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Jointly Creating Sustainable Rural Communities through Participatory Planning: A Case Study of Fengqing County, China

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Abstract: Rural communities have long been overlooked since globalization and urbanization struck traditional rural values. Building a sustainable rural community has become a contested issue in academia, especially after implementing the Rural Revival Strategy. This research attempted to establish a participatory planning approach, which considers rural planners as the external impetus and local villagers as an internal driving force, to promote the sustainability of rural communities. Carrying on the theoretical framework of public participation, the researchers carried out a pilot practice in Hongtang Village, Yunan Province, China, where planners tried to reestablish the social relationship in a village by designing and building a rural yard. We do not solely finish the design, but also advocate, communicate, and work with villagers to activate the vitality of the village. The research argues that the focus of rural planning and construction in China is to develop a participatory planning approach, which is human-oriented and place-based. Planners, acting as an external impetus, advocate public participation in the whole planning process, including mapping, designing, constructing, and managing. We try to empower villagers themselves rather than impose. During this participatory planning process, villagers improve the quality of their settlements through continuous dialogue and cooperation, and the social relationships among them become enhanced. Thus, rural communities are restructuring in both environmental and social dimensions to promote rural sustainability. Additionally, participatory planning in rural areas is constantly correcting itself to be more local, scientific, and rational and become a more powerful protector and promoter of public interests in this process.

Keywords: rural built environment; sustainable urban-rural development; rural landscape design; participatory planning



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1. Introduction

From the perspective of urban planning, the concept of “rural” and “urban” are seen as opposites. Since the promotion of the industrial revolution and urbanization around the world, urban areas have been considered as great “growth poles” and “centers” in development and thus grasp huge attention, while the rural areas, in turn, are regarded as “periphery” and seriously overlooked [1–3]. As a result, rural areas are deprived of goods, capital, labor, culture, et al., due to the rapid sprawl of urban areas and invasion of urban values. Such ‘backwash’ effects have created increased inequality between urban and rural areas [4]. As a result, various rural issues have emerged, such as rural out-migration, rural depopulation and exodus, rural poverty, industrial recession, culture decline, etc. [5–10].

Rural decline, inevitably accompanied by globalization and urbanization [11], has become a global issue and drives concerns from government, academia, and society. In 1992, the United Nations adopted “Agenda 21”, emphasizing that “The overall human settlement objective is to improve the social, economic and environmental quality of

human settlements and the living and working environments of all people, in particular the urban and rural poor. Such improvement should be based on technical cooperation activities, partnerships among the public, private and community sectors and participation in the decision-making process by community groups and special interest groups such as women, indigenous people, the elderly and the disabled" [12]. Therefore, more and more planners are shifting their focus to rural planning, exploring a stable path to maintain rural sustainability with diminishing rural capital. However, hotly debated topics include how to improve the quality of human settlements in rural areas, realize the people's demand for a better life, and achieve sustainable development. Therefore, planners should promote public participation to interact organically in the rural planning process.

China is a country with a large population based on agriculture since ancient times. However, due to globalization, industrialization, and urbanization, the traditional Chinese rural community structure has been severely destroyed, showing a hollowing, aging, and marginalizing trend. Rural communities present a decline demographically, economically, and culturally [13]. In 2021, China's demographic urbanization rate reached 64.72%, with 914,250,000 permanent urban residents and 498,350,000 rural residents. The per capita disposable income of urban residents was CNY 47,412, almost 2.6 times more than that of rural residents (CNY 18,931). The urban Engel's coefficient was 28.6%, while the rural one reached 32.7% [14]. Additionally, the rural physical environment is largely comprised of empty farmhouses, abandoned land, and a rural ecosystem affected greatly by humans [15,16].

Since 1982, 24 central documents have been issued by the Chinese government focusing on agriculture, rural areas, and rural people. In 2017, the Chinese government formally proposed the implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, calling for a comprehensive rural community regeneration among the industrial, environmental, institutional, cultural, and local elite. Therefore, how to promote rural planning, construction, and development comes into the discussion. Chinese researchers have conducted wide research concerning urban–rural integration, rural transition, rural restructuring, rural revitalization, etc. [17–20]. Research on "rural farmhouses" and "rural land use transition" are most often discussed [21–23]. However, planning practices seem to be separated from theoretical thoughts. The up-down planning system and planners' lack of local knowledge have led to a formulaic, superficial rural planning, which cannot obviously meet the diverse demand of rural communities and villagers. Moreover, the present process of rural planning is more of a "blood-transfusion", costing a huge amount of materials, money, and labor without leaving a lasting effect. Thus, we call for a shift of rural planning—participatory rural planning.

The previous government-led, top-down planning model shackles villagers' awareness and ability to participate in planning, construction, and governance. Hence, it is difficult for rural areas to break through the development dilemma by sole internal or external power. Instead, an internal–external combined path is suggested. In this context, participatory rural planning tends to be the interaction, communication, and negotiation process between the government, rural organizations, villagers, and other stakeholders concerned, instead of mere physical construction. The priority of rural participatory planning is to retrieve the traditional collectivism in rural communities and cultivate the self-organization ability of the villagers to realize rural community sustainability. Planners should also act as advocates, mediators, coordinators, and guides rather than traditional authoritative professionals [24].

