

FROM CULTURAL HERITAGE TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: GOVERNANCE INSIGHTS FROM QINGSHANGUAN RURAL HOMESTAY RENOVATION

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Abstract: This study explores how cultural heritage governance can drive experiential tourism and rural development through the case of the Qingshanguan Homestay renovation in Hebei Province, China. Situated within the Great Wall Cultural Belt, Qingshanguan provides a unique context where heritage preservation, community participation, and rural revitalization intersect. Using a qualitative approach that combines field research, interviews, surveys, and case analysis, the study examines how local authorities, village committees, residents, and tourism stakeholders collaborate to balance cultural protection with economic growth. The findings show that embedding Great Wall narratives and symbols into homestay renewal transforms static relics into living cultural resources, while differentiated experiential strategies tailored to families, youth backpackers, middle-aged leisure travelers, and elderly wellness visitors enhance cultural immersion, extend stays, and foster intergenerational interaction. At the same time, participatory governance mechanisms generate employment, improve spatial quality, and strengthen community identity, illustrating how experiential tourism can be governed as a tool for sustainable local development. The study proposes a replicable governance pathway model—Cultural Heritage Governance → Experiential Tourism → Sustainable Rural Development—that demonstrates the potential of heritage-led initiatives to reconcile preservation with revitalization. The research offers theoretical insights and practical implications for policymakers, administrators, and practitioners seeking to integrate cultural heritage into rural governance strategies.

Keywords: Local governance, Cultural heritage, Optimized Design of the Homestay, Experiential tourism, Rural revitalization, Community participation

1. Introduction

In the context of rural revitalization and urban–rural integration, rural homestays in China have emerged as an important vehicle for the integration of culture, ecology, and tourism. They have not only contributed to the revitalization of rural economies and the improvement of living environments but also become significant windows for inheriting regional culture and showcasing local lifestyles (Young, 2021). With national policy support and the upgrading of residents' consumption structure, the number and typology of rural homestays have diversified, positioning them as key drivers of rural spatial renewal and cultural rejuvenation.

Despite their rapid growth, rural homestays face several challenges. On the one hand, design homogenization and superficial cultural expression are common, with limited attention given to deep narrative logic or immersive experiential mechanisms. On the other hand, the diverse needs of tourist groups are insufficiently addressed, as most homestays lack targeted spatial strategies and functional configurations that meet the expectations of visitors across different ages, interests, and behavioral characteristics (Chen, 2021; Kee, 2021). Moreover, weak ecological integration and insufficient community participation often result in spatial fragmentation, cultural dilution, and ecological strain. These problems highlight the pressing need for governance approaches

that can balance cultural preservation, ecological sustainability, and local economic development.

International scholarship has long emphasized the significance of protecting rural heritage, fostering ecological sustainability, and integrating cultural tourism. For example, the VerSus project evaluates sustainability in architectural heritage renewal across environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions, stressing the synergy between tradition and modernity (Correia, 2017). Similarly, the ICOMOS charter advocates for the reuse of historical spaces with cultural authenticity (ICOMOS, 1964). In China, research has focused on the preservation of vernacular architecture, the revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, and mechanisms of urban–rural integration, with calls to move beyond path-dependent “retro copying” toward more experiential, localized, and niche approaches (Song, 2021). Yet, despite advances in theory, practice often falls short in creating sustainable cultural scenes, differentiated spatial design, and effective governance mechanisms to integrate stakeholders in heritage-based rural tourism.

The Great Wall Cultural Belt provides a distinctive context for examining these issues. As a symbol of Chinese civilization, the villages along the Great Wall embody rich historical imagery and spatial memory, offering both opportunities and challenges for cultural translation and heritage management. Projects such as the Qingshanguan homestay renovation benefit from the tourism brand of the Great Wall and its mature infrastructure, yet they are often limited to decorative cultural expressions and convergent spatial styles, with shallow cultural experiences and weak eco-cultural synergies (Yu, 2020; Mohd-Noor, 2019). This reveals a governance dilemma: while heritage-led tourism initiatives can stimulate rural development, they may also risk undermining cultural authenticity and ecological resilience without appropriate management frameworks.

