

Entering the Operational Afterlife: Art-Led Rural Revitalisation in China

Zhou Yang^{1*}, S'harin binti Mokhtar², Norazmi bin Shahlal³

¹Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia;
Department of Fine Arts and Craft Design, Yuncheng University, 1155 Fudan West Street, Yanhu District, Yuncheng, Shanxi 044000, China
Email: Matthewzhouyang@gmail.com

²Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: sharin2066@uitm.edu.my

³Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: norazmi2943@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Zhou Yang
(Matthewzhouyang@gmail.com)

KEYWORDS:

Art-led rural revitalisation
Operational afterlife
Maintenance
Adaptive reuse
Rural China

CITATION:

Zhou, Y., S'harin, M., & Norazmi, S. (2026).
Entering the Operational Afterlife: Art-Led
Rural Revitalisation in China. *Malaysian
Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
(MJSSH)*, 11(9), e004209.
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i9.4209>

Art-led rural revitalisation is commonly assessed through visible outputs, event attendance or participation during design interventions. Less is known about the transition in which completed or newly installed assets encounter the demands of ordinary use. This article develops operational afterlife as a focused analytical window on that transition. It reports an exploratory secondary qualitative analysis of eight source-screened operational episodes drawn from a broader doctoral fieldwork corpus. The episodes concern Xucun in Shanxi, Gejia and surrounding villages in Ninghai, Zhejiang, and the Route 8 art-village network around Caijiapo, Shaanxi. Recorded between January and August 2025, they cover seasonal business continuity, property conversion and local financial constraints; maintenance recognised during installation and retrospectively; and festival access, variable activity and early coordination. Explicit eligibility criteria excluded source overlap, unresolved place attribution and unreliable wording. The analysis develops three propositions rather than estimating prevalence or project impact. First, intervention legacies become selectively reusable assets rather than an automatically preserved stock. Second, design choices disclose recurring care work that must be assigned and resourced. Third, rules and alliances may coordinate access before they achieve durable and revisable operation. Operational afterlife differs from sustainability or legacy assessment by examining how actors select, care for and renegotiate what remains as exceptional project attention recedes. The propositions are deliberately bounded and require further longitudinal and multi-source testing.

1. Introduction

Art festivals, public installations, redesigned courtyards and artist-led village projects have become visible instruments of rural revitalisation. They can make rural places legible to visitors and funders, connect local actors to wider networks and open cultural or commercial possibilities. Research on rural arts-based development accordingly emphasises place recognition, interactional networks, entrepreneurship, co-creation and resilience (Anwar McHenry, 2011; Balfour et al., 2018; Qu & Zollet, 2023). Rural creative-economy research also warns that cultural practice is shaped by place-specific infrastructures, labour conditions and policy assumptions rather than by a portable urban development script (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Roberts & Townsend, 2016).

Visibility, however, is not equivalent to operational capacity. A converted courtyard may require further capital and permission. Turf introduced as a design improvement creates watering and trimming work. A festival route may organise commercial activity while raising questions about who may sell and on what terms. A network alliance may be formally established while fees, routines and evidence of effectiveness remain unsettled. These situations are not adequately described as simple project success or failure. They are encounters between temporary intervention and ordinary operation.

Projects and festivals concentrate people, resources and attention within bounded periods. Temporary-organisation research shows that project action is organised around time, transition and an anticipated end state (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Festival scholarship similarly cautions against treating event visibility as a self-executing route to durable social or economic benefit (Quinn, 2005). Development research adds that policy models and project representations do not straightforwardly determine the practices through which local arrangements are maintained (Mosse, 2004). Together, these literatures direct attention to what happens when an intervention's exceptional tempo encounters everyday constraints.

This article calls that analytical window the operational afterlife of art-led rural revitalisation. The term does not imply that a project has definitively ended or that its outcomes are already known. It refers to the transition in which physical, organisational and symbolic residues must be used, maintained, coordinated, altered or allowed to lapse under more ordinary conditions. The transition can become visible after completion, but it can also be anticipated during installation or an event when future operating demands first surface.

The empirical contribution is intentionally exploratory. Eight source-screened episodes are used to develop propositions about selective reuse, assigned care and revisable coordination. The material does not support a village ranking, an impact evaluation or a claim of thematic saturation. Xucun, Gejia-linked Ninghai and Route 8 provide contrasting operational contexts rather than symmetrical village cases.

1.1. Research Objectives

The primary research question is: How do operational frictions become visible as art-led rural interventions move from concentrated project or festival activity towards everyday use?

