



Disappearing gradually and unconsciously in rural China: Research on the sunken courtyard and the reasons for change in Shanxian County, Henan Province



Fang Wang^a, Fengyao Yu^a, Xiaohua Zhu^{b,*}, Xiaoli Pan^c, Ruimin Sun^d, Hongru Cai^c

^a Sino-German Joint Laboratory on Urbanization and Locality Research, College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, Peking University, Beijing, 100871, PR China

^b Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, 100871, PR China

^c College of Urban and Environmental Sciences, Peking University, Beijing, 100871, PR China

^d School of Urban Planning and Design, Peking University, Shenzhen, 518055, PR China

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ABSTRACT

China's rural areas have entered an important period of modernization, experiencing the rapid transformation from traditional rural society to modern urban society. In this context, since the 1980s, the rural traditional dwellings with unique local characteristics and ecological advantages encounter an enormous threat. The rapid demolition of famous heritage sites and landscapes easily garners the public's attention, but traditional dwellings in rural areas are gradually disappearing as part of the residents' long-term daily practices. The cave dwelling, "sunken courtyard" (known as "di keng yuan" in Mandarin), is an appropriate subject for interpreting this type of change and cultural transformation. The sunken courtyards are primarily distributed throughout central China, Henan Province, Shanxian County; their unique architectural design method show the characteristics of the Loess Plateau culture. This study adopts qualitative research methods, selecting five study cases in Shanxian County, to discuss the changes in the traditional sunken courtyard and to explore the reasons behind these changes. Based on the literature and preliminary investigation, a formal interview was conducted. The results indicate the causes of the changes in terms of decoration, custom, family structure and policy. Additionally, the key conclusion is that the rural land use policy, the limitations of the sunken courtyard itself, the change in residents' ideas and the lack of proper management are the major reasons for this heritage change phenomenon. This study proffers a method regarding the protection of traditional dwellings to attract attention to the disappearing dwellings and to provide a scientific planning method for them.

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1. Introduction

China's rural areas have entered an important period of modernization, experiencing a rapid transformation from traditional rural society to modern urban society. Rural China is facing significant out-migration, as some Western countries did after the Second World War (Long and Woods, 2011). Rural development faces the challenges of population emigration, employment, land use, resource consumption and environmental governance (Liu and

Zhou, 2015). Following the reforms and opening-up of 1978, socio-economic development and improvement in rural living standards have caused rural residents to abandon traditional housing in village cores for new housing on city and village fringes (Long et al., 2012). In this context, a variety of traditional cultural landscapes have been damaged or have disappeared. Particularly, traditional dwellings with important local characteristics and ecological advantages encounter an enormous threat.

The evolution of rural dwelling patterns, styles and appearances can reflect changes in farmers' production and living styles (Fang and Liu, 2009). Traditional houses are the carriers of historical change and traditional culture. Focusing on changes in traditional houses over time can provide ideas for how to protect cultural heritage and enable the sustainable development of traditional

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: wfpd@pku.edu.cn (F. Wang), fengyao_yu@126.com (F. Yu), zhuxhignsr@163.com (X. Zhu), 806656571@qq.com (X. Pan), 1023725307@qq.com (R. Sun), caih.pku@gmail.com (H. Cai).

architectural culture. The sunken courtyard, which local people know as “*di keng yuan*” in Mandarin, is a specific type of cave dwelling. The spatial forms of Chinese cave dwellings can be divided into three categories: cliffside-type, detached-type and sunken-courtyard-type. The sunken-courtyard-type is beneath the land surface and usually involves a large square or rectangular excavated pit with cave dwelling units dug around the perimeter. These dwellings are primarily distributed throughout central China, especially in Shanxian County, Henan Province. This type of heritage cave dwelling is an appropriate subject for interpreting cultural transformation in the context of rural restructuring. The sunken courtyard was developed from cave dwellings in the primitive period; its unique architectural design method shows the characteristics of the Loess Plateau culture. It was adapted to the production conditions of the past agricultural society. In the last ten years, the overall level of urbanization in Henan Province has increased dramatically (Chen and Liu, 2014). The number of sunken courtyards has decreased by 10% per year since 1978, and the reduction continues to increase in speed (Ma, 2010). The protection, renovation and development of sunken courtyards has become a key topic in Chinese vernacular architecture research.

