

An Exploration of the Dynamic Protection Path of Meibei Village Academy in Ji'an City

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Abstract: *Meibei Ancient Village, located in Qingyuan District, Ji'an City, Jiangxi Province, is a highly representative ancient village of the Jiangyou ethnic lineage and is renowned as “the First Village of Luling Culture”. With a long history dating back to the early Southern Song Dynasty nearly a thousand years ago, Meibei Village boasts a rich cultural heritage, particularly distinguished by its academy culture. The village still preserves several historic academies, including Jingde Academy, Mingxin Academy, Zhenhan Academy, and Yangyuan Academy. These academies witnessed the cultural development of Meibei Village, yet today they have fallen into disrepair and ceased operation. The thesis is based on field research and interviews with local villagers, tracing the historical development of Meibei’s academies and exploring pathways for their modern revitalization.*

Keywords: Meibei village, Meibei academy, Pathways, Modern revitalization.

1. Introduction

Meibei Village is renowned for its long history, which extends back nearly a millennium, to the early Southern Song Dynasty. It is celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, especially its distinctive academy culture.

The village is home to numerous ancient academies, such as Meibei Academy, Jingde Academy, and Yangyuan Academy. These academies witnessed the cultural evolution of Meibei Village and possess significant research value.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the legacy and development of Meibei Village’s academies, the research utilized a range of research methods. Field observations were carried out within the academies and villages to gain a direct insight into the architectural style of the academies, their surrounding environment, and the lifestyle of the villagers. Comprehensive documentation was provided, detailing the layout and architectural characteristics of the academies. In-depth interviews were conducted with local residents, academy administrators, and cultural experts to gather firsthand information about the history of the academies, their changing roles, current challenges, and future goals. Questionnaires were also distributed to collect data on the villagers’ awareness, involvement, needs, and recommendations concerning the academies.

2. Overview of the Academies

The development of the academies in Meibei Village is closely tied to the village’s history. Since the village was established in the early Southern Song Dynasty, the Liang family’s growth and prosperity have been accompanied by an increased emphasis on culture and education, resulting in the emergence of academies. Early academies primarily offered early childhood education to family members, establishing the groundwork for nurturing talent within the village. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Meibei Village underwent a commercial boom, and the idea of supporting Confucianism through commerce gained popularity, resulting in a surge in academy construction.

Meibei’s ancestors highly valued education and established numerous academies. Historical research indicates that Meibei Ancient Village boasted three academies: Meibei Academy, Jingde Academy, and Yangyuan Academy.

2.1 Meibei Academy

Meibei Academy was the place where Wang Jiusi, a renowned scholar of the Ming Dynasty, taught during his later years. Wang Jiusi, courtesy name Jingfu and pseudonym Meipo, was a native of Antai Village in E County (Hu County today). As a distinguished literary figure, he earned the prestigious Jinshi degree in 1496, the ninth year of the Hongzhi reign under Emperor Xiaozong of the Ming Dynasty. He went on to serve as a Reviewer in the Hanlin Academy and a Doctor in the Ministry of Personnel.

The Sima Mansion, built during the Qing Dynasty, is the largest historical structure in Meibei Village. The current Meibei Academy has been reconstructed based on this well-preserved mansion, incorporating elements of traditional Chinese academies to revive the scholarly and cultural spirit of the original Meibei Village Academy.

2.2 Jingde Academy

Jingde Academy, located in the southeastern part of the village, originally served as the ancestral hall of the Wensitang branch of the Dayi clan. Built in the mid-Qing Dynasty, the structure measures 27.6 meters in length and 12.2 meters in width, with a total floor area of 336.72 square meters, making it the largest surviving academy in the village.

The gate plaque of the small courtyard bears the inscription “Wen Yi Bei Dou” (a reference to literary brilliance and moral integrity). The main building is organized into two sections—front and rear—with a concave atrium in between, reflecting the traditional ancestral hall layout known as “four waters returning to the hall”.

The rear hall and flanking side rooms are well-lit, and the second floor features a mezzanine with wooden balustrades, adding both functionality and architectural charm.

Gilded family mottos are inscribed on both sides of the hall's pilasters: "Learning is the treasure of the body; Confucianism is the treasure of the table." Gilded paintings and couplets adorn the door panels. In 1930, it served as the office of the Soviet government's General Labor Union, where numerous revolutionary slogans remain. The gate plaque reads "Wei Wu De Xin" (a referen virtue to integrity). The family academy's name, "Jingde", emphasizes the importance of virtue.