This article's objective is to establish an internal–external combined mechanism of rural participatory planning with the government, planners, rural organizations, and villagers involved. In such a process, planners are supposed to act as advocates and mediators in order to ensure all the villagers are heard, informed, and interact with the rural planning and construction. Moreover, we attempt to recreate rural social cohesion and reshape the rural social structure as all the villagers participate in all the rural planning and construction to share common goals and take common actions. This paper is organized into six sections, including this introduction. The following section (Section 2) includes a

literature review of participatory planning and public participation, serving as the basis of the theoretical framework. Then, we discuss how planning empowers villagers and raises public participation to maintain rural self-governance and sustainability in Section 3. Section 4 presents an empirical study in Hongtang Village, China. The practice was carried out by the research team and funded by their affiliated university (the University from hereafter). This attempt aims to improve the physical environment and reconstruct the rural social structure by building rural yards under participatory planning. Finally, suggestions are put forward for rural planning and sustainable rural communities in Sections 5 and 6.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Participatory Planning

In modern urban planning, rationalism was once widely adopted. Meyerson and Banfield first proposed the concept of “rational” planning in “Politics, Planning and the Public Interest”, arguing that planning is a series of rationally chosen behaviors to maximize the effectiveness of results [25]. From the instrumental rationality perspective, urban planning is considered a means to achieve urban development goals, strictly separated from social, economic, and cultural prospects. Urban planners consider themselves the manipulators and managers of the urban system, and cities are demolished, constructed, and rebuilt under experts’ will.

Meanwhile, in the 1960s, the civil rights movement in Western countries was on the rise. The traditional top-down rational planning was questioned by the public and criticized by scholars. Whether planners were “rational” spokespersons was widely discussed. Habermas put forward the view of “communicative rationality” as a sublation. He believed that the potential for certain kinds of reason is inherent in communication. According to Habermas, the phenomena that needed to be accounted for by the theory are the “intuitively mastered rules for reaching an understanding and conducting argumentation” possessed by stakeholders who are capable of speech and action [26]. The planning thought trend since the late 1980s formed the so-called “Communicative Turn” in planning theory and implications [27,28]. Weber pointed out that society is not a logical structure designed by engineers but consists of logical and illogical elements and their interaction [29]. Following the shifting thoughts noted above, there was rising interest in engaging multiple stakeholders in the planning process. Davidoff first mentioned public participation in planning in 1965. He claims that planners are supposed to plead their cases to the public and ballot on comprehensive plans [30]. In the 1970s, neoliberalism and communalism theoretically reconstructed the relationship between the government, the market, and civil society, emphasizing the importance of public participation. In this context, participatory planning presents two dominant models: the communicative/collaborative model and the radical/insurgent model [31].

Collaborative/communicative planning argues that planners should act as a “knowledge mediator and broker” and engage all the stakeholders affected by the process’s outcome to make decisions and take actions together under consensus [32]. Throughout this process, solutions to conflicts amongst stakeholders may be re-framed as a ‘win-win’ rather than a ‘zero sum’ mindset, which occurs when stakeholders are bargaining based on their own fixed interests [33,34]. Hence, the key point is to build consensus, which requires long-term skill and training [35]. Radical/insurgent planning emphasizes the empowerment of marginated groups. Stephen Grabow and Allen Heskin critiqued planning as elitist, centralizing, and change-resistant and proposed a new paradigm based upon systems change, decentralization, communal society, facilitation of human development, and consideration of ecology [36]. In 1987, John Friedmann promoted a radical planning model based on “decolonization,” “democratization,” “self-empowerment,” and “reaching out” [37]. He concluded that “the engineering model of planning . . . (is) no longer valid and must be abandoned,” advocating decentralizing planning [38].

Therefore, participatory planning claims a role shift of planners. Sandercock argues that the presence of an individual planner in a local place is insufficient to support a

more sustainable community. Rather, she finds that planners, politicians, residents, and community organizations, and combinations of these, act together for urban planning and management [39,40]. The role of planners is considered as advocates, facilitators, mediators, and activists in the Western context [30,41–43], which means that professional planners should hear, inform, and respond to the common public interest and mediate among various stakeholders in planning. Furthermore, a corporation with governments and community organizations is needed. In the Western context, planning has transformed from solely physical environment construction to community regeneration in multiple dimensions, including the physical environment, economy, and society [44].

2.2. Public Participation

Public participation is critical to participatory planning and necessary for building sustainable rural communities. Patrick Geddes first advocated for the “real and active participation” of citizens, arguing that the up-down government would cause “detachment from public and popular feeling, and consequently, before long, from public and popular needs and usefulness” [45]. In 1969, Arnstein established a participatory planning paradigm public participation ladder model, dividing public participation into eight levels: (1) Manipulation, (2) Therapy, (3) Informing, (4) Consultation, (5) Placation, (6) Partnership (7) Delegated Power, and (8) Citizen Control. It is pointed out that the key to public participation is to empower the public in the decision-making process through power redistribution [46]. In this sense, who the participants are, how they interact socially, and how they engage in participatory practices together are critical to the acquisition of civil rights [47]. Hence, rural planners should condense the consensus of a rural community, advocate for villagers to participate in rural regeneration, and guide them to take common actions to achieve their shared goals. In this context, a sustainable rural community should be under the process of bottom-up participatory planning, which needs improvement on villagers’ participation level and a sustainable internal driving force.

Public participation in rural planning requires the construction of orderly social organizations. The structure of the current rural society in China is loose and disordered due to the widespread urban values [44,48]. To solve social conflicts, most secure resolutions come from face-to-face contact, so continuity and commitment to dialogue are necessary [49]. Planners must awaken traditional rural collectivism, create a sense of rural community, and call for joint action among multiple stakeholders.

2.3. Rural Planning and Rural Landscape Design

With the rural issues noticed in Section 1, governments and planners have made efforts to build sustainable communities. Wilkinson argued that a rural community of place consists of three elements, a locality, a local society, and a community field. He claimed that the interaction between social fields links agriculture, education, health, and so on into a holistic understanding of “the local community” that residents live in, have meanings about, and interact in [50]. Reimer pointed out that a network among individuals, families, and organizations is crucial to promote rural development effectively. Networks were grouped into four types: market networks, bureaucratic networks, volunteer group networks, and family networks [51,52]. To achieve any given objective, different types of networks perform differently. However, when one network failed to perform, the other networks did not act as (good) substitutes. Hence, a wider informal social contact is critical [53]. McManus pointed out that rural resilience results from people’s perceptions of the physical environment, their sense of belonging, and job opportunities; rural planning should be based on economic, social, and environmental dimensions [9].