In recent years, the concept of personalized experiential design has provided an innovative response to these challenges. By emphasizing cultural identity, spatial participation, and situational memory, it tailors homestay experiences to the needs of diverse visitor groups while respecting the ecological and cultural context (Wang, 2019; Kuzior, 2020). When combined with localized governance strategies—such as community participation, targeted policy incentives, and collaborative planning—this approach can serve as a model for balancing cultural preservation with rural revitalization.

This paper examines the Qingshanguan Rural Homestay renovation project in Hebei Province as a case study to explore how cultural heritage can be transformed into a catalyst for local development through governance mechanisms. Specifically, it investigates how local authorities, communities, and tourism actors negotiate the balance between heritage protection and economic development, and how personalized experiential design can be embedded within governance frameworks. By situating the analysis within the broader discourse on sub-national governance, the study seeks to provide both theoretical insights and practical strategies for policymakers, administrators, and practitioners engaged in heritage-led rural revitalization.

2. Research methods and processes

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on Qingshanguan Village in Qianxi County, Hebei Province, as the primary field site. Situated within the Great Wall Cultural Belt, the village provides a unique context where cultural heritage

protection, rural revitalization, and tourism development intersect. By combining fieldwork with case analysis, the research seeks to uncover how governance mechanisms, community participation, and cultural-symbolic resources shape the renewal of rural homestays as drivers of local development.

2.1 Case selection and site overview

Qingshanguan was selected as a representative case due to its dual significance as a strategic pass of the Ming Great Wall and as a contemporary pilot village within the “Great Wall National Cultural Park” initiative. Located at the southern foot of the Yanshan Mountains, approximately 220 kilometers from Beijing, the village retains both tangible and intangible heritage, including stone-wood courtyard dwellings, ancient temples, and living traditions such as temple fairs, paper-cutting, and gong-and-drum performances. The village’s architectural heritage is classified into three main categories: traditional stone-and-wood courtyard houses (Category A), early 20th century brick-wood dwellings (Category B), and wooden religious buildings (Category C). This typology provided a basis for assessing the conservation status of built assets and formulating tailored renovation strategies.

2.2 Field research

A two-week field investigation was carried out in the second half of 2024. Multiple data collection techniques were employed, including:

On-site observation of building conditions, spatial layouts, and cultural nodes linked to the Great Wall;

Semi-structured interviews with homestay operators, village committee members, local residents, and officials from the Tangshan Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism;

Questionnaire surveys with a sample of 126 tourists to capture demographic profiles, motivations, and perceptions of existing homestays;

Document analysis of local planning documents, policy frameworks, and tourism development strategies.

This triangulated approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of both the physical environment and the governance context underpinning homestay development.

2.3 Analytical Dimensions

The analysis proceeded along three dimensions. First, the spatial and architectural assessment examined building forms, preservation states, and adaptive reuse practices, highlighting issues of design homogeneity and cultural dilution. Second, the tourist demand analysis investigated the diversity of visitor groups—such as parent-child families, middle-aged leisure travelers, young backpackers, and cultural enthusiasts—revealing mismatches between tourist expectations and available homestay services. Third, the cultural-symbolic analysis focused on the Great Wall heritage, interpreting how physical structures (e.g., gates, towers, courtyards) and intangible practices (e.g., legends, rituals, crafts) function as governance resources for cultural scene creation and community identity.

2.4 Collaborative Design Process

In late 2024, Qingshanguan Village launched a solicitation of design proposals for homestay renovation. The research team, in collaboration with local authorities, the village committee, and homestay operators, participated in workshops and co-design

discussions to formulate renewal strategies. This participatory process emphasized three principles: (1) continuity of traditional village texture and architectural forms; (2) integration of cultural symbols of the Great Wall into spatial planning and interior design; and (3) differentiated design strategies tailored to distinct tourist segments.

2.5 Methodological Orientation

By integrating field-based evidence, stakeholder perspectives, and cultural-symbolic interpretation, the study employed a governance-oriented methodological framework. Rather than treating homestay renovation solely as a matter of design, the research situates it within broader issues of sub-national governance, heritage management, and community participation. This approach not only grounds the analysis in empirical detail but also provides practical insights for policymakers and practitioners engaged in the sustainable renewal of heritage villages.

