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Religious Heritage Conservation and Community Engagement under the Threshold of Heritage Revitalisation in Ningxia

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Abstract

Heritage revitalisation and community engagement are essential for the conservation of religious cultural heritage. Heritage revitalisation reuses historic buildings and places as useful resources for the community. Community engagement, on the other hand, involves community residents in the process of cultural heritage conservation and inheritance, so that they can better comprehend and inherit their own religious cultural heritage. Based on the perspective of heritage revitalisation, this paper will analyse the conservation value of religious heritage in Ningxia and explore the path of community engagement in heritage conservation.

Keywords

Heritage Revitalisation; Religious Heritage; Community Engagement; Heritage Conservation.

1. Introduction

Community engagement has become an important part of global cultural heritage protection and management efforts. Community participatory governance has become an international trend, but most of the communities in Ningxia that we have observed so far are not involved in power sharing during cultural heritage management. The role of communities in the process of cultural heritage conservation and management should not be marginalised.

Community engagement in heritage conservation planning has become popular in the international community in recent decades. China has also embraced concepts related to community engagement introduced by international agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme in the field of cultural heritage. However, these introduced concepts of community are regulated and restricted, and there are few examples of community engagement in decision-making processes. Religious and cultural heritage restoration and conservation projects in Ningxia are usually technology-centred, with little attention paid to community's values. For citizens and religious believers in heritage sites, who have the closest relationship with heritage, engagement in conservation is a spatial expression of the value of community presence. However, in reality, it is often the government, developers, archaeologists and construction teams who have a direct interest in the conservation work, while the community public, the largest contact with the architectural heritage and the main user of the heritage, is always in a marginalised position. The public is often not involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of conservation projects, but only in the results.

There are two reasons why communities are currently marginalised in conservation efforts: firstly, the government has not yet empowered communities; secondly, citizens lack the capacity and willingness to engage effectively. Cultural heritage conservation in Ningxia is mainly led by the government and professionals and carried out from top down. The pattern of community-based units focusing on public participation and community power is still lacking. Communities gather the consensus of residents and the power of the public, which has a greater

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role in promoting cultural heritage protection, and can be used as a unit for public engagement in the implementation of religious and cultural heritage conservation in Ningxia.

2. Problems Existing in the Heritage Conservation of Ningxia

Ningxia is one of the most important historical and cultural centres in Northwest China, and its diverse cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs have left behind a rich cultural heritage. These heritages reflect the cultural, scientific and artistic characteristics of several historical periods and provide valuable information for people to understand the local history. At the same time, religious heritage is also an important part of the cultural life of the local community and a source of spiritual support for its inhabitants. The conservation and adaptive use of cultural heritage is an important issue in urban development, and has presented a diversified concept. From the viewpoint of the current heritage conservation system, Ningxia is still facing a variety of problems, including the single conservation group, the imbalance in the relationship between heritage conservation and utilisation, and insufficient reflection on the relationship between heritage and community.

2.1. Single Heritage Conservation Group

In the conservation of religious heritage in Ningxia, the research and working groups involved in conservation are mainly professionals represented by universities or scientific research institutes. There is a lack of broad social participation and cooperation. The main reason caused the single conservation group is that the public does not share a comprehensive knowledge of the value of heritage, and is unable to fully understand the value and significance of heritage conservation. In some cities, the value of religious heritage has not yet been generally recognised by society. Residents of communities where religious heritage is located still have a relatively one-sided or lack of awareness of its value. Generally speaking, the surrounding community has a natural emotional connection to the local heritage, but this is not enough to motivate the majority of people to take an active role in preserving the architectural heritage of their neighbourhoods, with only a few awakened individuals playing a major role in promoting preservation in their communities. Community residents are the direct beneficiaries and custodians of the local religious heritage, and they should be active and proactive in the conservation of religious heritage. However, the current enthusiasm of the community to engage in heritage conservation is not high.

