

## **How social media influences rural spatial practice and place identity:**

### **A case study of Fuling Village**

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**Abstract:** Social media have opened up new growth opportunities for the development of tourism in traditional villages. It can not only attract the attention and sustainable development of villages, but also make villages dependent on the outside world's imagination of "tradition" and "the gaze of the other" in spatial remodeling. In this paper, we take Fuling Village as a case, and explore the spatial practice and changes in villagers' local identities triggered by social media in the context of rural tourism. It is found that (1) the village is changing from a local space to an fluid space under the shaping of social media.(2) Social and power relations in the social media space influence there modeling of local space, forming the "production of virtual space".(3) The development of rural tourism affects the community and rebuilds place identity. The development of traditional villages needs to pay more attention to refining and transforming local characteristics, preserving originality and promoting individuals' place identity in order to achieve sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Place, identity, tourism development, social media, traditional village

#### **1. Introduction**

In the context of global digitization, rural China has ushered in new development opportunities, with an increasing number leveraging social media to develop the tourism industry, aiming to drive economic growth(Liu et al., 2024, Su, 2011). Compared to the past when villages were inward-looking, closed-off, and primarily locally significant spaces, they are now not only shifting towards fluid spaces but also becoming objects of spatial production catering to virtual imagination through tourism development, showcasing cultural interactions with "others."(Jay, 1993, Poole, 2005). With the flourishing development of the tourism industry sparked by social media, there has been infiltration into rural areas, triggering the capitalization transformation of traditional spaces, even to the extent of the entertainment-oriented utilization of spaces of faith. This has led to a contestation among diverse entities for space and the weakening and reconstruction of spatial and place meaning(Guo, 2020). At the same time, with the rise of cultural heritage tourism and rural tourism, traditional villages like Fuling Village located along the southeast coast of China are actively engaging in tourism practices and community development construction, leveraging their unique natural and cultural resources. Similar to many traditional ancient villages in China, in their process of modernization, the intervention of external forces inevitably changes the original economic, cultural, and social relationships. The originally relatively

stable local significance is continuously deconstructed and reconstructed. This not only leads to drastic changes in the architectural landscape of the villages but also creates confusion among local residents about the "why" of tradition display and concerns about the loss of indigenous cultural heritage.

The theoretical study of place originated in the 1970s, slightly later than the study of space. In the context of modernity, space was initially rationalized as abstract geometry. However, with deeper reflection, the concept of place gained attention. Particularly, human geographers represented by Yi-Fu Tuan emphasized that the process of endowing space with meaning gives rise to place (Relph, 1976, Tuan, 1977, Wright, 1947, Tuan, 1971). After cultural accumulation and identity formation, a sense of place is established (Cragg, 2013). The essence of sense of place lies in the transformation of spatial meanings into new places and the generation of identity. In this process, spatial practices are essential. Without human spatial practices, a place is merely space (Relph, 1976). However, imposing violence or authority on spatial practices can disconnect individuals from their sense of place, leading to the destruction of the meaning and identity of place (Tuan, 2013). In urban design, place identity primarily revolves around the physical appearance and how people perceive it, with less focus on the extent of the bond between people and place or the depth of its significance. Studies in environmental psychology often link place attachment to individuals' sense of self and community identity, as well as their sense of uniqueness (Ujang and Zakariya, 2015).