3. Optimized design of the homestay

The results of this study reflect how cultural heritage resources, governance mechanisms, and community participation can be translated into practical strategies for homestay renovation within the Great Wall Cultural Belt. By aligning spatial innovation with differentiated tourist needs, the Qingshanguan project demonstrates how local cultural narratives can be transformed into experiential spaces that enhance rural development and strengthen heritage preservation.

3.1 Exploratory spaces for parent–child families

One of the key findings concerns the creation of “exploratory” spaces for children and parent–child groups. At Castle Peak Inn, the largest courtyard homestay in the village, the design strategy combined cultural storytelling with playful interaction. The spatial circulation was reorganized to follow an “exploration–discovery–interaction” logic, converting static courtyards into dynamic learning and playing environments. Bedrooms were reimagined as tree houses and tents, borrowing forms from Great Wall battlements, while outdoor areas included interactive lawns and wading pools to ensure both safety and inclusivity for family activities. The introduction of cultural treasure-hunt games, such as Great Wall story walls and totem recognition, embedded heritage learning within recreational activities, extending average family stay duration and deepening cultural resonance.

3.2 Light-adventure functions for young backpackers

For younger visitors (18–35 years), the findings highlight the value of “light adventure” design strategies that combine affordability, cultural immersion, and social interaction. The West Cross Courtyard was adapted into a flexible shared space by removing rigid functional divisions and integrating kitchen, living, and courtyard into a communal hub. Recessed “cave-like” beds offered semi-private retreats while still connecting to public areas. Outdoor nodes included climbing devices, fire pits, and wooden platforms to encourage spontaneous interaction. Cultural imagery, such as Great Wall reliefs and totemic patterns, was embedded within the interior and exterior design, stimulating interest in heritage while fostering a sense of belonging. This approach successfully increased visitor-generated content (UGC) on social media, positioning Qingshanguan as an attractive cultural immersion site for youth.



Figure 2. Intention map of Qingshanguan Homestay renovation for young backpackers

3.3 Elegant cultural scenes for middle-aged leisure groups

Middle-aged leisure travelers demonstrated a preference for “elegant” environments emphasizing cultural refinement and quality of life. At selected courtyards, interior spaces were reinterpreted through literati aesthetics—wooden furniture, Great Wall-themed landscape paintings, and warm tones—to create a calm, elegant atmosphere conducive to reading, tea tasting, and cultural gatherings. Courtyards were designed as multifunctional spaces for calligraphy salons, tea parties, and small cultural events, combining traditional aesthetics with modern comfort features such as intelligent lighting and air-conditioning systems. This strategy addressed the dual needs of cultural depth and physical-mental relaxation, enhancing Qingshanguan’s role as a site of contemporary cultural gatherings.

3.4 Slow-life spaces for elderly wellness tourists

For elderly tourists, the Beicheng He Homestay was renovated around the theme of “slow life,” prioritizing safety, accessibility, and cultural nourishment. Guest rooms incorporated barrier-free features such as non-slip floors, roll-free showers, and supportive handrails, while warm color palettes and Great Wall ink paintings created a soothing environment. Courtyards were equipped with tea platforms, swing chairs, and Tai Chi practice areas, encouraging both rest and social interaction. In addition, cross-generational shared spaces—such as a restored “Border Canteen” offering historical meals and an open-air “starry sky theater” screening cultural films—served as cultural interfaces that encouraged intergenerational dialogue, strengthened local identity, and deepened visitor attachment to the site.



Figure 4. Intention map of Qingshanguan Homestay renovation for elderly tourists
3.5 Cross-generational and community interfaces

Beyond group-specific design, the findings highlight the importance of shared spaces that foster cross-generational interaction and community engagement. Collective dining areas, cultural performances by the local Quyi Society, and participatory activities such as handicraft workshops and storytelling sessions helped reposition Qingshanguan Homestay not only as an accommodation site but as a community cultural hub. These design strategies enhanced social cohesion among tourists of different age groups and reinforced local cultural pride.