Most of the current conservation projects are carried out by local government agencies, mainly in the top-down system. Public show a little awareness and has low engagement. For some religious architectural heritage conservation projects, local governments are actively involved and responsible for implementation, while the public can only be passively involved. However, in a few examples of conservation, such as the Julun Temple in Lingwu City, community residents were actively involved in many aspects of the work, such as heritage surveys and fundraising. In addition, the establishment of volunteer teams has helped in the daily management. The absence of a community perspective can lead to a less comprehensive understanding of heritage value and significance. Therefore, it is recommended to raise the community's awareness of conservation, strengthen community engagement, and expand the conservation force so as to improve the effectiveness of heritage conservation in a comprehensive manner.

2.2. Imbalance Relationship between Heritage Value and Use

Heritage has irreplaceable multidimensional value attributes such as history, culture, science and economy. In reality, however, there exists imbalance in the relationship between value and use between heritage conservation and the expression of heritage values, which compromises the effectiveness of conservation and may even bring damage to the heritage.

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Some heritage has been over-utilised and commercialised, resulting in its original historical value and cultural significance being affected. For example, the Jade Emperor Pavilion in Pingluo, Ningxia, underwent large-scale alteration and expansion to meet the needs of the tourism industry, introducing commercial elements and entertainment facilities to increase economic benefits. The original simple architectural style was added to a higher regulation, weakening its original historical value. Therefore, there is a need to strike a balance between historical values and commercial interests in heritage conservation practices.

Religious heritage, by contrast, is more complex and also involves the continuity of religious beliefs and cultural traditions. It has a unique religious function, providing places of worship for religious believers. Over-commercialisation can prevent believers from carrying out their normal religious activities, while religious tourism, which is originally unique, becomes a one-size-fits-all model under the impact of commercialisation.

2.3. Lack of Connection between Heritage and its Environment

Architectural heritage is interdependent with its environment, and constitutes a geo-community. Heritage is nurtured by its environment and at the same time it impacts on heritage. However, many heritage conservation measures tend to focus only on the heritage itself, ignoring the interrelationships between it and its environment. Such simplistic perspectives and approaches render heritage detached from its environment.

Heritage, as an important part of local culture, is a collection of cultural, historical, religious and other elements, with complex interactive links with the surrounding environment, enabling the sharing and complementarity of resources. Comprehensive conservation measures should therefore be taken, focusing on the heritage itself as well as taking into account its relationship with the environment and the community, in order to achieve comprehensive conservation and sustainable development. For example, the Chongsheng Temple in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province. Chongsheng Temple used to be one of the centres of Buddhism in the Bai area, and a centre of faith for the local people. The neighbourhood of Dali Ancient City, where Chongsheng Temple is located, is a community full of traditional Bai culture and folklore. This community is inhabited by local Bai residents and various cultural and artistic workers, and is also a must-visit place for many tourists and pilgrims. This community and the Chongsheng Temple are interdependent and mutually supportive, forming a unique and organic whole.

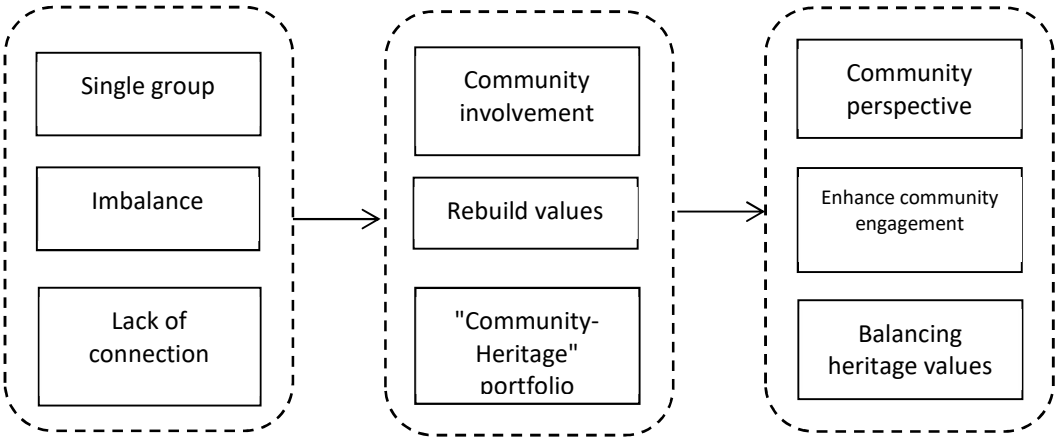


Figure 1. Flowchart of community engagement in heritage conservation

In conclusion, heritage conservation in Ningxia still suffers from a single conservation force, an imbalance in heritage values and a lack of connection with the community. Therefore, heritage