Governments have thus implemented diverse planning policies. The Rural Action Plan, adopted with the Long-term Vision for the EU’s rural areas, represents the European Commission’s commitment to acting for rural areas. One of its actions is to propose a Rural Pact which aims to strengthen the multi-level governance (European, national, regional, and local) of the EU’s rural areas [54], with an emphasis on collaboration and mutual

learning. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has suggested there is a new rural paradigm driving rural development policy [55], arguing that rural development policy should shift from a sector-focused approach to a place-based approach [56]. Variation within a group of rural communities is noticed, so planners should examine certain communities and take specific actions flexibly.

It is worth noting that the LEADER Program in the European Union provides a good example of endogenous rural development. It emphasizes a bottom-up participatory approach to development and focuses on developing the skills, cooperation, and awareness of local villagers, with the aim of closing development gaps, improving the quality of life, and achieving sustainable development in rural communities. This program provides great inspiration for the endogenous development of Chinese villages [57]. In addition, Britain regarded key settlement policies as a panacea for the ills existing in all types of rural areas by implementing rural planning systems such as development plans, and later, structure plans to solve the problems of rural out-migration and infrastructure shortcomings since the 1950s [58]. Australia has put forward a series of policy bases for promoting rural development, using concepts such as “social capital”, “community development”, and “community building” [59]. Canada’s rural policy emphasizes the importance of human capital and social capital [60–62]. After World War II, Japan started a rural revival movement (*mura okoshi undo*) in which municipal authorities encouraged rural self-reliance. Villages drew on their inner resources to survive a large-scale demographic and economic decline, and many of the villagers involved in the movement were return migrants [63]. In addition, agricultural support plans and rural environmental protection acts are widely implemented to promote rural restructuring.

In the landscape design of rural planning, the construction of rural community gardens can be regarded as a participatory planning method. Community gardens are the result and source of social capital. In the planning process, community gardens generate social capital by bringing people together with a common purpose to participate in a common activity. The joint effort creates a strong sense of collective ownership and pride. Community gardens are also mutually beneficial, as those who contribute may learn new skills and expand their social networks [64]. A study of East Harlem Community Gardens in New York City showed that community gardens effectively enhanced participants’ local attachment to the community as the garden has a strong social and cultural significance for the participants. A high degree of autonomy and democratic processes for decision-making emerged among the participants [65]. However, the current research on community gardens focuses on cities, and the knowledge, resources, and research on rural community gardens are relatively lacking. A survey of rural towns in Australia showed that participation in rural community gardens can also build social support networks to foster social capital [66]. Chinese community gardens are rooted in people’s love for nature and longing for pastoral life nurtured by Chinese traditional farming culture. They are the pursuit of the Chinese memory of nature and nostalgia as well as the recognition and return of tradition. Thus, the building of rural community gardens can be regarded as one of the participatory planning methods for rural development and social capital can be generated through joint participation to improve the rural living environment as well as community social relations.

China’s rural policy is changing along with the urbanization process. Urban–rural coordinated development, new countryside construction, and new-type urbanization are subsequently implemented to solve rural issues and narrow the urban–rural gap [23]. However, these strategies still give priority and preference to urban development, so rural issues remain unsolved. In 2017, the Chinese government launched the Rural Revitalization Strategy, focusing on rural modernization and sustainability. The main topic of China’s rural study and planning was how to promote rural revitalization and maintain rural sustainability. The first question was what the revitalized rural communities should actually be? In the Western context, “counter urbanization” appears ubiquitous and rural idylls were considered to be a vision of a good place to live, something which rural

inhabitants and ‘armchair urban residents’ aspire to [67]. Meanwhile, researchers such as Halfacree argued that the rural idyll is a visioning of rural areas by a hegemonic middle-class culture imposed on rural residents [68]. Therefore, what the ideal rural areas should actually be like is under discussion. In this research, we believe that the vision of rural communities is established by villagers themselves, fundamentally reaching their demand for a better life in both environmental and social dimensions, and will be achieved through participatory planning.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Role of Planning Professionals

In the 1880s and 1890s, Sager and Innes proposed “Communicative Planning,” emphasizing that planners are not only technical consultants and spokespersons for the client in the planning process but need to change the traditional way of providing technical advice and decision-making information to an interactive way of participating in decision making and promoting multilateral cooperation between the government, the public, the developers, and the planners [69]. The current domestic and international practice also shows that the essence of village planning should be new community planning based on public participation. Correspondingly, in rural planning, the planner acts as a direct “blue printer” [70]. The roles should be changed from traditional authoritative professionals to planning organizers, coordinators, and guides, playing the role of connecting multiple stakeholders such as the government, the public, communities, and community organizations. The intervention of planning professionals such as expert teams and universities will also establish an interactive relationship with villagers in the process of knowledge production and local practice and promote the improvement of the villagers’ ability to participate in self-governance [71].

Specifically, the promotion effect of the planning professionals on the improvement of villagers’ participation ability is mainly divided into three aspects: concept cognition, knowledge interaction, and behavioral practice [72]. On the one hand, conceptual cognition is an important basis for villagers’ ability to participate, which is embodied in the villagers’ understanding and attitude towards themselves and the development of the village. In this process, the planning professionals usually integrate the interests and demands of different stakeholders by means of various methods, such as convening villagers’ councils and household interviews, displaying planning concepts, construction plans, and construction results, and building a platform for villagers to understand, participate, discuss and communicate, and negotiate the vision of the village with the villagers. In turn, it will improve the mental outlook of the villagers, mobilize their enthusiasm for the future development of themselves and the village, and also promote the transformation of planning from the way of the “education” and “persuasion” of farmers to the way of “interaction and cooperation” [44]. In turn, the knowledge interaction brought by the planning team improves the villagers’ ability to communicate, express, and solve problems. Local knowledge constitutes the internal environment of rural governance [73], which is established in a certain practical and empirical sense. Its openness provides a broad space for cultural reference and dialogue.