2.3 Yangyuan Academy

Yangyuan Academy, also referred to as Dizang Pavilion, is a site where the saying goes, "Dizang Pavilion came first, followed by Yangyuan Academy." Legend has it that at one point in time, the Mishui and Fushui rivers converged into a large whirlpool. Since then, few individuals from Mibei Village have succeeded in the imperial examinations. A Fengshui master proposed constructing a pavilion at the site, naming it Dizang Pavilion. This pavilion was intended to safeguard the village's feng shui and ensure the continuous flow of wealth. Perhaps by coincidence, an increasing number of people from Hubei began to pass the imperial examinations, and Mibei Village flourished. After enduring thousands of years of historical transformations, four prominent families established Yangyuan Academy in this location.

Yangyuan Academy is one of the oldest buildings in the ancient village of Mibei village and was also the finest academy of its time.

3. The Protection of Meibei Village and Its Current Dilemma

3.1 The Protection of Meibei Village

Since its establishment as a city in 2000, Ji'an has intensified efforts to explore, promote, and develop its local traditional cultural resources. Nevertheless, there have been no new challenges or established paths for the protection and development of the ancient village and its academy. Researches indicate that across various tasks, ranging from understanding the cultural value of the ancient village to shifting perspectives, from enhancing the village's appearance to installing tourist facilities, there have been clashes of ideas and approaches among officials, villagers, and the public, as well as diverging strategies. There have been conflicting goals and aspirations, as well as disputes over the distribution of interests. Despite the twists and turns, disputes, and challenges, there has also been the joy of achievement.

Due to its focus on preservation, Meibei successfully applied to be listed as one of the first batch of Jiangxi Province's Historical and Cultural Villages in 2003 and was designated a National Historical and Cultural Village in 2005. In 2004, it was designated a Jiangxi Province Youth Patriotic Education Base. In March 2005, it became a teaching site for the China Cadre School in Jinggangshan. In 2010, it was designated a National Eco-Village. In 2011, it was listed as one of the second batch of National Characteristic Landscape Villages. In 2012, it was included in the first batch of China's Traditional Village Protection List.

3.2 Current Dilemma

Although the government has taken some measures to protect the village and its academies, its current dilemma is hard to ignore.

Firstly, the population of residents is gradually diminishing. Over the past decade, villagers have consistently purchased and constructed houses in the township's planned new districts and streets, or relocated to other cities. Currently, fewer than 100 households, comprising less than one-third of the total, reside in the village with their entire families. This figure is steadily declining, and an increasing number of houses will become vacant.

Secondly, local customs are diminishing. Most of the village's younger and middle-aged inhabitants are employed or engaged in business activities beyond the village, adopting modern lifestyles. Traditional customs are encountering unprecedented challenges. Weddings, birthdays, and other festive rituals are frequently presented in a novel manner, devoid of their traditional significance. The widespread implementation of agricultural technology and the introduction of new materials and technologies have largely supplanted farming practices such as planting and breeding, leaving traditional production and processing techniques in a state of uncertainty. Local folk customs, the living history of the ancient village, are at risk of being lost. This necessitates practical and viable strategies.

Thirdly, the issue of who should be responsible for protection and what actions should be taken arises. In Meibei Village, some houses are collectively owned, while others are designated as cultural relics or scenic spots, entitling them to protection by the state or the collective. However, the majority of houses are privately owned, and the homeowners have the right to decide their fate. Ownership regulations only prohibit demolition, without specifying whether repairs are necessary. There is no clear definition of which buildings are worthy of preservation.

Currently, some buildings in the village have been neglected for a long time, exposed to the elements, and some alleyways are overgrown with weeds. There are at least 200 old houses in the village, either uninhabited or occupied only by one or two elderly residents. This vast number and scope require substantial repair and maintenance, and this will require long-term preservation, not just a one- or two-year effort.

Homeowners may be reluctant to invest in repairs because their old houses are inconvenient and uninhabitable, and they feel they have little use for them. Even if the national and local governments provide some funding, it can only provide partial support at this time. Logically, for houses outside of cultural heritage protection sites, the primary responsibility for their preservation lies with the householder.

So, how can householders be encouraged to fulfill their conservation responsibilities and obligations? This is a daunting and challenging issue.

Fourthly, there is a conflict in management methods. Meibei's current management system comprises two tiers: a top-down

administrative body and the Liang clan's natural village management unit. Village directors and deputy village directors represent each branch and clan to manage clan affairs. For over a decade, conservation and development have been largely government-led, with administrative initiatives and clan responses and implementation. The imbalance in responsibilities and interests between the two parties creates uncertainty.

