



Characteristics of Small Towns in Wuyue Cultural Area from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage

A Case Study of Xitang Ancient Town, Wuzhen, and Xincheng

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Abstract. Intangible cultural heritage towns across the country are deeply influenced by the local characteristic culture and present a unique charm. Based on the preliminary understanding of Xincheng and combined with the precocious development of Xitang ancient town and Wuzhen, this essay summarizes the characteristics of intangible cultural heritage towns influenced in Wuyue Cultural Area.

Keywords: Xitang Ancient Town · Wuzhen · Xincheng · Characteristics of town

1 Introduction

In recent years, a number of distinctive small towns have soared in Jiaxing. Xitang Ancient Town, Wuzhen and Xincheng are located in Jiashan County, Tongxiang City and Xiuzhou District of Jiaxing City, Zhejiang Province respectively [1] and have convenient transportation and advanced economy. The three towns are all intangible cultural heritage towns in Wuyue Cultural Area, and they are water towns in Jiangnan, the South of the Yangtze River, with their own unique characteristics. Based on the research of Xincheng in Wuyue Cultural Area by the Great Innovation Project, this paper extends to the whole cultural area and selects three typical towns. By giving the historic architectures, peculiar food, unique customs, dialects of Jiangnan, distinct intangible cultural heritage features of these towns and clarifying the characteristics of the towns, this paper has an overall grasp of the intangible heritage towns in Wuyue Cultural Area, actively respond to the call of the country and seek qualitative development.

Fund: “Protection and development of historical building culture under regional culture radiation—a case study of Zhejiang Province intangible cultural heritage town” (National Innovation Training Program for College Students), Project number: 202014275001.

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Y. Pogrebnyak and R. Hou (Eds.): ICLCCS 2022, ASSEHR 689, pp. 409–414, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-27-5_45

2 The Historic Architectures

Xitang Ancient Town, Wuzhen and Xincheng are all typical water towns in Jiangnan with waterfront buildings. Among them, Xitang Ancient Town is more prominent [2].

From the general picture of Xitang, the town is long in shape, and most buildings are built around the main river running from east to west. The town is densely covered with rivers, and almost every household lives near the water, which perfectly shows the characteristics of a water town.

Alleyway is a unique form of dwellings in small towns of Jiangnan. There are countless alleyways in almost every town, connecting various roads and the urban areas, and Xitang is not an exception. Most of Xitang's alleyways are named after people, but a 68-m-long alleyway located at the end of Xitang West Street is pretty particular. Its sewer skin is paved with 216 three-centimeter-thick stone slabs, which is the reason why this alleyway is named the Shipi Lane. The Shipi Lane is relatively narrow and the widest point is 1.1 m, the narrowest part is only 0.8 m wide [3], which is why this lane is known as "the skyline of Xitang".

In addition, the Misty Rain Corridor is also a well-known ancient architecture in Xitang. The Misty Rain Corridor is not just one peculiar corridor, but a general term for many corridors in this town. The Misty Rain Corridors mainly serve as a shelter from wind and rain and they exist in commercial blocks such as the North and South business street. The two words "Misty Rain" outline the subtlety of the magnificent Xitang. In the season when grass grows and warblers fly, suddenly there is a spring rain. The rain is clear and dripping down the verandas, filling the air with fog. With the passage of time, the applicability of the corridor is more and more extensive. In everyday life, people gather here to cool off, chat, and play a few games of chess if they meet the right person.

There are many bridges, lanes and corridors in Xitang. The bridges in Xitang also have a lot for us to talk about. It is said that there are a total of 104 bridges in Xitang, dating back to the Song Dynasty. Most of these ancient bridges are single-hole arch bridges, which are convenient for boatmen to cross. They are quite exquisite and convenient for the town people. One of the bridges, called the Huanxiu Bridge, has a couplet on both sides of its arch that reads, "ships pass through the jasper ring, people walk up the rainbow." A harmonious and beautiful picture suddenly comes to life.

The buildings in Xitang still retain the architectural style of the Ming and Qing dynasties. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, capitalism spelt and Xitang developed into one of the earliest commercial towns in South China. At the same time, capitalism drove Hui merchants eastward, who explored the commercial value of Xitang and brought Hui culture and architectural art there. The architecture of Xitang has been greatly influenced by Hui culture, especially the Matou wall. People preferred the Matou wall due to its functions of fire prevention and wind resistance, and in Xitang, Matou walls are built in many layers to show the wealth and status of its owners.