Two subsidiary questions guide the analysis. First, what problems of asset reuse, recurring care and access rules appear in the eight selected episodes? Second, what exploratory propositions can these episodes support about entry into an operational afterlife, and where do the evidence boundaries prevent stronger conclusions?

The study has three objectives: to distinguish operational afterlife from sustainability and legacy assessment; to develop bounded propositions from source-screened qualitative episodes; and to identify questions that future longitudinal research should test concerning reuse, care and rule revision.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rural arts, creative development and event activation

Arts-based rural development is commonly justified by its capacity to strengthen place identity, civic interaction, entrepreneurship and external recognition. Anwar McHenry (2011) links rural arts activity to civic and social participation, while Balfour et al. (2018) place arts-based development within creative, entrepreneurial and interactional community contexts. Bell and Jayne (2010) show why rural cultural economies should not be treated as smaller versions of urban creative economies: their infrastructures, labour arrangements and policy needs are geographically distinctive. Roberts and Townsend (2016) likewise connect rural creative practice to adaptive capacity while demonstrating that participation depends on enabling infrastructure and locally embedded resources.

Research on art tourism shows that external initiatives can activate endogenous responses. Qu and Zollet (2023), for example, argue that long-term co-creation between external art development and community activity can support neo-endogenous revitalisation. Potter et al. (2024) nevertheless show that rural public-art funding can be misaligned with local priorities and capacities. Festival research reinforces this caution. Quinn (2005) argues that event-led cultural strategies can privilege image and economic expectations while leaving social value and longer-term effects insufficiently understood. Visible cultural investment is therefore better treated as an opportunity structure than as a self-executing development outcome.

Recent East Asian research strengthens the case for examining what cultural activation becomes in ordinary rural practice. Qu and Cheer (2021) study community art festivals through the problem of sustainable rural revitalisation and foreground the importance of locally embedded participation and collaboration. At Japan's Echigo-Tsumari Art Festival, Leung and Thorsen (2022) show how farmers encounter art within everyday agricultural, social and environmental relations rather than only as visitors or beneficiaries of an event. These studies move analysis beyond festival visibility, while leaving room for a more focused account of the operating work attached to particular assets and arrangements.

This distinction is especially relevant in China. The active party-state, village institutions and professional networks can mobilise resources rapidly, but the resulting arrangements may depend on public finance, political recognition or selected intermediaries (Xin & Gallent, 2024). University engagement can enable participatory planning and knowledge co-production (Lang et al., 2024), while short-duration design practice may struggle to root outputs in everyday life after external teams leave (Wang

et al., 2016). The issue is not a binary opposition between exogenous and endogenous action. It is how a heterogeneous coalition deals with what it creates after concentrated intervention.

2.2. From project sustainability and legacy to operational transition

Sustainability research asks whether programme benefits, organisational routines or community capacities persist after initial support. Shediak-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) distinguish among maintained benefits, institutionalisation and community capacity, and relate these outcomes to project design, organisational settings and wider environments. This framework remains useful because it prevents continuity from being reduced to the survival of a single visible output.

Event-legacy research asks what remains after an event and provides frameworks for identifying persistent structures and effects (Preuss, 2015). Although Preuss's framework was developed for mega sport events rather than rural art projects, its evaluative orientation helps clarify the contrast at issue here: a legacy inventory identifies residual outcomes, whereas the present study examines the work through which particular residues enter, or fail to enter, ordinary operation. Temporary-organisation theory begins elsewhere: projects are bracketed in time and organised around transition and termination (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). The end of concentrated project action therefore creates a handover problem. Actors, routines and resources that were assembled temporarily do not automatically become a durable local operating system.

Development ethnography further complicates a linear handover model. Mosse (2004) shows that policy success depends on the ongoing work through which actors maintain relationships and coherent representations of a project. Formal design and practical operation can diverge. For rural cultural interventions, the transition is not simply from an external project to local ownership. Assets may be accepted selectively, responsibilities may remain distributed, and rules may be revised through continuing interaction between local and extra-local actors.

Operational afterlife is proposed as a narrower concept within this terrain. Sustainability asks whether valued activities or benefits persist; legacy assessment identifies what remains; operational afterlife examines the practical selection, care and negotiation through which remaining assets and arrangements become usable, burdensome, altered or discontinued. It is therefore process-oriented rather than an outcome label. It also permits deliberate non-maintenance or repurposing to be analysed without automatically coding either as failure.