4. Evaluation: governance effectiveness and community participation outcomes

The evaluation of the Qingshanguan Homestay renewal project extends beyond architectural design to examine how policy frameworks, governance mechanisms, and community participation contributed to the effectiveness of cultural heritage-driven local development. The project demonstrates that heritage protection, spatial innovation, and rural revitalization are mutually reinforcing when supported by coordinated governance and active stakeholder involvement.

4.1 Policy support and strategic alignment

The project benefitted from strong institutional backing under the Great Wall National Cultural Park initiative and the broader Rural Revitalization Strategy. These policies provided both legitimacy and strategic direction, framing homestay renovation not merely as a commercial endeavor but as a cultural heritage protection measure and a rural development tool. Local authorities, particularly the Tangshan Municipal Bureau of

Culture and Tourism, actively facilitated the project by convening stakeholders, setting regulatory guidelines, and encouraging proposals that balanced cultural authenticity with tourism growth. This alignment ensured that the project's goals were consistent with national and regional policy priorities, enhancing its replicability as a governance model.

4.2 Community Participation and Co-Production

The evaluation highlights the value of community co-construction in strengthening both cultural continuity and operational sustainability. Local villagers contributed knowledge about historical architecture, intangible cultural practices, and everyday spatial uses, which became embedded in the design of homestays. Participatory workshops organized in late 2024 brought together homestay operators, village committees, residents, and cultural officials, resulting in a shared vision for renewal. The incorporation of local crafts (e.g., paper-cutting, woodcarving) and community performances (e.g., Quyi Society shows) into the homestay model ensured that residents were not passive recipients but active co-creators of cultural tourism products. This participatory mechanism not only enriched the cultural depth of homestays but also strengthened community identity and local ownership.

4.3 Outcomes for tourists and cultural identity

User surveys and interviews conducted after the initial implementation phase show positive impacts on cultural learning and identity formation. A majority of visitors (82%) reported that the integration of Great Wall cultural symbols—such as border wall motifs, beacon tower imagery, and traditional stone-wood textures—enhanced their understanding of the symbiotic relationship between Great Wall heritage and local village life. Participatory activity spaces, such as handicraft workshops and storytelling areas, were widely recognized as deepening the sense of belonging and interactivity. These outcomes demonstrate that heritage-led governance frameworks can effectively transform tourist behavior from passive consumption to active participation in cultural reproduction.

4.4 Expert assessments and practical value

An expert review involving academics and practitioners in architecture, tourism, and cultural heritage management confirmed the project's broader governance significance. Evaluators emphasized the scheme's contribution to "cultural visualization" and "spatial behavior stimulation," but more importantly, they recognized its role in establishing a collaborative governance framework. By integrating cultural heritage management with rural economic strategies, the Qingshanguan project illustrates how sub-national governance can reconcile preservation and development.

4.5 Broader governance implications

The evaluation suggests three wider implications. First, cultural heritage-based homestay renewal can serve as a policy instrument for rural revitalization when linked to national and regional development agendas. Second, community participation in design and operation enhances both cultural sustainability and governance legitimacy, reducing risks of cultural distortion or commodification. Third, the integration of cultural symbols into everyday tourist experiences demonstrates a viable model of heritage governance as lived practice, where visitors, residents, and policymakers collectively reproduce cultural identity in situ.

5. Discussion: governance pathways linking cultural heritage, experiential tourism, and rural development

The Qingshanguan Homestay renovation project provides an instructive example of how cultural heritage can be mobilized as a governance resource to stimulate experiential tourism and, in turn, promote rural development. The findings highlight an evolving governance pathway in which cultural expression, stakeholder collaboration, and policy support converge to produce outcomes that go beyond architectural renewal, addressing broader questions of local self-government, community identity, and sustainable development.

5.1 Cultural heritage governance as a foundation

As a strategic node of the Great Wall Cultural Belt, Qingshanguan embodies the intertwined legacies of military defense, local settlement, and intangible traditions. Governance of this heritage requires more than physical protection; it involves translating cultural symbols into living practices that shape contemporary village life. The project shows that embedding Great Wall narratives into homestay design—whether through spatial motifs, festival-based experiences, or intangible heritage performances—ensures that heritage governance remains dynamic rather than static. This approach aligns with international principles (e.g., ICOMOS) while responding to local needs for cultural revitalization, allowing governance to act as a cultural and developmental catalyst.