Wuzhen and Xincheng also have these characteristics. The residents live near the water while the towns have various roads and lanes. And the small bridges standing on the river with black tiles and white walls are harmonious with nature.

3 The Peculiar Food

Jiangnan has all sorts of delicacies, such as mung bean cake, West Lake lotus root flour and osmanthus cake and there are numerous unique cuisines in Xitang Ancient Town, Wuzhen and Xincheng.

Taking Wuzhen as an example, tea is a must to meet people, and there is a very special kind of tea in Wuzhen called smoked bean tea. In smoked bean tea, the main ingredient is soybeans rather than tea. Local people smoke soya beans over charcoal fires until their skins wrinkle, then they pour tea into cups with sesame seeds, tangerine peel and osmanthus flowers to match. Smoked bean tea is becoming a top treat. In the old days, because of the complicated manufacturing process of smoked bean tea, it was usually served when a new son-in-law came to visit for the first time. But now, with the development of technology, it is not so difficult to make smoked bean tea, and people get to enjoy this kind of tea in daily life.

There are many different kinds of cakes in Wuzhen, among which Dingsheng cake is the most famous. Dingsheng cake is sweet and soft and shaped like a purple lotus flower. The outer layer is covered with fragrant rice and glutinous rice flour, and the inside is made of red bean paste, with a little white sugar and osmanthus flowers. It is suitable for those who have a sweet tooth. Dingsheng means certain victory. According to legend, it was originally a special snack for soldiers returning from a victorious war and later it becomes popular among students because it represents good luck.

When a place is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is the local food. Speaking of stinky tofu, people often associate it with Changsha. But a lot of people don't know that Wuzhen also has its own distinctive stinky tofu. The stinky tofu sold on the streets of Wuzhen can be made in two ways. One is to use dried beans soaked in a marinated pork broth for more than 20 h, which is similar to dried tofu and has a strong taste. One is to deep-fry it and sprinkle it with scallions and spices, making the tofu crispier. But if you want to make it at home, there's an even more special way to make it. The stinky tofu is fried until it's half-cooked and creamy, then it's steamed in a pot with salt until it becomes pale white. This makes stinky tofu even softer. Sometimes people would add an egg in the tofu and make it tastier and more suitable for meals.

The delicacies of Xitang and Xincheng also have their own unique features. For example, The Bazhen Cake of Xitang is made of eight herbs, such as Yam, Tuckahoe, Gordon eurox seed, rice kernel, malt, lentil, lotus meat, hawthorn, etc. The process is extremely difficult and takes a lot of efforts. Xincheng became well-known as an intangible heritage town because of its traditional pastry production skills.

4 The Unique Customs

To these three towns, Confucianism is clearly reflected in the residential life. Their lifestyle is greatly influenced by the euro gentle and elegant lifestyle, namely "li", and it's exemplified by the marriage custom of Xincheng.

When a husband and wife visit each other's home for the first time, their parents will bring them a cup of tea and the uncles and aunts will give them red envelopes to welcome them. When an engagement is made, the two families will find a fortune teller

to find a perfect date for the wedding and the couple would first be engaged and then married. Xincheng does not place as much emphasis on engagement as some places, such as Wenzhou, but it is still indispensable to them. And they would hold the wedding banquet for three days. They have the reception on the first day, the wedding ceremony on the second day and the appreciation banquet on the third day. Since Xincheng has a subtropical monsoon climate, with hot summers and warm winters, distinct seasons and abundant rainfall, weddings are usually held indoors to prevent the impacts of rain. On the first day, only close relatives or friends are invited and there are not many tables at the reception. And a wedding banquet is a big event for the villagers, so every family in the village will contribute to help. The next day was the formal wedding ceremony, with all the relatives and friends invited. Each family must donate money, and the couple must return the gift, otherwise it will be considered unlucky. The third day is relatively simple. The couple will thank the villagers for helping them and hold a banquet for them in the evening. In the process of getting married in Xincheng, the people there show their manners in every act.

Xitang and Wuzhen are both prosperous, and the residents there are hospitable to visitors, blending their gentleness into every move to show the town's charm.

5 The Dialects of Jiangnan

The dialects of Xitang Ancient Town, Wuzhen and Xincheng belong to the Suhujia sub-area of Taihu Sub-area of Wu language, which has similarities with suhu sub-area [4]. In Suzhou dialect, “Han Dou” means “pea”, “Chen Guang” means “time”, and in Shanghai dialect, “Jin Zao, Meng Zao” means “today, tomorrow”, which are more or less reflected in the dialects of the three towns. In the dialects, there is no warped tongue sound and few back nasal sounds. The basic tone is the first flat tone, with few oblique tones, and some are generally the second and fourth tones. The tone sometimes sounds rude, not as gentle as Suzhou dialect and not as sweet as Shanghai dialect [5].