2.3. Maintenance, repair and distributed responsibility

Maintenance studies challenge the tendency to treat design and construction as decisive moments in the life of an object. Graham and Thrift (2007) argue that repair and maintenance reproduce social and technical order even though they are commonly backgrounded. Denis and Pontille (2015) similarly show that apparently stable designed things are continually sustained through situated care. Jackson (2014) describes repair as a productive site for understanding how order is restored and transformed, while Edensor (2011) demonstrates that a building remains stable only through ongoing relations among materials, environments, skills and replacement practices.

These perspectives matter for rural cultural interventions in two ways. First, maintenance is not simply a technical cost appended to design. It distributes time, attention, skill and responsibility. A landscaped site that requires regular watering has already organised a future labour relation. Second, breakdown and adjustment are diagnostic. They reveal dependencies that were less visible during construction: access to capital, an authorised person, locally available skill or a procedure for changing an arrangement.

The transfer from urban infrastructure and media technology to rural art projects must remain cautious. A lawn, homestay or village route is not equivalent to a metropolitan technical system. The useful commonality is more modest: material stability is an accomplishment rather than a permanent property. In rural revitalisation, that accomplishment is entangled with household resources, seasonal livelihoods, collective authority and mobile project networks.

2.4. Operational afterlife as a sensitising framework

The framework uses three sensitising processes. They guide comparison but are not treated as mechanisms already validated across villages.

The first is selective reuse. Intervention legacies may include renovated spaces, inherited houses, landscaped sites, public facilities and new place meanings. Reuse depends on access, ownership, condition, investment and a plausible everyday function. Selectivity may be a practical way to distinguish viable assets from liabilities rather than evidence that an entire intervention succeeded or failed.

The second is assigned care. Every maintained asset implies recurring work and an actor expected to perform it. Care may be planned, informally absorbed, retrofitted through technical change or left unresolved. The analytical question is whether care requirements become visible, resourced and legitimately assigned.

The third is revisable coordination. Rules concerning access, vending, fees, publicity or membership shape how residents and businesses can use intervention-generated opportunities. Alliances may reduce fragmentation, but their formal existence does not establish mature operation. Durable coordination also requires resources, feedback and a recognised way to revise rules.

These processes support three exploratory propositions: intervention legacies become usable through selective rather than automatic reuse; design discloses recurring care work that must be assigned; and durable coordination may depend on the capacity to evaluate and revise its rules. The analysis asks whether the eight selected episodes make these propositions plausible. It does not test their prevalence, causal strength or village-wide effects.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research design and unit of analysis

The study is a focused secondary qualitative analysis of eight operational episodes drawn from a broader doctoral fieldwork corpus. The unit of analysis is the episode

rather than the village or participant attitude. An episode is a bounded account in which an art- or design-linked asset, maintenance task or operating rule encounters a practical constraint, response or unresolved responsibility.

The geographical contexts are Xucun in Shanxi; Gejia and an unspecified surrounding-village network in Ninghai, Zhejiang; and Caijiapo and a neighbouring site within the Route 8 art-village network in Shaanxi. These are not treated as three equivalent cases. Xucun contributes three participant accounts concerning business continuity, property reuse and local financial constraints. Ninghai contributes one site-level maintenance discussion and one network-level retrospective comparison. Route 8 contributes two Caijiapo accounts concerning activity and access rules plus one neighbouring-site account of early coordination.

This design supports analytic comparison across different kinds of operational friction. It does not constitute a complete reanalysis of every interview in the doctoral corpus and does not claim corpus-level saturation, case representativeness or population coverage.

3.2. Episode identification and evidence eligibility

The candidate set was assembled from the project's source inventory by identifying episodes concerning reuse, maintenance, post-construction operation, access rules or follow-up coordination. Thirteen candidate segments were screened before the revised argument was drafted. An episode was eligible only when it: (1) concerned an identifiable operational issue linked to an art or design intervention; (2) could be located to an adequate participant role and place or network context; (3) had sufficiently stable wording for cautious paraphrase; (4) was independent of evidence used in a related manuscript from the same doctoral project; and (5) supported a bounded claim without relying on an unresolved speaker, date or interviewer-led inference.

Eight episodes were retained after source screening and clarification of the selected claims. One was held because chronology, speaker attribution and audio wording remained unresolved; four were rejected because they duplicated a previously used source event, concerned a different site or depended materially on interviewer framing. Held and rejected items were not interpreted as negative cases. Their exclusion indicates that the present article is an eligibility-bounded analysis rather than a comprehensive thematic account.