4. Suggestions for Dynamic Protection

Since Ji'an's establishment as a city in 2000, the local area has intensified its efforts to explore and develop traditional cultural resources. However, the preservation and development of ancient villages like Meibei and their academies remains a pressing challenge. Currently, Meibei Village faces multiple challenges, including the exodus of villagers, the fading of local customs, unclear conservation responsibilities, and conflicting management mechanisms. To address these issues and promote the dynamic preservation and sustainable development of the academy, this article proposes the following suggestions:

4.1 To establish an Ancient House Trusteeship Platform

Considering the intricate property ownership in ancient villages, one potential solution could involve the implementation of an "ancient house trusteeship" model. This model would encourage villagers who have relocated to transfer the use rights of their vacant homes to the village collective or a conservation foundation for centralized management. A "Meibei Ancient Village Conservation Cooperative" could be formed, allowing villagers to entrust their unoccupied homes to the cooperative for a period of 10-20 years. For instance, ten idle residential structures at the village's entrance could be converted into a "Shuyuan Yashe" homestay complex, managed by a professional hotel management team. After coordinated renovations, the cooperative could introduce cultural and creative studios, distinctive homestays, and various other enterprises to augment the villagers' income and stimulate economic growth. Additionally, exploring a fair profit distribution system, such as allocating 50% to the homeowner, 30% to a maintenance fund, and 20% to cooperative operating costs, would be beneficial.

4.2 To establish a Restoration Fund Pool

To address the issue of insufficient restoration funds, it is recommended to establish a flexible and diverse protection mechanism. In addition to applying for national cultural relics protection funds and matching municipal fiscal funds, it is advised to increase participation from all sectors of society. For instance, a "Adopting an Ancient Building" program could be implemented, allowing businesses to adopt individual buildings and receive naming rights and tax deductions. Moreover, a crowdfunding platform could be established to raise funds for restoration, with donors receiving digital certificates of authenticity.

4.3 Specific Projects for Revitalizing the Functions of Academies

To prevent academies from becoming mere tourist attractions, they should be given new and practical functions.

4.3.1 To develop a one-day "Little Academy Teacher" experience program.

For instance, activities could encompass morning readings of "Luling Jiaxun," engaging in traditional rubbing techniques and creating personalized bookmarks, participating in field classes to learn about ecological farming, and enjoying evening fireside chats where elders share stories about village history. To establish reasonable fee standards, integrate the functions of academies with the civilization of ancient villages, and enable students to gain a deeper understanding of local culture.

4.3.2 To establish workshops to learn about intangible cultural heritage projects.

For instance, consider setting up woodcarving, bamboo weaving, and traditional papermaking workshops. For those requiring advanced skills, such as woodcarving, invite provincial intangible cultural heritage inheritors for monthly residencies. Bamboo weaving workshops could partner with local artisans to create cultural and creative products, while papermaking workshops could provide hands-on experiences to recreate the ancient papermaking process.

Additionally, develop "intangible cultural heritage experience packages" that include materials and instructional videos, thereby overcoming time and space limitations.

4.3.3 To establish digital experience programs

Firstly, to establish immersive "time travel" experiences. It is recommended to develop an AR tour app that scans buildings to reveal historical images. Additionally, set up 10 check-in points, with digital medals awarded for completing all of them.

Secondly, to design script-based games, such as "Searching for the Lost Secret Book," and develop real-life puzzle games based on academy history, allowing participants to learn about academy culture through the game.

Thirdly, to establish seasonal themed activities. For example, in spring, hold a "Brush Opening Ceremony" for school-age children, possibly at the Wenchang Pavilion. In summer, organize "Academy Night Readings" offering lectures on traditional culture. In autumn, hold a "Harvest Poetry Festival" combining farming experiences. In winter, hold a "New Year Customs and Culture Week" to recreate the diverse customs and traditions of Meibei Village.

Fourthly, to establish an industry-university-research base for the Meibei Village Academy. Currently, the Luling Cultural Research Center of Jinggangshan University and the Ji'an Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center have established a deep cooperative relationship. They recommend training several graduate students annually in the field of intangible cultural heritage inheritance. These graduates will conduct research on Ji'an's intangible cultural heritage projects, revolutionary stories, folk tales, and local folk

culture.

They will also jointly apply for municipal, provincial, and national social science research projects, arts and science research projects, and other types of research projects. This will form a joint research force to extensively research, preserve, and disseminate Ji'an's intangible cultural heritage and Luling culture.

Finally, they will launch the “Meibei Memory” project. We recorded the oral histories of hundreds of elderly people, cleaned and processed the audio content, and tried our best to create a 3D digital archive.

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