Tourism has promoted rural geographical imagination and spatial construction, influencing place meanings and identities. Social media has intensified this change. With its extensive marketing capabilities, social media has increased the attention to rural tourism and promoted the development of rural tourism industry (Senyao and Ha, 2020, Harb et al., 2019). Due to binary definitions (Dymitrow and Brauer, 2018), urban people often view rural areas with curiosity, which is why content with "rural" titles on social media often receives higher click rates. Current research focuses on the motivations behind tourists' viewing and sharing behaviors on social media (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014), the influence on tourists' expectations and decisions (Narangajavana et al., 2017, Palazzo et al., 2021, Liu et al., 2024), and the impact on tourists' social networks (Meek et al., 2019). However, most studies overlook the importance of social identity. In this process, virtual spaces and real-life spaces are connected through social media, reshaping social and power relations (Senyao and Ha, 2020). The groups of social actors become more complex, not only affecting spatial practices and changing the lifestyle and livelihood (Su et al., 2019) of local villagers but also influencing their sense of place (Guo, 2020). Due to the neglect of local subjects, there is a lack of theoretical and principled guidance in spatial practices, thus further analysis and strengthening of the guidance and control of local spatial practices are necessary. Therefore, this study focuses on three aspects of spatial creation in Fuling Village's tourism development process under the influence of social media as the research object. It specifically analyzes the changes in spatial practices and social identity, posing the following questions: 1) Under the background of tourism development mediated by social media, what kind of changes have three types of public spaces in Fuling Village experienced? What factors have led to these changes? 2) What perceptions and local identities have the changes in public space practices in Fuling Village brought to the villagers? What does this reflect in terms of substantive issues? 3) As a microcosm, what insights does the case of

Fuling Village offer for understanding new development models for villages in the context of rural revitalization in China? How can the significant gap between spatial practices relying on virtual imagination and the obscured real history be bridged? Additionally, how can the misinterpretation of tradition and the pandering to sensationalism be avoided in tourism development? Research and answers to these questions can deepen people's understanding of rural spatial practices and place identity theoretically. In practice, they can provide reference for practical activities in Fuling Village and similar regions.

## **2. Methods of case study**

### **2.1 Context of the study area**

Fuling Village is located in the coastal region of the Xinghua Bay in Fujian Province, China. The site of village is near the Wuhou Mountain and leading to the Taiwan Strait. Fuling Village and Wuhou Mountain are well-known scenic spots along the coast of Putian (Figure 1). The village has a history of around 1000 years and was officially listed in the fourth batch of traditional villages by the Fujian Provincial People's Government in 2021. Currently, the village comprises 232 households with a permanent population of 1580 people, predominantly consisting of three major family surnames: Chen, Xiao, and Xu. Before the 1950s, the village was primarily governed by clan autonomy. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the clan system was replaced, but local elders and other respected individuals still oversee the village's political, religious, and daily management affairs. Following the reform and opening-up policies, the closed pattern of the village has been disrupted, with a large number of villagers going out for work or business. Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a gradual increase in folk activities, such as the Wuhou Mountain religious and scenic tourism experiences. Traditional ceremonies like the Lantern Festival celebration have started to revive. Since 2010, Fuling Village has primarily experienced a phase of spatial practices characterized by simultaneous tourism development and community reconstruction. Especially in 2019, the village established a tourism development company with a focus on using social media as a means to attract tourists, highlighting the cultural theme of "福" (fortune) to generate additional income for the village and stimulate industrial development.