Local customs and habits can also be learned from dialects. For example, in Wuzhen, people call attending funerals “eating tofu rice”. When someone dies in a villager's family in Jiangsu and Zhejiang province and the family needs the help of others in the village to hold a funeral, the host family needs to hold a banquet as a reward. However, since the host family is often not that rich, the meal for the funeral is normally quite simple and the family will serve the villagers meals with tofu (tofu is cheap and white, which matches the solemn atmosphere). In the village, there are always some taboos about death, so the relatives and friends of the host family will not call it attending a funeral, but call it eating tofu rice. This custom is still preserved in rural areas and is simply called “eating tofu”.

Dialect is spoken by people, and the common people have added a lot of wisdom into it. Many of the terms are very vivid; for instance, the needles for sewing clothes are called “ni xie” in Xincheng dialect, which sounds the same as “yin xian”, whose function is to draw the thread from end to end. And “ni” in Xincheng means thin or long, which is appropriate for describing both needle and thread.

Due to its full voiced sound, the dialects of these three towns sound more suitable for the locals. Combined with the slow speed of people in Jiangnan, the dialects have the characteristics of softness in the locals in this area.

6 The Distinct Intangible Cultural Heritage Features

The Intangible Cultural Heritage List in Zhejiang province covers many contents, and there are also many intangible cultural heritages in the Wuyue Cultural District. Xitang Ancient Town now has 28 intangible cultural heritage projects at all levels, including 6 provincial-level traditional button making skills. In Wuzhen and Xincheng, Wuzhen Xiangcheng City and traditional pastry production skills are also listed in the intangible cultural heritage list.

Xitang is known as the hometown of Buttons in China, and the technology of buttons has developed to a state of excellence. In 2021, “Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China” Xitang Pankou Exhibition was solemnly opened in Jiashan Museum. 50 Pankou paintings of different styles created the formed of a red boat through pankou, filling, embedding and other techniques, and combined different elements together to convey sincere wishes to the Communist Party of China, with certain aesthetic value. The button industry group in Xitang is quite complete. In recent years, Xitang has continuously pursued innovation, expanded its international vision and actively combined with other cultures and digital media to go global.

The development of Intangible cultural heritage in Wuzhen has entered a relatively perfected period. The one-stop production of handicraft workshops, artisan shops, intangible cultural heritage performances and experiences gives people a deep understanding of the local intangible cultural heritage. At the same time, with Wuzhen Drama Festival and World Internet Conference held here, Wuzhen has never been this popular and well-known before and has become a resounding brand of intangible heritage town.

Xincheng is the relatively less well-known of the three towns, but it has not been left behind in the development of traditional pastry production techniques. On the basis of retaining the old town blocks on both sides of the City River with strong cultural temperament, the town is actively transforming to adapt to the urbanization construction. The unique traditional pastry processing technology is attached to moon cakes, sugar cakes and other ordinary food, seeking to spread the intangible cultural heritage culture in the process of commercialization, paying attention to the unity of social benefits and cultural benefits [6], to achieve the intangible cultural heritage.

7 Conclusion

Although Xitang Ancient Town, Wuzhen and Xincheng are located in different places, they are influenced by strong local culture in many aspects and present typical characteristics of Jiangnan water towns. Most of the buildings in the towns were built around the waters with bridges and lanes crossing the towns, and there is a unique way to make local delicacies. The people here treat others with courtesy and communicate with each other in a soft and unique dialect. At the same time, each town has its own characteristics of intangible cultural heritage, which is the overall feature of the town in Wuyue Cultural area. In 2021, the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued the Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which shows that the country attaches importance to and guarantees intangible cultural heritage. The Intangible Cultural Heritage Town of Wuyue Cultural

District should form a systematic development model, cultivate the brand effect, and actively respond to the call of the state.

Acknowledgments. The essay was completed under the guidance of the advisor—Xuefeng Ying.

Authors' Contributions. Two authors finalized the theme on the basis of discussion. Shuxian Yao wrote the general framework of the essay, Xichen Wang polished the content; after the full text, Xichen Wang wrote the abstract and key words, Shuxian Yao summarized the full text, and combed the characteristics of the intangible cultural heritage towns. The full essay is completed under the joint efforts of two authors.

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