

Rural revitalisation in Songyang

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Abstract Rural revitalisation in China has traditionally involved the demolition of old housing, construction of new developments, and the relocation of original residents. Since the beginning of Xi Jinping's leadership in 2012, however, national policy has shifted toward a pro-conservation model of urban and rural regeneration. Central to this transformation is the Excellent Traditional Culture policy (2013), which promotes balanced development across urban-rural divides and regional disparities. This policy reframes rural areas not as impoverished backwaters, but as valuable cultural and ecological landscapes. Initiatives such as the Beautiful Countryside programme reflect this reorientation by emphasising infrastructure improvement, environmental quality, and the aesthetic and cultural preservation of rural settlements.

Zhejiang Province exemplifies this policy shift through its early implementation of the Project for Thousands of Villages (2003), which placed cultural heritage at the core of rural development. In Songyang County, a targeted village conservation programme aligns with this agenda, integrating rural heritage into the broader revitalisation strategy. This paper applies UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach—which considers built heritage, natural environment, local communities, and intangible culture—to analyse the revitalisation of mountain villages in Songyang. The study argues that the HUL framework offers a robust methodology for understanding rural conservation practices in contemporary China, particularly in mountainous regions where the natural environment is inseparable from settlement identity.