale Simiao rice cultivation), a "Research and Learning Experience Zone" (offering hands-on farming activities and educational programs), a "Landscape Recreation Zone" (featuring colorful rice art and viewing nodes), and a "Cultural Exhibition Zone" (housing the Agricultural Culture Museum and cultural signage corridor). These zones can be interconnected by pedestrian trails to prevent functional overlap.

(2) Creating landscape nodes. A "Panoramic Viewing Platform" can be constructed at the highest point of the paddy fields, offering an overlook of the entire landscape. A 2.5 km "Paddy Trail" can be paved along the Dongjiang River tributary, equipped with resting pavilions and landscape seating. A "Threshing Ground Plaza," serving dual purposes of crop drying and public activities, can be built within the Research and Learning Experience Zone.

(3) Optimizing spatial connectivity. A "transitional vegetation belt" (such as bamboo groves and fruit trees) can be planted between the paddy fields and the village to soften the interface between farmland and built structures. Segregation of production and recreational circulation shall be implemented: production routes will feature concrete surfaces (3 m wide for agricultural machinery), while recreational paths will feature wooden boardwalks or stone slabs (1.5 m wide for pedestrian use), thereby enhancing both safety and user experience.

5 Landscape design scheme for paddy fields in Xiangling Village (core area)

Employing the "Landscape Recreation Zone" and "Research and Learning Experience Zone" as case studies, the specific design schemes are demonstrated to illustrate how the strategies are translated into practice.

5.1 Landscape leisure area design

5.1.1 Colorful paddy field landscape. Pattern design: the pattern is centered on the theme of "Hakka walled village + Dongjiang fishing boats" using purple, yellow, and green rice varieties. Planting areas are divided via GPS positioning to form a multicolored rice pattern covering approximately 3.3 hm^2[7-9]. The design can be updated annually to align with thematic occasions such as the Spring Festival and Harvest

Festival (Fig.1).

Supporting facilities: Wooden boardwalks (with a total length of 800m) are set up around the colorful rice fields for tourists to enjoy and take photos. Two rest pavilions (named "Daoxiang Pavilion" and "Keyun Pavilion") are set up next to the boardwalk, with wooden signs of Hakka agricultural proverbs hanging inside the pavilions. There is a guide sign at the entrance to introduce the colorful rice varieties and their symbolic patterns.

5.1.2 Dongjiang paddy filed wetland. Location: the idle low-lying land on the edge of rice fields (with an area of about 2 hm^2) is used and transformed into an artificial wetland. The wetland has been planted with aquatic macrophytes like *P. australis*, *A. calamus*, *Nelumbo nucifera* to purify drainage water from the rice paddies. Wooden platforms and a bird hide are installed to facilitate tourist observation of wetland birds, such as egrets and turtledoves. The wetland periphery has been planted with peach and plum trees, creating a landscape offering floral and fruiting displays throughout the four seasons[10].

5.2 Design of research and learning experience zone

5.2.1 Hands-on farming field. Zoning: The 1.3 hm^2 paddy field is subdivided into two distinct zones: Family Experience Plots (measuring 10 m×10 m per plot, available for families to rent and cultivate), Educational Experience Plots (measuring 50 m×20 m per plot, designated for collective teaching activities conducted by schools). Supporting facilities: the area is equipped with both traditional farming tools (like plows, harrows, sickles) and modern agricultural machinery (like small-scale rice transplanters), which are stored in a dedicated toolshed. An "Agricultural Education Shelter" (with an area of 100 m^2) has been constructed, furnished with tables, chairs, and a projector, to facilitate instructional sessions on rice cultivation knowledge (Fig.2).

5.2.2 Simiao rice processing experience hall. Architectural design: The structure is designed in the traditional vernacular style of Hakka architecture, characterized by gray tiles, white walls, and a sloping roof. With a total area of approximately 200 m^2, the hall is divided into two functional zones: a Processing Demonstration Zone and a Product Sales Zone. Functional layout: the Processing Demonstration Area is equipped with traditional stone mills and modern rice milling machines, allowing visitors to engage in hands-on activities illustrating the entire process "from paddy to polished rice." The Product Sales Are is dedicated to the sale of "Xiangling Simiao Rice" and related cultural and creative products, such as notebooks featuring paddy field art and gift boxes of Hakka specialty foods.