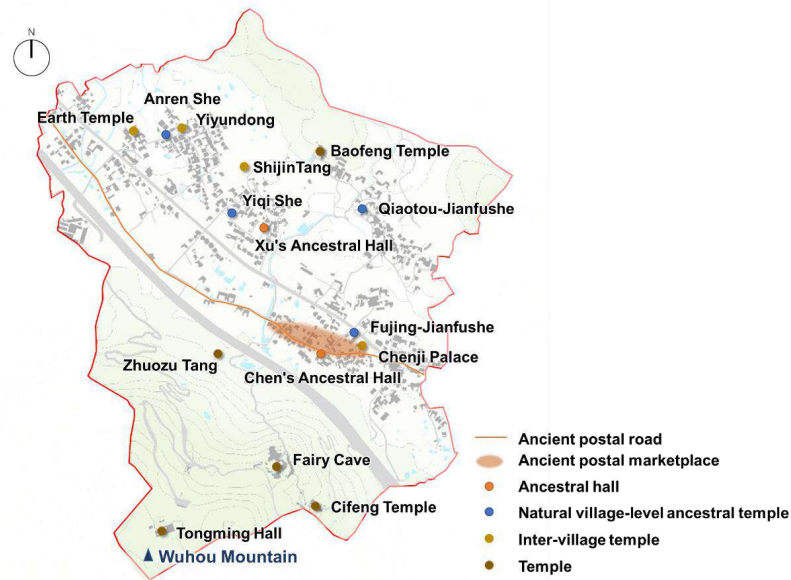


Figure 1. Distribution of public spaces in villages

The selection of Fuling Village and its public space transformation focuses on three case studies: "Religious Belief Space," "Family Ancestral Hall," and "Post Road Marketplace." This choice is based on several reasons. Firstly, Fuling Village, as a traditional coastal village in China, mainly relies on tourism development, making it an ideal place to observe spatial practices influenced by tourism. It heavily relies on social media and social communication to promote its local characteristics, making it a typical destination for technology-mediated tourism. Secondly, the three public spaces in Fuling Village exhibit differences in type and scale. They have clear functional boundaries within the old village and collectively constitute the core public spaces of the village. These spaces have undergone morphological and functional changes under the influence of social media and tourism development, fundamentally altering the usage and perception of daily social life by villagers, leading to changes in local connotations. The interpretation of traditional culture is flattened, and the spiritual foundation based on place identity is shaken. The balance between development and preservation requires urgent consideration and resolution. Thirdly, the spatial practices in Fuling Village are not unique, especially in the context of rural revitalization in China. The challenges it presents have implications and warnings for other regions.

## 2.2 Data collection and processing

In this research, participant observation and semi-structured interviews were mainly undertaken to study the causes and processes of rural change and the place identity of various villagers in the process.

The research process is mainly divided into two stages: data collection and data analysis. The survey consists of two stages. In February 2023, a village survey was conducted to collect basic data and conduct preliminary investigations. Researchers visited all religious buildings, residential houses, ancestral halls,

and government offices in Fuling Village to gain a preliminary understanding of the overall environment, culture, population, spatial layout, and tourism development situation of the Fuling community. After obtaining basic information about Fuling Village, participatory observation and in-depth interviews were conducted. Researchers entered the case study site multiple times to observe interactions among villagers, tourists, and administrators, as well as changes in lifestyle, recording observations in diary format. In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 respondents as listed in the table below, covering their perceptions of material and cultural changes within the village and their evaluation of village tourism development. In addition, a supplementary questionnaire survey was conducted, targeting individuals who work outside the village but still maintain household registration in the village (and are still involved in village public affairs), with 105 valid questionnaires collected. Subsequently, data analysis and validation were performed. In August 2023, a return visit to the village was made to supplement research and revisit, to understand the situation of tourism development construction and community development. In addition, historical information was supplemented and verified through multiple local chronicles, genealogies, and other historical records.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1 Social Media Landscape in Fuling Village**

Historically, the development of Fuling Village into a popular tourist destination on social media is closely intertwined with people's use and understanding of social media. The village own several religious destinations, famous for special mountainous coastal landscape and efficacious gods, which attract disciples and tourists. People initially used the photography and video features of social media to document and share the local scenery and activities, aiming to connect people both inside and outside the village. Since the 1980s, many villagers have migrated elsewhere, yet due to difficulties in obtaining urban residency or basic services, they still retain rural household registrations. As a result, they need to participate in certain village collective affairs, necessitating them to stay in touch through mobile phones. Consequently, many important village matters are now disseminated through social media platforms like WeChat. Subsequently, with the rise of short video platforms like Douyin (Tiktok in China), some villagers have uploaded these unique village scenes to platforms with wider audiences, garnering significant attention. Moreover, proud villagers often share the distinctive features of their hometown on social media, leading to an initial understanding of the village's original intentions from outsiders.

After the central government implemented the rural revitalization strategy, government of Fuling village try to show the local scenery online in order to resonate or trigger curiosity with consumers. In 2019, the village was designated as a pilot village for rural revitalization in Fujian Province and established a tourism company in the same year, officially initiating tourism development. It mainly attracted investment through the social capital of villagers and enhanced the village's visibility in Putian City and surrounding areas through marketing and promotion on the Douyin platform. In 2021, Wuhou Mountain was rated as a 2A-level scenic spot, and the village was included in the list of traditional villages in Fujian Province, receiving some special funds, which accelerated its construction.