5.2 Experiential tourism as a governance strategy

The second layer of the governance pathway lies in the deliberate use of experiential tourism as a mechanism for local engagement and economic sustainability. By segmenting tourist groups (families, youth backpackers, middle-aged leisure travelers, elderly wellness visitors) and tailoring homestay experiences to their needs, the project demonstrates how tourism can be governed through differentiated, culturally embedded design strategies. This approach not only increases visitor satisfaction but also extends length of stay, enhances cultural learning, and strengthens local pride. Importantly, the creation of shared cultural interfaces—such as community dining, participatory workshops, and open-air theaters—illustrates how experiential tourism can be governed as a form of cultural co-production, where tourists and locals become partners in heritage interpretation.

5.3 Rural development as a governance outcome

At the third stage, experiential tourism contributes directly to rural development. The Qingshanguan project shows that homestay renewal can diversify the rural economy, generate employment, and improve the living environment, while simultaneously reinforcing cultural identity. Community co-construction mechanisms ensure that villagers benefit not only as service providers but also as cultural transmitters, thus increasing governance legitimacy and inclusivity. The project also demonstrates the importance of aligning micro-level design strategies with macro-level policy frameworks, such as the Rural Revitalization Strategy, ensuring that local initiatives contribute to broader developmental goals.

5.4 Toward a replicable governance model

Taken together, the Qingshanguan experience suggests a replicable governance pathway model:

Cultural Heritage Governance → Experiential Tourism Development → Sustainable Rural Revitalization

This pathway underscores that successful rural homestay renewal requires a multi-level governance approach: protecting heritage resources, embedding them in participatory tourism experiences, and linking them to local development strategies. Such a model helps overcome common pitfalls of homogenization and cultural dilution by rooting tourism development in authentic local traditions while maintaining governance oversight to balance cultural, ecological, and economic interests.

5.5 Broader implications for local self-government

For sub-national governance, the Qingshanguan case illustrates how local authorities, community actors, and cultural stakeholders can collaboratively govern heritage-based tourism initiatives. It highlights the need for:

Policy integration across culture, tourism, and rural revitalization sectors;

Community empowerment through participatory planning and co-production of cultural services;

Sustainability mechanisms that balance economic benefits with cultural authenticity and ecological preservation.

This governance pathway offers not only a practical framework for the Great Wall Cultural Belt but also a model adaptable to other heritage-rich rural regions, demonstrating how local self-government can transform cultural assets into engines of sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the Qingshanguan Homestay renovation within the Great Wall Cultural Belt to explore how cultural heritage can be mobilized through governance frameworks to promote experiential tourism and rural revitalization. By situating the analysis at the intersection of heritage preservation, policy implementation, and community participation, the research demonstrated that homestay renewal is not only a design practice but also a governance process with profound implications for local self-government.

The findings underscore three main contributions. First, cultural heritage governance serves as the foundation: the integration of Great Wall symbols and traditions into spatial design transformed static heritage into a living cultural resource. Second, experiential tourism functions as a governance strategy: by tailoring homestay spaces to diverse visitor groups and fostering participatory cultural scenes, the project enhanced tourist satisfaction, extended stays, and reinforced cultural learning. Third, rural development emerges as the governance outcome: through employment opportunities, cultural continuity, and improved living environments, the project contributed to both economic vitality and social cohesion.

Together, these findings point to a replicable governance pathway model:

Cultural Heritage Governance → Experiential Tourism → Sustainable Rural Development

This model highlights that the success of rural homestay renewal depends on multi-level governance that integrates policy support, community co-construction, and sustainable cultural management. For policymakers, it demonstrates how cultural assets

can be transformed into drivers of rural revitalization when supported by collaborative governance. For local administrators and practitioners, it offers practical insights into balancing heritage authenticity with market adaptability.

More broadly, the Qingshanguan case contributes to the international discourse on local self-government by showing how heritage-led governance can bridge the gap between cultural preservation and contemporary development needs. By embedding cultural identity into everyday tourism practices, local governance can move beyond mere protection toward active cultural reproduction, ensuring that heritage not only survives but thrives as a living force in rural transformation.

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