The rapid demolition of famous heritage sites and landscapes in the pursuit of commercial interests easily garners the public's attention, but traditional dwellings in rural areas are gradually being replaced by modern-style houses as part of the residents' long-term daily practices. In these places, the people who still live in the rural environment actually use these heritages sites. However, similar to boiling a frog in cold water that is slowly heated, the disappearance of rural traditional dwellings is occurring gradually and unconsciously, so it has evaded notice. By the time people realize that changes are taking place, it may be too late to protect these heritages because irreversible damage will have already occurred. In this process, the colorful heritage of traditional dwellings in rural China has been unknowingly disregarded, along with changes in traditional rural customs and the loss of related construction skills. The features and characteristics of rural environment have gradually become monotonous and mediocre. Current international research mainly focuses on the energy conservation, heritage value and historical significance of cave dwellings; there is great research potential from the perspective of local residents under the context of urbanization and rural restructuring. Local residents are the creators, users and protectors of traditional dwellings; they have the closest relationship with heritages, and have been with them for the longest time. The residents master traditional building skills and preserve shared memories. These memories are agrestic and local, different from national memories in that they can become symbols of the local area, so they deserve special attention when facing the cultural assimilation that accompanies globalization. Taking into account the perspective of local residents, researchers can provide a deep understanding of the unique characteristics of heritage sites, give an account of how folk customs are forgotten or preserved, and examine the reasons for these changes. In addition to understanding heritage sites from the perspective of the authorities, the perspective of local residents offers an important supplement. This study adopts qualitative, in-depth interview methods to examine changes in the prevalence of sunken courtyards, using this type of building in Shanxian County, Henan Province as an example. The results reveal the causes of changes in heritage architecture in relation to architectural form, decoration, custom, policy and family structure. This study suggests methods for protecting traditional dwellings, for drawing public attention to disappearing dwellings, and for providing scientific planning methods to implement these

goals.

2. Traditional rural dwellings and the Chinese context

2.1. Value and plight of traditional dwellings

The traditional dwellings are indigenous and originate from folk society; they are the local architectural forms that have great historical and cultural value and ethnic characteristics (Lu, 2007). The houses are distributed in vast countrysides and towns; they are not designed by professional architects but are built by local villagers with vernacular materials and traditional skills. The dwelling models were formed in agricultural society and remain until today (Shan, 2004). Certain traditional houses are where culture and tradition collides with the local daily life; the respective dwellings have close relationship with the local environmental characteristics (GhaffarianHoseini et al., 2014). They not only have strong aesthetic characteristics, but also partly adapt to local climatic conditions; the ancient construction skills can provide low energy solutions for the modern world (Gou et al., 2015). It could be concluded that traditional dwellings are the integrated embodiment of ecological, cultural and functional values.

Rural areas are in a more advantageous position to preserve and sustain their built environment including traditional heritage because of their static demographic structure and means of production (Günçe et al., 2008). However, in the process of modernization, certain rural traditional houses are gradually encountering the plight of development and function as farmers' living conditions have improved a lot. Certain traditional activities related to pre-modern rural life may no longer be obvious, so that houses are required to accommodate new activities (Chuapram et al., 2012). Many studies show the limitations of traditional dwellings in adopting themselves to modern rural life. Their design and techniques cannot always meet the modern living style (Bodach et al., 2014). Some basic modern living facilities like health space, bathroom, lighting, ventilation and kitchen insulation are many features that appear unsuitable in the traditional architecture, and these contradictions are the important reason that the local people spontaneously abandon or retrofit them (Dong and Jin, 2013). Moreover, although the cultural and social values are admitted by local people, their limitations are also widely noticed. The study of Iranian traditional loggias not only shows that the spaces are created to serve residents' social, cultural and aesthetic requirements, but also the negative aspects that they are perceived to be inconvenient, uneconomic and often impractical (Foruzanmehr, 2015).

The five types of changes in landscape elements in villages are add, continue, customize, transform and repair (Fatimah, 2015). The changes of traditional dwellings under these dilemmas are affected by a series of comprehensive factors. Economy plays an important role and is the root of all of these changes (Al-Naim and Mahmud, 2007); social and cultural changes also result in the changes of traditional dwellings (Chuapram et al., 2012). Local residents' minds are changing as new industries come into their daily life. For instance, with the development of tourism, the capital-oriented value system replaces the traditional personal relationship and service concept, leading to the transformation of traditional houses (Hanan, 2012). Additionally, modern technology in building materials and construction techniques play a very strong role in the transformation of the traditional houses (Al-Naim, 1998; Cited in Al-Naim and Mahmud, 2007: 426). For example, with wide social acceptability and economic sustainability factors, the contemporary concrete balustrade appeared in the Nigerian vernacular ar-

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