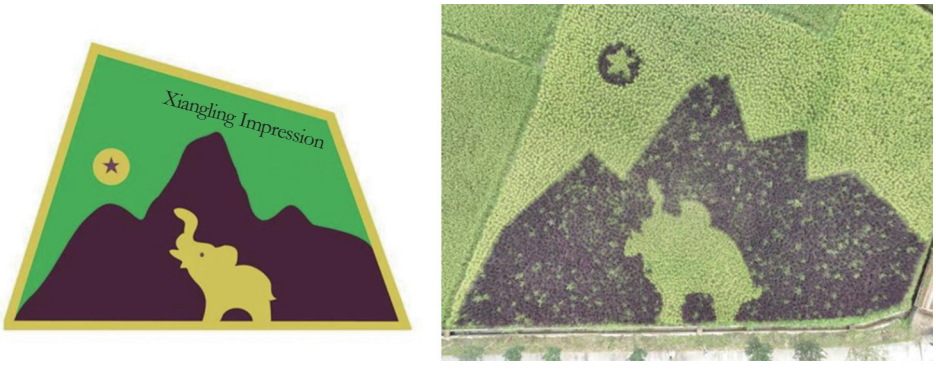

Fig.1 Colored rice fields

Fig.2 Hands–on farming field

5.3 Technical and implementation support

5.3.1 Technical support. Collaborations have been established with the School of Life Sciences at Huizhou University and the Huizhou Municipal Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs to provide technical guidance on green cultivation and ecological conservation. Furthermore, a professional landscape design team has been introduced to ensure the practical implementation of the planning.

5.3.2 Financial security. A diversified funding model described as "government subsidies + village collective self-financing + social capital investment" has been adopted. Specifically, government applications are submitted for rural revitalization special subsidies (estimated to account for 40%), village collectives leverage rental income from underutilized assets (estimated at 20%), and tourism companies are invited to invest (estimated at 40%).

5.3.3 Operations management. A "Xiangling Village Paddy Landscape Operation Cooperative" has been founded, comprising representatives from villagers, the village collective, and tourism companies. This cooperative is responsible for daily operations, including the reception of educational tourism groups and landscape maintenance. A benefit-sharing mechanism has been established to prioritize the employment of local villagers in operational roles and to distribute profits according to predefined proportions.

6 Conclusion and prospect

6.1 Research conclusion

Taking Xiangling Village in Huizhou, Guangdong as a case study, this paper demonstrates the multiple values of paddy landscapes in rural revitalization and proposes a four-dimensional design strategy of "industrial integration, ecological optimization, cultural empowerment, and spatial restructuring," thereby developing an implementable design scheme. The findings indicate that: paddy field landscape design must be closely aligned with the overall requirements of rural revitalization, moving beyond the limitations of a singular production focus to achieve an integration of "production, ecology, culture, and experience." For hilly rural areas in Southern China, paddy landscape design should incorporate regional characteristics (such as Hakka culture and the ecology of the Dongjiang River Basin) to avoid homogenization. Establishing a multi-stakeholder collaboration mechanism involving

(To be continued in P48)

such as crowded shopping malls during peak hours, shallow and overlapping development of various business types, and lagging construction and renewal of the business district's appearance. The emergence of various problems has restricted the development and improvement of the renewal site.

5.2 Suggestions

The renewal of traditional commercial districts should focus on the introduction of new business formats and the revitalization of traditional spatial characteristics. On the one hand, it can be combined with experience, leisure and other business formats with higher efficiency to rejuvenate traditional functions. On the other hand, under the trend of de-regionalization, the characteristic value of the block itself should be strengthened, and contemporary functions should be considered on the premise of historical protection and the exploration of traditional spatial features[6].

During peak hours, it is advisable to install certain facilities to control pedestrian flow at the entrance as much as possible, such as adjustable and expandable barriers and one-way entrance and exit channels, which can effectively reduce pedestrian flow. Even for popular stores that buy out the market every three or five days, it is advisable to adopt an innovative flow control method of appointment and limited entry time periods to effectively alleviate the noise and congestion at the store entrances and exits. At the same time, at the renewal site, in addition to continuing to supplement the guidance system, increasing the density of guidance signs and the clarity of indication directions, and significantly strengthening the guiding and directing role for pedestrian flow, it is necessary to add some pedestrian passages around the stall market or widen the already established ones, so as to coordinate and connect with the surrounding commercial areas, and effectively enhance the overall mobile evacuation capacity around the renewal site. Under the backdrop of urban renewal, the redevelopment of community commercial complexes still has many challenges and opportunities[7].

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"government, village collectives, social capital, and villagers" is crucial for the successful implementation and long-term operation of paddy landscape design.

6.2 Research prospects

Future research can further explore the following directions: By integrating smart agriculture technologies, an IoT-based monitoring system (such as soil moisture, pest and disease surveillance) can be introduced into the paddy landscape of Xiangling Village to enhance intelligent landscape management. Long-term tracking studies can be conducted to monitor the impact of the paddy landscape design on villagers' income and the ecological environment, thereby providing data-driven support for scheme optimization. The experience from Xiangling Village can be extended to other rural areas in Huizhou and across Guangdong Province, ultimately forming a paddy landscape design model that is both regionally distinctive and replicable.

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