It does get a lot of attention, according to the search results on the Douyin platform. Douyin (TikTok) is a music and creative short video social networking app. By April 2019, TikTok has gained 200% market-share in a two-year growth period (Lee and Nass, 2005). The app had 51 million ratings on iPhone app store, 19.31million ratings on Google Play, and over 5 hundred million downloads (2024 May).

On Douyin, searchers using keywords such as "Fuling Village, Putian City," and "Fuling Village, Wuhou Mountain" saw a rapid increase in video creation and views in 2021 (Figure 2). The most viewed video had approximately 27 thousand plays. Promotion focused on keywords like "internet celebrity," "check-in spot," "Spring Festival," "night scenery," and "dream prayer holy land," constructing local cultural landscapes and guiding people to understand and imagine the geographical features of Fuling. Local features such as Xianv Cave, Lover's Bridge, and Rainbow Path were amplified and became symbols of promotion, attracting numerous comments and attention, and enhancing on-site experiential perception. Internet users and the village formed a relationship of mutual gaze through the internet, with Douyin serving as a theater for tourism promotion and display.

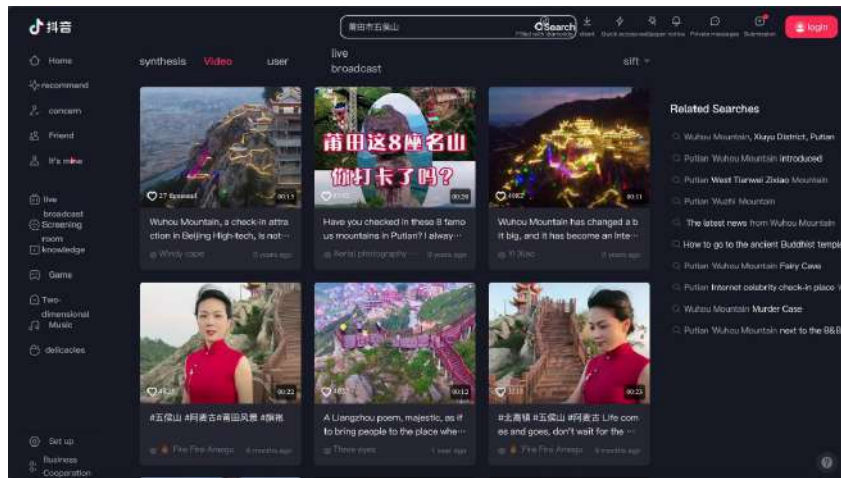


Figure 2. The search results for "Wuhou Mountain in Putian City" on Douyin

### 3.2 Influence of Social Media on Spatial Practices

#### 3.2.1 Religious belief spaces and tourist attractions

Since the Northern Song Dynasty, ancestors have been building temples in Fuling Village. Due to its unique geographical location in the plain area, Wuhou Mountain serves as a natural "landmark" for the safe passage of boats in and out of Xinghua Bay in Putian and Fujian. In ancient times, people believed that the gods could conquer the forces of nature, and the safe sailing of ships was believed to be blessed by the gods. Over time, this place became a gathering place for guardian gods of fishing boats heading out to sea. During the Northern Song Dynasty, the statesman Cai Xiang supervised the

construction of the "Two-Pavilion Temple" on Wuhou Mountain to enshrine the Jade Emperor. In the early Song Dynasty, a clever girl named Chen Mingzhu in the village ascended to heaven as a fairy after reaching enlightenment here. Later, people built the Fairy Cave and the Ruizhu Palace in her honor. It is believed that the gods here help those in need and bless the villagers, so prayers are constantly answered. The village still preserves nine religious belief spaces, including the Tongming Hall, Qingyun Pavilion, Qingyun Cave and Fairy Cave.