All eight retained episodes are paraphrased. For the two Xucun accounts of business continuity and village finances, the first author re-listened to the relevant audio passages and confirmed the speakers, their roles, the meaning of the replies and the interview date of 19 January 2025. Statements elicited through leading causal questions were excluded from the permitted interpretation. Unconfirmed wording, exact amounts, prevalence, institutional identities and implementation effects were omitted where the sources did not establish them.

3.3. Fieldwork context and temporal position

The accepted episodes were recorded between January and August 2025. Their temporal positions differ, which is analytically important. The Xucun material combines retrospective business accounts and reported current financial constraints with routine

use after a property conversion. The Ninghai material identifies maintenance during installation and retrospectively compares older interventions. The Route 8 material concerns festival-period activity and access rules alongside early coordination after project construction. The article therefore examines entry into operational afterlife, not a uniform post-project endpoint. Table 1 records the fieldwork date, temporal position, empirical role and permitted inference for every episode.

Table 1. Selected operational episodes, temporal positions and analytical boundaries

Evidence	Date and temporal position	Source role and context	Exploratory analytical use	Boundary
MJ-XC-001	19 January 2025; retrospective business account during a winter visit	Local shop operator in Xucun	Reported seasonal opening and fewer businesses in routine operation	No exact count, village-wide closure rate or causal attribution
MJ-XC-003	19 April 2025; routine use following property conversion; exact conversion date not established	Xucun homestay operator	Selective property reuse and conversion burden	No village-wide abandonment, counts or financial figures
MJ-XC-004	19 January 2025; current account of village finances	Xucun village committee member also engaged in shopkeeping	Reported lack of village income and difficulty paying for work	No audited finances, amounts, duration, funding dependence or specific follow-on activity claim
MJ-GJ-003	29 April 2025; turf newly installed and later care being anticipated	Discussion at a Gejia project site	Recurring turf care and a proposed labour-saving adjustment	No claim that a sprinkler was installed or successful
MJ-GJ-004	29 April 2025; retrospective account of older interventions	Observer comparing Gejia with unspecified surrounding Ninghai villages	Plausible gap between network expansion and locally embedded follow-up	No Gejia failure, named-site or regional prevalence claim
MJ-CJP-001	9 August 2025; festival-period rules rather than a post-festival outcome	One Caijiapo resident	Bounded account of roadside-vending restriction and a possible deposit	No village-wide system, amount, issuer or impact claim

Evidence	Date and temporal position	Source role and context	Exploratory analytical use	Boundary
MJ-CJP-002	10 August 2025; post-construction concern and early alliance formation	Operator at a neighbouring Route 8 site	Construction-operation gap and emerging coordination	No Caijiapo-specific generalisation or alliance-effectiveness claim
MJ-CJP-004	9 August 2025; festival-period comparison with earlier years unspecified	One local interlocutor in Caijiapo	Variable event intensity alongside continued village performance participation	No named comparison edition, trend, participation rate or strategic-retreat claim

Participants were recruited in two stages. Initial village participants were approached opportunistically during field visits, after which participants with direct experience of relevant projects or activities were located through participant referrals. The first author conducted the fieldwork and all interviews; his spouse accompanied and assisted visits in Caijiapo and several villages along Route 8. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin with regional dialect accents. The eight source recordings analysed here lasted approximately 15-128 minutes. iFlytek Speech-to-Text and Whisper were used to generate initial transcripts, which the first author checked and corrected against the recordings. All participants gave verbal informed consent before taking part in the interviews.

3.4. Analytical procedure and trustworthiness

Each eligible episode was coded across five fields: the asset or arrangement at issue; the recurring work or constraint; the affected actor; the response or proposed adaptation; and the unresolved boundary of the claim. Coding and comparison proceeded iteratively, with patterns developed and refined through repeated movement between individual episodes and the provisional cross-episode categories, consistent with the recursive character of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Yin (2018) informed the bounding of each episode as an analysable unit and the explicit separation of empirical support from contextual inference; it was not used to treat the three geographical contexts as complete or symmetrical cases. Maintenance and project-transition literatures sensitised the analysis to recurring work, temporality and responsibility, while the episodes directed attention to reuse decisions and operating rules.

The three propositions were developed after coding and were repeatedly checked against each episode's prohibited-claim boundary. They should be read as plausible analytical statements generated from a small evidence set, not as themes reaching saturation or mechanisms proven through causal process tracing. The analysis also preserves temporal counterweights: the Gejia turf episode is anticipatory, the Caijiapo vending episode is contemporaneous with a festival, and only some material is clearly post-construction or retrospective.