In this way, the presence and interaction of the planning professionals update local knowledge and traditional culture. One method is to increase the villagers’ planning-related skills and to explain the design knowledge to the villagers through the combination of online and onsite methods such as sharing sessions, demonstration boards, and webcasting. Another is to improve villagers’ own communication and expression skills through real-time discussions with them. With the advancement of technology, the application and popularity of new Internet media also provide more efficient channels for public participation, such as establishing online work groups and building a platform for continuous communication throughout the project. Ultimately, the cultivation of villagers’ awareness and ability to participate in self-governance is positively influenced by the planning team during the actual construction process. Planning itself is actually a practical activity of

mutual influence and learning among participants, involving joint participation in common action in the form of space [32,74].

The planning team promotes the effective transmission of ideas and technologies, and the villagers' thinking and behavior change subtly. The ability to participate is reflected in this process, and finally solves public affairs and other village development issues. In general, as an external force, planning professionals should not only carry out common practices in the rural community, but also play an exemplary role, stimulating the enthusiasm of villagers to build their hometowns, activating the internal power of rural revitalization, and encouraging villagers to take actions towards the common goal of rural revitalization. They should also carry out professional guidance, strengthen technical support, improve the ability of villagers to build their hometowns, and ensure the sustainability of rural construction and governance [75].

3.2. Villagers Participating in Self-Governance

Since the Reform and Opening-up, China's rural governance structure has changed [76]. The implementation of the "household responsibility system" allows the governance power to return to the rural community itself. The subsequent enactment of a series of laws and regulations has provided corresponding guarantees for public participation in village governance. However, current practice shows that rural planning and construction present low initiative and enthusiasm for public participation [77]. On the one hand, bound by the traditional top-down planning model [78] and concept, villagers have not realized the importance of participating in governance yet; on the other hand, the industrial civilization brought about by globalization and urbanization [79] has had a certain impact on traditional rural community values. As cities, considered to have a higher income and greater development opportunities, attract people to "vote with their feet", rural labor continues to flow out, and rural areas appear hollow and aging [80], leading to poor public participation in rural governance.

Based on this, the key to promoting public participation in sustainable rural community construction is to ensure the core status of the villagers. External organizations represented by the planning team should take actions such as building a platform for villagers to participate in the construction and development of rural communities, expanding channels for villagers to fully communicate with the government, enterprises, and other stakeholders [81], and paying attention to the wishes and needs of villagers.

In this process, the villagers' sense of self-governance and identity becomes built up, their ability to participate is greatly enhanced, and at the same time, positive feedback is given to the planning professionals throughout the construction process. In particular, in the early stage of planning, the villagers' expression of the village development vision is decided and the generation of the planning scheme is continued and supported; during the construction and implementation process, the villagers received professional knowledge from the planning team on the one hand, while their own perceptions and actions represented the complex traditional cultural epitome accumulated in the countryside for thousands of years on the other hand. The interaction between professional knowledge and local knowledge [82] promotes the formation of planning and design that are both vernacular and artistic. In the later stages of construction, also based on the awakening of villagers' sense of ownership, villagers and the planning team usually discuss the formation of a corresponding supervision and management mechanism to promote the sustainable development of the countryside.

3.3. Participatory Planning Framework

The research question in this paper focuses on how to build an interactive platform between planning experts and villagers through participatory planning, thereby awakening villagers' awareness and enhancing their capacity for self-governance, and ultimately achieving the sustainable development of rural communities. The connection between the planning professionals and the villagers shows that the development of village planning has

gradually shifted from symbolic participation to cooperative, interactive, and substantive participation, with people changing their elite consciousness and expectation of results and shifting their focus to the formation of a full expression of all interest groups and their participation in the whole process of construction. The “bottom-up” force makes the planning more local and scientific, and the participation process also improves the village’s self-organizing ability. However, in the existing practice process, it has been found that there is a weak awareness of villagers’ self-governance and a lack of interaction between different stakeholders in the Chinese countryside. Therefore, it is important to discover and answer the above research questions for sustainable rural development. Only when the villagers and the planning team work together to solve problems and take action will the villages become responsive [83].

Based on this, by building a methodological framework for participatory planning (Figure 1), we take the improvement of the rural landscape as the main focus and organize stakeholders, such as the government, villagers, and planning teams, to build a rural spatial order. As the main body of village governance, villagers participate in the planning, design, construction, and management throughout the whole process. Under the guidance and promotion of the planning team, they independently improve rural social relations. As a result, the endogenous power of rural community governance is activated, and a long-term mechanism is built. It can be considered that this is a process of empowerment and blood-building, which is fundamentally different from the previous rounds of the blood transfusion-based rural planning and construction model, and can more effectively promote the sustainable development of rural communities.