For generations of Fuling villagers, their daily lives are closely intertwined with the religious belief spaces on the mountain, forming an inseparable emotional bond with themselves. Villagers participate in various religious activities throughout the year, over a dozen festivals and ceremonies annually. To facilitate these ceremonies, villagers even invite deities down from the mountain for daily worship, seeking blessings for the villagers. In the construction of their homeland, religious beliefs connect villagers and believers from all directions through various activities, fostering significant emotional ties to the space. In the villagers' perception, religious beliefs symbolize the rich culture and long history of their village, affirming it as a "blessed land" and strengthening collective consciousness. It is evident that religious beliefs shape the worldview and environmental perception of local villagers.

Since 2018, the village has been actively developing rural tourism. The abundant religious belief spaces have become the primary resource for tourism development and are now "spaces under scrutiny." The tourism company, managed and operated by villagers elected for their high social status and economic strength, collaborates with the temple board to discuss development plans. This new organization, as a driver of tourism practices, has initiated a reinterpretation and reconstruction of Fuling Village. These transformations are based on the spatial imagination of potential tourists analyzed by the tourism organization. They observe the "Internet-famous tourist villages" on social media and believe that the social construction of tourists' visual and psychological perceptions, as well as their aesthetic appreciation of the Jade Emperor culture and the Fairy Maiden Cave, should be based on freshness and unique experiences. Therefore, facilities that can become focal points for sightseeing must be redesigned to serve as tourist attractions. Under this concept, religious spaces have encountered modernization erosion, and the tourism development company has expanded and transformed the original spaces. For example, the Golden Dragon, symbolizing the "distinguished status of the Jade Emperor"; the Lover's Bridge, originating from "many people come here to make wishes for love, and the construction of ropes symbolizes climbing together through the trials of love." ([Figure 3](#))



Figure 3. New facilities for religious spaces, (a) "Lover's Bridge," and (b) "Golden Dragon"

It can be seen the fundamentally different logics in spatial connotation between original religious spaces and the tourist attractions in Fuling Village. Although the villagers who built the temples and the members of the tourism development company mainly come from within the village, the subjects with different behavioral purposes have significant differences in the concept of spatial practice. The religious beliefs originated from worship of nature and deities, leading villagers to form a natural-space territorial view in spatial practice, resulting in strong local cognition. However, spatial practices under tourism influence take tourists' spatial imagination and psychological needs as starting points, demanding novelty and popularity, thus creating a large number of symbolic expressions.

### 3.2.2 Ancestral temples and ritual performance spaces

The four natural villages in Fuling Village are all family lineage clans primarily based on surnames. In ancient China, the lineage was an important organization and responsible for the regulation of rural populations (Chen, 2016). In folk tradition, the ancestral hall is an important public space where clan members engage in daily recreational activities, discussions, ceremonies, and social mobilization (Dean, 2010). Traditional ancestral hall spaces not only host public affairs but also serve as places to maintain emotional connections among villagers of different surnames. The most frequent and fundamental activity is after a day of farming, villagers gather in front of the ancestral hall to chat, share stories, and then light incense inside the hall before returning home. This has been the daily routine for villagers for centuries. Additionally, various clan affairs must be consulted with the ancestral hall's deities, leading to periodic ceremonies. Through these ceremonies, blood ties are emphasized, creating tighter connections among clan members. Within the ancestral hall space, people share emotions, making it a crucial space for local emotional communication. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China and especially during the reform and opening up period, the clan system dissolved. The village's lifestyle was disrupted, clan-based production and life disintegrated, and with the outflow of population, clan ceremonies decreased or ceased altogether, weakening collective consciousness and local spirit.

With the increase in income among some villagers, local spirit and traditional culture have seen a resurgence. Clan culture has been revitalized, and since 2010, villagers have begun rebuilding their

communities. Concurrently, the ancestral halls of various clans have been renovated to restore and promote clan activities. Building upon this foundation, village management proposed integrating the development of rural tourism by packaging major ceremonies such as ancestral worship activities with festivals like Lantern Festival (Figure 4). These events are organized and performed, coupled with promotion on social media platforms like WeChat and TikTok, resulting in widespread sharing among both locals and outsiders, once again boosting attention and visits.