Trustworthiness rests on source-event independence, explicit inclusion criteria, stable evidence identifiers, visible limits on every claim and the exclusion of unreliable wording. A related manuscript audit removed two Gejia excerpts that mapped to an interview already used elsewhere. No direct participant quotation, numerical prevalence or causal-effect estimate is included.

The first author conducted the initial episode coding. The co-authors reviewed the resulting episode coding, evidence-to-claim matrix and manuscript interpretations. A source-linked evidence-and-code ledger was retained for audit purposes; it records the raw audio file, transcript, time locator, descriptive and process codes, analytical proposition and claim boundary for each accepted episode.

3.5. Ethics and data protection

The research received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee, Research Management Centre, Universiti Teknologi MARA (REC/09/2024; PG/MR/457) and was conducted under the approved protocol and applicable research ethics guidelines. All participants gave verbal informed consent before taking part in the interviews. Role-based evidence identifiers are used, no direct participant quotations are reproduced, and raw recordings and identifiable transcripts remain restricted.

4. Results

4.1. Proposition 1: intervention legacies become selectively reusable assets

A local shop operator in Xucun reported that farm stays opened seasonally and that fewer businesses remained in routine operation than at the outset. The first author confirmed these replies through audio re-listening. The respondent's uncertain numerical recollection and agreement with interviewer-proposed explanations were excluded. The account supports a reported change in routine operation, but does not establish a village-wide closure rate or show that the art festival, competition or declining visitor numbers caused that change (MJ-XC-001; Table 1).

The Xucun episode indicates that the operational value of a rural building cannot be inferred from its visibility within an art-village setting. A homestay operator described adapting a family property for accommodation and business use while referring to other inherited village properties as locked, deteriorating or costly to convert. The account supports neither a count nor a claim of village-wide abandonment. It makes a narrower process visible: one household asset entered routine use because an operator assembled access, investment and a business function, while other assets were described as harder to activate (MJ-XC-003; Table 1).

A village committee member in Xucun, who also participated in running a family shop, reported that the village lacked income and faced difficulties paying for work undertaken for it. This account identifies a perceived constraint on meeting ordinary financial obligations. It does not establish an audited financial position, the amount or duration of unpaid remuneration, or a shortfall specifically affecting proposed cultural activities. Its relevance to operational afterlife lies in the broader resource conditions within which continuing use and care must be organised, rather than in evidence that a particular follow-on project was prevented (MJ-XC-004; Table 1).

Together, the three Xucun accounts shift attention from the presence of buildings and businesses to their continuing operability. A house may carry heritage or aesthetic value but still require repair, utilities, permission, management and demand. A business may remain seasonal, while a village official may report difficulty meeting ordinary payment obligations. The latter account supplies financial context; it does not demonstrate that village finances caused a household to reuse or abandon a property. The evidence therefore makes plausible a proposition of selective reuse under differentiated operating and resource conditions. It does not establish whether selection was collectively planned, economically successful or representative of Xucun.

Selective reuse complicates a simple success-failure interpretation. An unused property does not by itself demonstrate that a wider intervention failed, just as one operating homestay does not establish general revitalisation. The accounts suggest that project residues and associated businesses can acquire different operational trajectories at household and village levels.

4.2. Proposition 2: design discloses recurring care work

At a Gejia project site, participants discussed the maintenance implications of newly laid turf. They identified recurring watering and trimming needs and considered adding a sprinkler to reduce manual watering. The recording positions the sprinkler as a possible later addition rather than an implemented solution. It captures maintenance being anticipated soon after installation, not a verified post-project improvement (MJ-GJ-003; Table 1).

The episode is small but analytically useful. Turf initially appears as a design element; once installed, it also becomes a schedule of care. Continued appearance depends on water, tools, time and an actor able to respond when grass dries or grows. The proposed sprinkler acknowledges the labour demand but cannot by itself settle who will acquire, install, operate and repair the device or decide whether the turf remains worth maintaining.

A second Ninghai episode extends the question from one site to a surrounding-village network. An observer reported that some older interventions outside Gejia had become worn and received little maintenance, contrasting those conditions with Gejia and arguing for continuing follow-up. Because the villages and installations were not identified, the account cannot establish prevalence or attribute a failure to Gejia. It provides only a bounded retrospective indication that extending intervention across sites may be easier than reproducing locally embedded follow-up (MJ-GJ-004; Table 1).