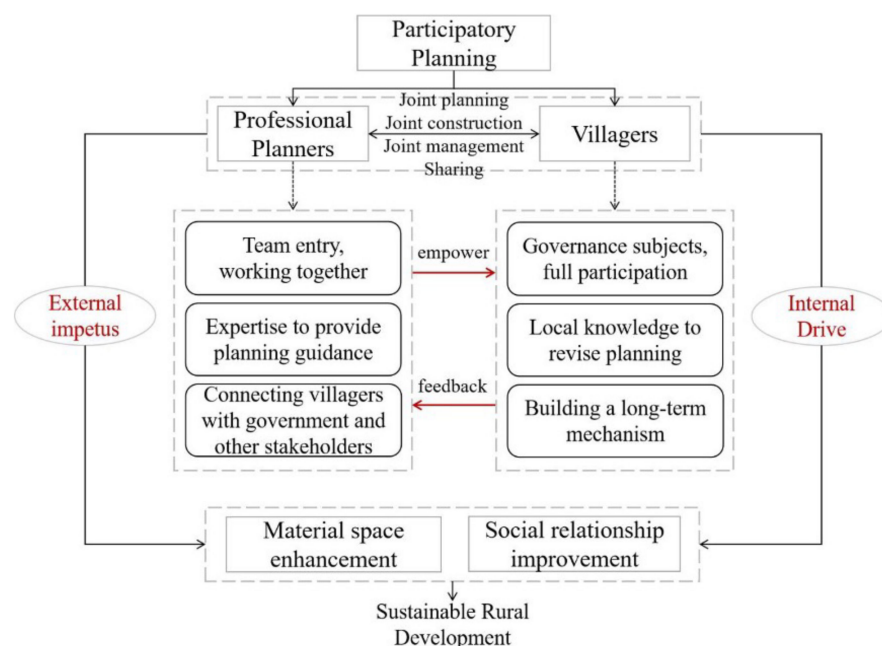


Figure 1. The research framework of this study.

4. An Empirical Study in Fengqing Country, China

4.1. The Study Area of Hongtang Village

The case site, Hongtang Village, is located in Fengshan Town, Fengqing County, Lincang City, Yunnan Province, China (Figure 2). The village’s total area is 20 square kilometers and is under the jurisdiction of 4 natural villages and 17 small villager groups (Xiao Zu), with a population of 2649 people and 662 households in total; most of the young people have left to work in Fengqing County or other areas, so there are mostly elderly people, women, and children in the village. In terms of spatial distribution, one natural village, Hongmu, is the closest to Fengqing County, with a concentrated distribution of farming households basically living along both sides of the road. The other three natural

villages are located in the mountainous area, with scattered households that are farther apart. In 2020, the total rural economic income of the village was CNY 4230036 and the per capita disposable income of rural residents was CNY 1871; the main industries are walnuts and tea.



Figure 2. The location of Hongtang village in Fengqing country in Yunnan Province. (a) Lincang City in Yunnan Province; (b) Hongtang village in Fengqing County. Source: the authors.

The determination of Hongtang Village as a pilot project for rural planning and construction, on the one hand, considers the mass the foundation accumulated by the University over the years of point-to-point assistance. Since 2013, in response to the deployment of the Ministry of Education, the University has chosen Fengqing County, which is known as the “hometown of Dian Hong”, to carry out targeted assistance. Over the years, the university has made efforts in various areas such as planning and construction, medical care, education, and industrial development through various forms, such as expert medical assistance, cadre linkage, and postgraduate teaching missions. On the other hand, because Hongtang Village has the geographical advantage of being close to Fengqing County, the villagers strongly desire to get out of poverty and develop. In addition, the advantageous human organizations include the implementation of grassroots village affairs democracy are already in place. In 2020, the research team responded to the call of the Party Central Committee, and the Ministry of Education joined the University in supporting Fengqing County, Yunnan Province, and, stationed in Hongtang Village, used planning methods to enable the rural revitalization of Hongtang Village. In the past two years, the research team has focused on the concept of “Beautiful Hongtang, jointly created” through field research, planning, and activity practice, to understand the development of Hongtang Village deeply and create a new rural development pattern of multi-stakeholder participation.

The rural yard is an important part of the improvement of the rural habitat, a green starting point for a better environment and happy life. This is not only a rural yard but also a public space where village committees, expert teams, social organizations, and villagers work together to integrate unused rural spaces and rebuild interactive places through collaborative activities so that the people can become the creators of a good life in the process of participating in the construction of the countryside together, continuously improving the people’s sense of access, happiness, and security to achieve a good environment and happy life. Through such practice, bit by bit, the rural community also gradually realizes the community’s sustainable development with a shared future for humankind. Based on this, the research team decided to start with the rural yard and transform and improve the living environment in the front and back of rural houses through participatory planning. On 10 July 2022, the research team, consisting of five teachers and students, carried out a pilot project for the rural revitalization of habitat environment enhancement in Hongtang

village after a joint consultation with the government and villagers. The site property is a self-built farmhouse with a total area of 380 square meters in front of a house with a terrain and height difference (Figure 3). It is worth mentioning that from this time onwards, the subsidies with rewards for the rural yard renovation were set at CNY 860, and the limited resources were most dependent on the integration of elements and consultation and interaction under the concept of “joint creation”.



Figure 3. The sample farmyards before rebuilding and beatification in Hongtang Village. (a) The farmyard site; (b) the surrounding environment. Source: the authors, taken in August 2022.

4.2. Building a Rural Yard through Participatory Planning

The research team’s practice is based on Arnstein’s ladder theory and is divided into a ‘powerless’ stage of government-led participation, a ‘symbolic participation’ stage of consultation and persuasion, and a top stage of ‘substantive participation’ that includes cooperation and village-led participation, in descending order. In the first stage, the research team arrived at Hongtang Village on 27 October and 20 November 2021, led by the government, to gain an in-depth understanding of the village’s development through seminars and reports with the Revitalisation Bureau and the Hongtang Village Committee. This stage was mainly a preliminary understanding led by the government.

After gaining an overview on the ground, the expert team began to engage with villagers in the second phase to promote the design proposal and receive public consultation. Several household interviews and site selection communications were conducted on 25 March, 10 May, and 22 June 2022, while planning consultation sessions were held to present the design proposal to villagers and listen to their comments for revision, and finally, the site and preliminary plan for the renovation of the rural yard were determined in June 2022. In the “deep participation” stage of empowering villagers, in July 2022, the research team officially settled in, arrived at the site, and carried out work such as site clearing, material sorting, and road paving. The team then organized a group of ten teachers and students to work together with the villagers to build the rural yard and continuously optimize the design plan in practice.