Figure 4. (a)Chen's Ancestral Hall, (b) Clan rituals

Source: *Chinese Traditional Village Archives Survey Form - Fuling Village*

The transformation of the functional role of ancestral halls fundamentally reflects a shift from utilitarian space to symbolic space. The rebuilding of ceremonies and spaces is diminishing the practical significance for the original users. Meanwhile, tourists, as the target audience for tourism development, are gaining prominence. Although clan ceremonies emphasize identity and belonging to some extent, arousing villagers' attachment to their land, the ambiguous modernity of their multifaceted objectives and villagers' doubts about their own identity are evident. Ultimately, this process represents a form of spatial disciplining in the locality.

### 3.2.3 Postal marketplace and the "Rainbow Blessing Path"

Besides religious spaces, the primary public activity space in the village is the marketplace developed from the postal station. Ancient Post Road was established by ancient Chinese authorities to meet various governmental, military, and economic requirements, including the dissemination of decrees and official communications, administrative transactions, and the transportation of goods between central and local regions. To ensure the swift delivery of official documents, post stations were strategically placed along the route, equipped with amenities like post buckets, relay horses, and resting facilities for travelers (Kauz, 2005, Wang et al., 2020). The branch line of the Fuxing Post Road system, which was established during the Tang Dynasty (Fuzhou to Xinghua region), passed through Fuling Village. A post station was established at Puochoujing in Fuling Village to accommodate the increasing number of travelers, gradually forming a marketplace. Named Puochou Pu, the post station evolved from a public service facility to a retail business space with the increase in exchanges, offering tea houses, grocery stores, etc., thus forming a small-scale market. Over the nearly one thousand years of existence of the

post road, the prosperity of the post stations continued, where people communicated and cared for each other. Despite being strangers, it became a warm space.

As the 20th century brought the construction of inter-village connecting roads and county highways, and in the early 21st century, the completion of highways passing through villages, car travel became the main mode of transportation for people. As the width of the post roads mainly suited pedestrian and horse-drawn carriage traffic, they were designated as village-level internal roads, resulting in fewer travelers and a decline in vitality. Consequently, street-front shops gradually closed down, and the marketplace lost its vibrant public activities, gradually fading away.

With the rise of tourism development in Wuhou Mountain, village administrators noticed that the tourism industry lacked a long supply chain, with most tourists staying only in the temples for sightseeing experiences, without contributing to the overall development of the villages at the foot of the mountain, thus limiting further consumption. Therefore, a plan was devised to construct the "Rainbow Blessing Path" to connect the foot of the mountain with the village, promoting it as a significant experiential facility in tourism videos. It emphasized guiding people to experience the village on foot rather than leaving directly by car. However, due to the lack of vitality in the village and insufficient tourism experiences and service facilities, it failed to attract tourists to come and experience it, leaving only the "rainbow" waiting quietly (Figure 5).



Figure 5. (a) Ancient Post Road, (b) "Rainbow" road

Due to the outflow of population and the reduction in community public life, the frequency of use of public spaces has sharply decreased. The original "Post Road," as the main space for village life, remains an emotionally significant "place" for them. Many elderly villagers recalled in interviews the lively and warm atmosphere of life on the "Post Road," saying, "In the days when travel to distant places could only be done on foot, the mutual help between strangers is something we cannot experience today," expressing regret for the loss of close connections between people. Meanwhile, the "Rainbow Path" has become the choice for villagers commuting to work in the fields and for accessing external roads by car.