Read together, the two Ninghai episodes support an exploratory assigned-care proposition. The first shows future maintenance becoming visible at installation; the second points retrospectively to the consequences of thin follow-up elsewhere. Neither establishes who ultimately performed care or whether a specific maintenance arrangement succeeded.

4.3. Proposition 3: coordination precedes durable and revisable operation

The Route 8 episodes show operational transition in event activity, rules and organisation. During the 2025 festival period, one local Caijiapo interlocutor reported fewer activities than in unspecified previous years while also describing village

residents participating in performances. The statement does not identify the earlier editions, quantify participation or establish a downward trend. It separates variation in event intensity from the continued presence of some local participation (MJ-CJP-004; Table 1).

One Caijiapo resident reported that roadside vending during the festival period was restricted and that selling within an authorised arrangement could involve a deposit. The account does not identify the rule-maker, recipient, amount or village-wide coverage. It supports only a bounded observation of governance friction experienced or observed by one resident (MJ-CJP-001; Table 1).

Spatial ordering may address congestion, safety or visitor experience, but it can also change the threshold at which residents turn event attention into small commercial opportunities. That general implication is an analytical inference, not proof that a Caijiapo-wide system excluded residents. The episode identifies a question for rule evaluation: whose access is made easier or harder by an operating arrangement?

A neighbouring Route 8 operator offered a different perspective. The operator distinguished completed government-backed projects from what was perceived as weak subsequent operation and described a Route 8 industry alliance already formed to coordinate opt-in activities and shared promotion. The account also indicated that fee collection had not begun. It therefore establishes neither alliance effectiveness nor a Caijiapo-specific operating condition (MJ-CJP-002; Table 1).

Together, the three episodes make a distinction between continuing activity, coordination and durable operation plausible. Residents may still participate when activity is reported as less extensive than in earlier years. Rules can order activity, and an alliance can create a platform for communication, before either arrangement has demonstrated stable resources, accepted membership value, accountability or feedback. Revisability is consequently proposed as a criterion for later investigation rather than reported as an achieved outcome.

4.4. Cross-context synthesis

Across the eight episodes, entry into operational afterlife appears as a set of practical questions rather than a uniform decline after a festival. Which businesses remain in routine operation? Which inherited assets can be converted and financed? What recurring work follows a design choice? Who retains responsibility when projects extend across sites? How do changing activity and operating rules distribute participation and access? When does an alliance progress from formation to durable coordination?

The evidence supports further investigation of three propositions: reuse is selective, care requires an assignment of responsibility, and durable coordination may depend on opportunities for rule evaluation and revision. The episodes do not demonstrate that the propositions operate together, determine project outcomes or occur widely across the three regions. Their contribution is to specify processes and evidence needs for a more systematic longitudinal study.

5. Discussion

5.1. Operational afterlife as a transition rather than an outcome

Operational afterlife makes a temporal and analytical distinction. Sustainability research asks whether benefits, routines or capacities persist (Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). Event-legacy assessment provides a structured way to identify what remains and with what effects (Preuss, 2015). Operational afterlife asks how actors deal with remaining assets and arrangements as concentrated project attention recedes. The eight episodes suggest that continuation is only one possible trajectory; seasonal operation, reuse, financial constraints, redesign, consolidation and non-maintenance also require analysis.

This approach connects temporary-organisation and development-practice perspectives. A project can mobilise action within a bounded period without producing a permanent operating organisation (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Formal programme models also remain dependent on continuing relational work in practice (Mosse, 2004). The operational-afterlife lens therefore focuses on handover without presuming a clean transfer from external initiators to a unified local community.

The temporal qualification matters. Not every episode is post-project. The Gejia turf discussion anticipates future maintenance, and the Caijiapo account concerns festival-period rules. These episodes reveal an operational afterlife prospectively: demands of ordinary care or access become visible before an event or intervention has fully receded. The article consequently concerns entry into an afterlife, not a completed longitudinal assessment of one.

5.2. Selective reuse and the limits of preservation

The Xucun accounts suggest that preservation is an inadequate default measure of success. Rural creative-economy research emphasises place-specific capacities and infrastructures (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Roberts & Townsend, 2016), while adaptive local responses are central to neo-endogenous revitalisation (Qu & Zollet, 2023). Selective reuse adds connected business, property and resource questions: which visible or inherited assets can acquire an everyday function, which operations persist beyond seasonal peaks, and how do ordinary financial obligations constrain the resources available for continuing use and care?