The planning team worked with villagers to carry stones and saw bamboo, gradually advancing the construction of the bamboo wall landscaping and berms, planting, etc. At this stage, through the in-depth interaction between the planning team and the villagers, the villagers’ awareness of self-governance was awakened and their ability to exercise their power was enhanced; thus, the villagers were transformed from passive to active participants and could take ownership of the building process. As a result, the original weed-piled entrance was transformed into a neat and orderly tea terrace, and the barren vacant land was planted with colorful local flowers. With the full participation and joint action of the government, villagers, and the planning team, the construction of the rural

yard was basically completed. After the completion of the rural yard, the head of the household was overwhelmed with joy and took the initiative to invite villagers into the yard for a chat. Many of the villagers who stopped to watch the yard, as well as online watchers, expressed their delight at its completion, reflecting on the pursuit of a better and happier life with more order and beauty.

4.3. The Interaction Process between Professional Planners and the Villagers

4.3.1. Planning Intervention: Assist Villagers in Participating and Developing Local Knowledge

The planning team further promotes the improvement of residents' participation ability by influencing the participants' thoughts, value judgment, and behavior mode during the construction process [84]. The impact of planning intervention on villagers is embodied in the change of attitude towards rural development, the improvement of active problem-solving ability, and the deepening of participation in village development. Before the intervention of external forces, villagers failed to form a systematic plan for rural construction and public affairs development. In the early stage of the research team's settlement, most of the villagers had little understanding of the planning scheme. They even showed an "outsider" attitude toward the future development of Hongtang Village, thinking that, "you are experts, you can do it." After a series of lively practices, such as the planning team's household interviews (Figure 4), easy-to-understand popular science, a comprehensive explanation of Hongtang Village (Figure 5), and the "Hongtang in My Mind" painting activity (Figure 6), the villagers have a better understanding of the countryside and its development environment.

Due to the comprehensive understanding, the sense of identity has been improved; at the same time, the enthusiasm of some "rural capable people" has been fully mobilized, including visionary village cadres, young people who have gone out to work and returned home, and the elderly who have witnessed the development of the countryside. They began to actively discuss the planning goals and development vision of Hongtang Village with the planning professionals. For example, an elderly person who started in the tea industry chain in the team's household interview pointed out that "the future of Hongtang Village depends on industrial revitalization" and other development directions. During the communication process, it was discovered that they knew the development direction of the village better than the research team, which made the villagers' plans more suitable for the rural reality [85]. The guiding and stimulating effect brought by the external forces can thus be seen.



(a)



(b)

Figure 4. Planners consulting with the local villagers on rebuilding their surrounding environment. (a) Villagers sharing their opinions with the planners on the site design; (b) Villagers giving suggestions on the industrial revitalization. Source: the authors, taken in August 2022.



Figure 5. The public consultation meeting among multiple stakeholders before taking action. Source: the authors, taken in August 2022.



Figure 6. The jointly organized painting activity by planners, local village committee members, and third parties to activate children's perceptions of their home village. (a) Some primary school students who participated with their paintings; (b) One of the paintings made by a primary school student. Source: the authors, taken in August 2022. The Chinese words in the picture serve as title, which means "Hongtang Village outside the Earth".

The plan further improves the villagers' ability to communicate, express, and solve problems. In the construction of the rural yard in Fengqing Hongtang, the planning team was committed to increasing the planning expertise of the villagers. Through various methods, such as thematic classes and hands-on activities, the enthusiasm for building rural yards in the village continued to rise, and the villagers with yards under construction also reflected the obvious change. Taking the owner of the case site as an example, obvious changes occurred as the construction progressed.

First, the participation rate of household heads and their family members increased. The bystanders who wondered "what do I have to do" have changed to the spectators who proposed planning and design ideas and implemented them. In particular, his daughter started to learn how to trim bamboo fences under the guidance of the team on the last day of construction. Second, more villagers entered the yard, visiting the construction of the rural yard, chatting through the yard, and helping. The head of the household even uploaded the video of the rural yard to the village group of Hongtang Village and invited the villagers

to come as guests. Third, the communication attitude of household heads has become more open, and construction skills have been improved. There was little communication between the head of the case site and other rural yard households in the early stage of construction. With the encouragement of the planning team, the two household heads and the artisans had a friendly exchange over the progress and engineering technology of the rural yard. At the technical level, the villagers developed from a slight understanding of the concepts of “edge trimming” and “edge constricting” to leading the next rural yard householder to complete brick landscaping. The localized knowledge of the villagers and their representatives has changed during this communication process.

In addition, under the guidance of planning practice, the participation of villagers in village affairs has been greatly improved. The research team implemented the concept of “horizontal to edge” and strove to mobilize all villagers to participate jointly in the development and construction of Hongtang Village. More and more villagers are now participating in beautifying and repairing the front and rear of houses or rural public spaces and public facilities, organizing joint actions such as cleaning village roads and canals. The planning team realized the significant difference in the mental outlook of the villagers before and after the intervention of the planning force. The key to rural revitalization lies in the people. Aging, hollowing out, and the gap between urban and rural areas has led to rural talent’s outflow. Taking the intervention of external forces as an opportunity, it is crucial to cultivate villagers’ awareness and ability to participate in rural revitalization.

4.3.2. Villager Empowerment: Improve Participation Ability and Form an Interactive Mechanism

In the pre-planning stage of expression and communication, villagers put forward their ideas on topics such as road hardening, municipal facilities, and the living environment in front of and behind their houses in the opinion-gathering session, which is an important channel for the research team to determine the current status of village development and the basis for the formation of the planning scheme, the latter being essentially a scientific expression of villagers’ demands.