From the case of the "Rainbow Blessing Path," it can be seen that the post station, as a service facility, is an important source of spatial vitality. It forms a fluid social network through social

interactions, creating emotionally special "places" and fluid "communities." However, after modern facilities disrupt the foundation of the village community, attempts to transplant, imitate, and reconstruct spaces without resonating with the villagers or attracting tourists. This is fundamentally because tourism producers overlook changes in relational connections, leading to differences in social culture and place identity.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

##### **4.1 Discussions**

Social and cultural identity is a socio-psychological phenomenon formed through the spatial-temporal process ([Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001](#)), constituting an important spiritual essence for national and local development. The social community of traditional villages, on one hand, sustains organization and perpetuates collective and national momentum, while on the other hand, it is rooted in its subject—the people ([Castells, 1997](#)).

From the case of Fuling Village, it can be observed that in traditional societies, local socio-cultural values construct and maintain villagers' unique cultural identity through local religious beliefs, customs, social organization, and ways of life. In traditional spatial practices, people devoutly believe in the protection of religion, deities, and clans, relying on the identity conferred by structural frameworks. Villagers form a negotiated "natural identity" through interaction with nature and society, based on accumulated a priori rules that lead to stable, consistent understandings and beliefs. However, in recent years, the external focus brought about by tourism has led to the inclusion of new actors in spatial practices: tourism development enterprises and their imagined network tourists. Due to the differing interventions of various actors and their divergent understandings and practices of space and place, the roots of identity have undergone changes. Developers aim to gain profits, while tourists seek experiences and exploration. Social media amplifies the audience's curiosity, leading to the rapid production of symbols and differential identification in the crowded network image competition. For the new spatial villagers, they find themselves in an awkward situation where they cannot fully identify, yet they cannot maintain their original identity through reminiscence and reproduction. This case reflects that modern public spatial practices are transitioning villages from sacred spaces to secular spaces, and natural identities are shifting towards mechanical identities collectively constructed by subjects with different backgrounds and cognitions. Local meanings and attachments are in a state of flux.

It can be seen that complexities exist in giving places their identities under the tourism backdrop. Holding on to one's place meanings may become increasingly challenging as the gap widens between the meaning and the physical characteristics of the setting ([Fitchen, 2019](#)). The loss of place meanings and attachment result in the inability to continue to feel, to practice and to recall experiences ([Ujang and Zakariya, 2015](#)). Therefore, in the context of fluidity, the future spatial practices of rural areas require respecting local natural identities, orderly developing diverse mechanical identities, avoiding nihilism, and better promoting the healthy development of local socio-cultural through multi-party negotiation.

##### **4.2 Conclusions**

The transformation of Fuling Village reflects the powerful impact of modernization intrusion on traditional spaces. While tourism development brings possibilities of economic growth to ordinary rural areas, the new ideologies it brings about lead to the transformation of traditional values and customs. This subjects them to the rapid influx of information, making it difficult to extricate themselves. In the longer term, this may prove to be short-lived and bring about even more severe challenges.

Public spaces play a significant role in the formation of place identity and attachment, but their creation and governance have always been a complex process. In tourism-oriented community development, particular caution should be exercised. Traditional consumption and tourism rely on meaningful places, so it is still necessary to understand and construct what constitutes a place within the new system. This involves identifying social and cultural differences and commonalities among different stakeholders, and re-evaluating space and locality.

It can be observed that the development of the internet society has once again changed the way people travel. People share and obtain information through the internet, forming virtual communities and online identities. This not only affects users' perceptions but also influences specific places and their indigenous inhabitants through their spatial practices. As early as the 20th century, Joshua Meyrowitz proposed that the emergence of new media directly led to the fragmentation, reorganization, and transformation of social situations, affecting people's definition of contexts (Meyrowitz, 1986). In China, there are still many places similar to Fuling Village that are becoming tourist spaces under the focus of mobile networks. The spatial practice case of Fuling Village can provide reference for other places, reminding people that locality is not only a physical space and region, but more importantly, the associations and meanings generated by interactions among subjects. Perhaps in practice, tourism development can expand digital utilization methods, such as reflecting local culture and heritage through digital platforms, to strengthen interaction and negotiation among subjects, and explore the possibility of place identity on the basis of building communities.

**Note:** Except for the marked ones, the rest of the photos are produced by the author.

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