This is not an argument for neglect. It is a proposition that operational capacity may include legitimate decisions to repurpose, consolidate or discontinue some outputs rather than promising indefinite activation of everything produced. The present evidence cannot show whether such decisions in Xucun were legitimate or collective. It identifies convertibility as a dimension that future comparison should document through ownership records, operator trajectories and repeated observation.

5.3. Maintenance as distributed responsibility

The Ninghai episodes are consistent with maintenance scholarship's insistence that material stability is continuously accomplished (Denis & Pontille, 2015; Edensor, 2011; Graham & Thrift, 2007; Jackson, 2014). They also suggest a rural governance question. Watering turf or following up on installations allocates work among project actors, households, village organisations and mobile professional networks.

The sprinkler discussion cautions against technological solutionism. A device may reduce manual watering while adding acquisition, operation and repair requirements. Technical adaptation shifts the configuration of care rather than eliminating it. Whether the shift is viable depends on authority, resources and skill that the present episode does not document.

For practice, the proposition points toward task-and-responsibility mapping before installation and review after a period of use. Such measures are recommendations derived from the analytical framework, not interventions evaluated by this study. Longitudinal evidence would be needed to determine whether they reduce burden or improve durability.

5.4. Revisable coordination and local access

Festival and public-art research cautions against equating visibility with locally valued outcomes (Potter et al., 2024; Quinn, 2005). East Asian rural-art research likewise shows that sustainable revitalisation depends on locally embedded relations and that art is experienced through everyday rural practices (Leung & Thorsen, 2022; Qu & Cheer, 2021). The Route 8 material adds a limited governance perspective. One account indicates that a less extensive programme can coexist with resident performance participation. A vending rule can organise visitor space while raising questions about access costs, and an alliance can connect sites while still lacking evidence of routine operation.

Coordination is therefore treated as an intermediate achievement. In networked rural development, external and state actors can connect sites and resources (Lang et al., 2024; Xin & Gallent, 2024), but formal connection does not show that arrangements are accepted, adequately resourced or capable of learning. Future research should investigate revisability through meeting records, membership decisions, fee practices and accounts from residents differently positioned relative to visitor routes.

5.5. Implications and limitations

The propositions identify three practical questions for project appraisal. First, what is the credible everyday function, operator and exit option for each asset? Second, what recurring labour and cost are built into a design, and who has authority to alter it? Third, how will affected residents and operators evaluate and revise access or coordination rules? These questions shift attention from preserving visible outputs to creating accountable choices around use, care and discontinuation.

The evidentiary limits are substantial. The study analyses eight episodes from an uneven corpus and does not establish saturation, prevalence or causal effects. Xucun is represented by three participant accounts rather than operating records or audited collective accounts. Audio re-listening resolved speaker attribution and wording for the two January interviews, but does not independently corroborate the reported business contraction or payment difficulties. Those accounts cannot establish a causal link between festival activity, village finances and business outcomes. The Gejia site discussion captures anticipation rather than an outcome, and the surrounding-village comparison does not identify the sites observed. The Caijiapo material does not identify earlier festival editions, quantify participation or resolve the rule-maker and deposit

details, while the alliance account comes from a neighbouring operator. No direct quotations are used, and the analysis cannot determine whether proposed adaptations were implemented or effective.

The eligibility protocol reduces false precision but cannot substitute for triangulation. Future research should combine repeated interviews, field observation, project documentation, maintenance budgets, ownership records and alliance records. It should include non-operators, off-route households, maintenance workers and residents who choose not to participate. Such a design could test whether selective reuse, assigned care and revisable coordination interact as mechanisms rather than merely appearing as plausible propositions in separate episodes.

6. Conclusion

Art-led rural revitalisation does not move automatically from visible intervention to ordinary operation. Its assets and arrangements encounter questions of business continuity, conversion, financial capacity, care, access and coordination. A focused analysis of eight selected episodes makes three exploratory propositions plausible: reuse is selective rather than automatic; design discloses recurring care work that must be assigned; and durable coordination may depend on the capacity to evaluate its resources and revise its rules.

The article's contribution is not a judgement that the villages succeeded or failed. It is a process-oriented distinction between what an intervention leaves behind and how those residues become usable, burdensome, altered or discontinued. Operational afterlife names this transitional field of work. Longitudinal and multi-source research is required before the three propositions can be treated as mechanisms or used to explain broader project outcomes.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The research received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee, Research Management Centre, Universiti Teknologi MARA (REC/09/2024; PG/MR/457) and was conducted under the approved protocol and applicable research ethics guidelines. All participants gave verbal informed consent before taking part in the interviews. Role-based identifiers are used, and no direct participant quotations are reproduced.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank the first author's spouse for assistance during fieldwork in Caijiapo and villages along Route 8 in Shaanxi Province.