In the process of jointly building the “rural yard”, the villagers, based on their experience and localized knowledge, constantly revised, updated, and integrated the professional knowledge brought by the planning team, to a large extent, to promote the implementation of the planning and construction (Figures 7 and 8). The Chinese countryside has gradually formed a unique and stable living environment, customs, relationship network, and operating mechanism over thousands of years. Due to their different geographical roots, the heterogeneity of rural landscapes, production, and lifestyles has become the main carrier of complex traditional cultures. Therefore, respecting and adapting to the village’s local environment and resource conditions is the most basic and important principle in building a rural yard. The case site had a certain terrain difference, and the villagers first paid attention to the drainage problem and then the beautification design. Based on this situation, the planning team took advantage of the height difference, using dragon bamboo to form a water-drop landscape, and stacked stones on both sides to create grooves. The dragon bamboo itself had the limitations of natural distribution, the particularity of production and development, and the diversity of cultural connotations. The fences, gates, circular dustpan wall decorations in the rural yard, and the fresh bamboo shoots that the research team ate at the householder’s house all benefited from this (Figure 9).



Figure 7. The design rendering of farmyards in one case study site in Hongtang Village. Source: the authors.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)

Figure 8. Planners working with local villagers on rebuilding their farmyards in front of their houses and behind. (a) Planning team transferring stone with villagers; (b) volunteer students carrying building materials with one local family; (c) elderly villagers assisting planners in building a fence aside the farmyard; (d) planners decorating wall art with villagers; and (e) planners building a bamboo stockade with the villagers. Source: the authors, taken in August 2022.



Figure 9. Planners working with local villagers on rebuilding their farmyards in front of their houses and behind. (a) The farmyard entrance before rebuilding; (b) the farmyard entrance after rebuilding; (c) the grounds and fences before rebuilding; (d) the grounds and fences after rebuilding (e) the vegetation before rebuilding; (f) and the vegetation after rebuilding. Source: the authors, taken in August 2022.

At this stage, the villagers fully exploited local materials and combined modern design techniques to create local characteristics; the planning team and the government provided technical and financial support. Finally, under the joint promotion of multiple stakeholders, the Hongtang Village formed the “Implementation Measures for the Improvement of Human Settlement Environment of Hongtang Village, Fengshan Town, Fengqing County” in May 2022, focusing on incentive conditions for the improvement of human settlements

projects, reward standards, maintenance management, etc., covering the whole process of pre-assessment, process construction, and post-event supervision, as discussed and determined. It can be considered that this establishment of a mechanism is an important symbol of promoting villager self-governance and realizing effective rural governance. The rural society described by Fei Xiaotong is transitioning from “mechanical solidarity” to “organic solidarity”, and the rural yard, a form of improvement in which multiple stakeholders participate in the construction from the bottom up, helps to promote the mutual interaction between the government, villagers, and external forces. This dependence allows them to depend on and connect with each other, uniting the governance community, and optimizing and enriching the organic solidarity model.

5. Discussion and Implication

5.1. Building a New Approach for Rural Planning in China

The idea of public participation has been widely discussed and practiced in the field of Western urban planning since the 1960s. Throughout the thinking and practice of advocacy planning, negotiated planning, collaborative planning, and community empowerment in the West, concepts such as “stakeholders”, “actor networks”, “power distribution”, “social capital”, “meta-governance”, and “partnership” have been widely used. It is constantly emphasized that discussions are carried out with respect to the social interaction between participants, such as the relationship between the state and society, the relationship between the government and the market, and the relationship between planners and the public. China’s urban planning theory is largely influenced by the West, from functionalism and rationalism in pursuit of efficiency to people-oriented public participation, the pursuit of higher quality and sustainable urban and rural construction, and planning values turning from the traditional “elite thinking” to inclusion and fairness. Since the 21st century, China has carried out a series of planning and governance practices such as urban community renewal and a rural grassroots transformation. However, China’s political system, social civilization, and development stage are different from those of Western developed countries, which means that the practice of Western theories in China must present a different appearance.

In the community’s social structure, under the background of Western civil society, the community’s social relations are mainly based on geography and industry, and organic interaction is realized through community organizations. The social relations of Chinese rural communities are mainly based on family ties and geography, and a certain social network has been formed. In addition, traditional Chinese civilization emphasizes collectivism, which provides a unique social basis for public participation. However, the traditional rural social order has been destroyed by globalization, industrialization, and urbanization. How to effectively utilize the traditional rural social order, awaken traditional rural collectivism, build a consensus on rural governance, and call for public participation requires continued theoretical discussions and practical explorations.

Regarding community governance, in ancient Greece and Rome, there was a germination of civic consciousness in the West. Large-scale urban construction, the rise of the citizen class, and surging social movements have gradually matured Western civil society, providing an ideological foundation for public participation. Developed social productive forces, a complete quality education system, and the process of rural gentrification provides a knowledge base for public participation. It can be considered that the degree of self-organization in Western communities is relatively high, and the foundation of public participation in governance is relatively good. Rural communities in China are currently facing the challenges of elite outflow, hollowing out, and aging. The overall human capital in the countryside is insufficient, and governance awareness and governance ability are poor. How to cultivate villagers’ self-governing ability and stimulate rural vitality deserves further discussion. In addition, this case study also proves that the construction of a rural community garden is feasible, to a certain extent, as a method of realizing public participation in rural China. In the planning process, based on the development situation of the

rural community, the research team guided villagers to join in the construction of a rural community garden, jointly create a rural landscape, and cultivate the local social capital in joint labor, realizing the local exploration of the construction of a rural community garden.

In terms of participatory planning, most Western public participation is based on the community's common interests. Therefore, the public actively participates in the planning and decision-making process. Among them, the government provides institutional guarantees, enterprises provide social investment, social organizations play a bridge role in the power network, and residents participate in the capacity building of governance. Reversely, from our case experience, different stakeholders, especially the villagers, participating in rural planning is an important manifestation of the Chinese people's democracy. At the same time, planners have converted their own roles. Compared to the role of the professional planner in the previous process, the planner is not only a planner and designer but is also transformed into a coordinator and communicator that guides villagers to jointly plan their vision, jointly build and manage the village, and jointly evaluate and enjoy the achievements of village construction through conceptual cognition, knowledge interaction, and behavioral practice.