Funding

No specific funding was received for this work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The interview recordings, transcripts and detailed coding records are not publicly available because they contain confidential human-participant information and are subject to the conditions of the ethics approval and consent process.

Use of Generative AI

Automated speech-recognition tools, including iFlytek Speech-to-Text and Whisper, were used to generate initial interview transcripts; the first author checked and corrected the transcripts against the recordings. OpenAI ChatGPT and Codex assisted with evidence organisation, alternative conceptual framing, manuscript restructuring, language editing, document preparation and source checking. The authors reviewed the evidence selection, coding, interpretations and final text and take full responsibility for the manuscript. No AI tool is credited as an author; responsibility for all evidence-selection decisions and interpretations rests with the authors.

References

- Anwar McHenry, J. (2011). Rural empowerment through the arts: The role of the arts in civic and social participation in the Mid West region of Western Australia. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 27(3), 245-253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2011.03.001>
- Balfour, B., Fortunato, M. W.-P., & Alter, T. R. (2018). The creative fire: An interactional framework for rural arts-based development. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 63, 229-239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.11.002>
- Bell, D., & Jayne, M. (2010). The creative countryside: Policy and practice in the UK rural cultural economy. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 26(3), 209-218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2010.01.001>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Denis, J., & Pontille, D. (2015). Material ordering and the care of things. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 40(3), 338-367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243914553129>
- Edensor, T. (2011). Entangled agencies, material networks and repair in a building assemblage: The mutable stone of St Ann's Church, Manchester. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36(2), 238-252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2010.00421.x>
- Graham, S., & Thrift, N. (2007). Out of order: Understanding repair and maintenance. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24(3), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075954>
- Jackson, S. J. (2014). Rethinking repair. In T. Gillespie, P. J. Boczkowski, & K. A. Foot (Eds.), *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society* (pp. 221-240). MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9042.003.0015>
- Lang, W., Gkartzios, M., Yan, J., Chen, T., & Tan, S. (2024). Community co-creation through knowledge (co)production: The engagement of universities in promoting rural revitalization in China. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 112, Article 103455. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103455>

- Leung, K. Y., & Thorsen, L. M. (2022). Experiencing art from a field of rice: How farmers relate to rural revitalisation and art at Japan's Echigo-Tsumari Art Festival. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 62(3), 611-631. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12379>
- Lundin, R. A., & Söderholm, A. (1995). A theory of the temporary organization. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 11(4), 437-455. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0956-5221\(95\)00036-U](https://doi.org/10.1016/0956-5221(95)00036-U)
- Mosse, D. (2004). Is good policy unimplementable? Reflections on the ethnography of aid policy and practice. *Development and Change*, 35(4), 639-671. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0012-155X.2004.00374.x>
- Potter, E., Johanson, K., & Molan, D. (2024). Activating rural infrastructures in regional communities: Cultural funding, silo art works and the challenge of local benefit. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 106, Article 103239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103239>
- Preuss, H. (2015). A framework for identifying the legacies of a mega sport event. *Leisure Studies*, 34(6), 643-664. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.994552>
- Qu, M., & Cheer, J. M. (2021). Community art festivals and sustainable rural revitalisation. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(11-12), 1756-1775. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1856858>
- Qu, M., & Zollet, S. (2023). Neo-endogenous revitalisation: Enhancing community resilience through art tourism and rural entrepreneurship. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 97, 105-114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.11.016>
- Quinn, B. (2005). Arts festivals and the city. *Urban Studies*, 42(5-6), 927-943. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980500107250>
- Roberts, E., & Townsend, L. (2016). The contribution of the creative economy to the resilience of rural communities: Exploring cultural and digital capital. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 56(2), 197-219. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12075>
- Shediac-Rizkallah, M. C., & Bone, L. R. (1998). Planning for the sustainability of community-based health programs: Conceptual frameworks and future directions for research, practice and policy. *Health Education Research*, 13(1), 87-108. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/13.1.87>
- Wang, W., Bryan-Kinns, N., & Ji, T. (2016). Using community engagement to drive co-creation in rural China. *International Journal of Design*, 10(1), 37-52. <https://www.ijdesign.org/index.php/IJDesign/article/view/2458>
- Xin, S., & Gallent, N. (2024). Conceptualising 'neo-exogenous development': The active party-state and activated communities in Chinese rural governance and development. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 109, Article 103306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103306>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.