5.2. Suggestions on Strategies for Rural Planning Practice

Taking Hongtang Village as a practical case, this study reveals the roles and changes of the planning professionals and the main villagers in the process of the joint action of the "rural yard". It discusses the relationship between external stimuli and internal drive in the process of rural construction. In Hongtang Village, the planning professionals provided a yardstick based on professional skills, measured the pros and cons of the planning and design scheme, and made adjustments to improve villagers' enthusiasm for participation from three aspects: concept cognition, knowledge interaction, and behavioral practice, and stimulated collective and self-governance consciousness. As a result, the villagers, with experiential local knowledge, accepted the influence of external intervention, and at the same time, gave positive feedback to the planning team throughout the whole process, playing an indispensable role in the generation of the plan, design and construction, public participation, and other aspects. External force and internal motivation then go hand in hand, becoming an effective way to promote good rural governance [75], which together point to the establishment of a long-term mechanism for the sustainable development of Hongtang Village.

Despite this, it was also found in the study process that the main body of the villagers is still highly dependent on the expert and planning team. Throughout the time the planning team was stationed, the villagers' participation enthusiasm, collective awareness, and professional skills were greatly improved. However, it is worth noting that without the planning team, the villagers' independent construction and management of rural yards is still a problem and stagnation occurs. In other words, when the planning team withdraws, will the villagers return to their indifferent "outsider" mentality and return to the "normal" where experience limits professional skills? In addition, considering practical factors, for example, the difficulty of ensuring special vertical funds enter the villages is still an obstacle. These issues require continuous exploration and close consultation by all stakeholders at all levels in practice.

5.3. Recommendations for Building a Sustainable Rural Community

In general, China's rural revitalization construction cannot simply copy the existing experience and development model of the West. Instead, it is necessary to find similarities in the differences and see the individual needs in the commonalities, promote the joint participation of multiple subjects, formulate institutional mechanisms that meet the local reality and local needs, and form a common development model of beautification. Based on the above discussion of relevant theory and practice, the research puts forward development suggestions from three aspects: mechanism system construction, internal power activation, and external force promotion.

Firstly, in order to transform the above case study of Hongtang Village into an example and experience that can be replicated and extended to more rural areas in China, it is most important to establish and improve the corresponding mechanisms and systems. The development of sustainable communities in China's rural areas should not stop at one or two specific activities but lies in improving the villagers' self-governance capacity through institutional safeguards and creating sustainable development momentum. Therefore, the vast rural areas, including Hongtang Village, should be more committed to improving policy mechanisms such as mass participation, incentives instead of subsidies and financing, and guarantees for rural community building. That is to say, take the urban and rural communities as the basic unit, the practical and trivial matters of improving the living environment around the people, in front of and behind houses, as the breakthrough point, and the diverse participation of villagers, as the core, with planning teams and other key stakeholders to build "The vertical to the end, the horizontal to the edge, the governance system of consultation and co-governance, and the creation of a social governance pattern of co-construction, co-governance and sharing as the path, mobilizing the masses to co-conspiracy, co-construction, co-management, co-evaluation, and sharing," to build a beautiful village, cohesive social consensus, shape a common spirit, and ultimately achieve rural self-organization, self-governance, and self-development [86,87].

Secondly, adhere to the main role of villagers and stimulate the sustainable vitality of rural development. It is necessary to realize that the transformation of the village is essentially "the transformation of people". Therefore, on the one hand, the goal is to stimulate the villagers' awareness of subjectivity and self-governance and to promote their self-awareness changes from "outsiders" to "spectators" and then to "owners". However, it is also necessary to cultivate local artisans. Through rural planning course training and activity organization, we hope to discover and cultivate talents who fully understand rural affairs and have basic knowledge and planning skills and to encourage artisans and established householders to provide help for the subsequent construction of rural yards, forming a benign transmission of mutual help so that the village has the ability to build and develop independently.

Thirdly, it further expands the inclusiveness of village planning and provides channels for the intervention of more external forces. For example, NGOs have been engaged in specific fields for a long time and have a high degree of specialization. They can provide services and resources for villages, and villages also provide them with sufficient project opportunities to support their own development. European and American countries are relatively mature but the development of NGOs in China started relatively late, and their coverage of affairs below the county level needs to be strengthened. In recent years, Taiwan, Shanghai, and other places have also begun to explore the introduction of university resources into rural areas to help rural revitalization [88,89]. After the "rural yard" construction is completed, resources such as colleges and universities can be actively introduced, and cooperation with tourism companies can be considered to form practical economic benefits.

6. Conclusions

This article explores the internal and external dynamics of public participation in building sustainable rural communities in the Chinese context. First, this article analyzes the theoretical and participatory planning and public involvement in Western countries, which serve as a theoretical framework. Then it introduces a pilot practice in Hongtang Village, Fengqing County, China. We consider planners as an external power and villagers as the internal power, trying to establish a mechanism for their organic interaction in building sustainable rural communities. We believe that villagers' vision of rural communities is established and accomplished through participatory planning. In rural participatory planning, planners, as an external force, advocate public participation to empower villagers and activate the internal vitality for sustainable rural communities. Villagers are supposed to cooperate for common interests under consensus, which means the return of traditional

Chinese rural collectivism and the restructuring of the conventional Chinese rural society. Additionally, the planning is constantly self-correcting in the continuous interaction with the public, which means it will be more local, scientific, and rational and become a more powerful protector and promoter of public interests.

The shortcomings of the research lie in the lack of the in-depth tracking and mining of personal changes in the context of public participation and the incomplete analysis of the internal interaction mechanism between the planners and villagers. In the future, we will attempt to conduct more in-depth interviews and pilot practices. Only then can we understand the changes in individual decision-making behavior, reflect on the role of planners, build a systematic governance network, and optimize the mechanism for public participation in building sustainable rural communities.

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