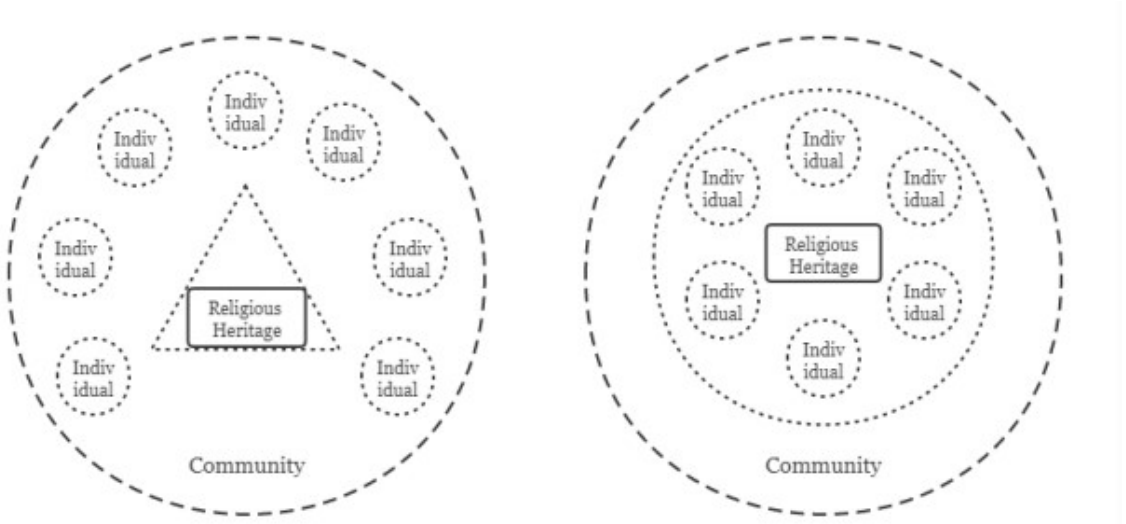
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conservation work needs to establish a more comprehensive view and a mechanism for mutual promotion between heritage and community development. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the comprehensive consideration of the heritage itself, its surrounding environment and the community, and to focus on the protection of the cultural connotation and historical value of the heritage. There is also a need to increase community awareness and participation in heritage conservation in order to achieve sustainable development in heritage conservation. More specifically, heritage conservation can be assigned to the host community as a conservation unit. (As shown in Figure 1).

3. Community-heritage Integration

The "community-heritage" integration perspective considers and presents heritage and community as a whole, and the creation of a community and heritage community is a prerequisite for public engagement and the sustainability of conservation. The formation of integration needs to be based on bottom-up public engagement mechanisms, taking into account the perceived value of heritage in contributing to community development.

3.1. Basis for the Formation of a "Community-heritage" Integration



"Heritage-Individual-Community" "Community-Heritage" Integration

Figure 2. Flowchart of a "Community-Heritage" Integration

The value of heritage is rich and diverse, with historical, religious, artistic and other ontological values, as well as cultural, social, economic and other derived values. Religious heritage usually reflects people's ideas and customs in religious activities, and is of great significance to the harmonious coexistence of human beings and the environment. The cultural values it contains constitute the cultural content of the community and play an important role in shaping the community atmosphere. In terms of social value, the value of religious heritage is reflected in its shaping and construction of the community. Heritage represents the collective memory of an area and has social attributes such as identity and a sense of belonging to the community, providing the community with a platform for spiritual fulfilment and social contact. In addition, through the adaptive use of religious heritage, communities can gain economic benefits, thus highlighting the positive impact of heritage on the community economy. This perspective suggests that we should consider the value of religious heritage from multiple dimensions and make it play a broader role in community development and heritage through rational

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development and utilisation. An example is the Shaolin Temple in China, which has developed a religious tourism economy. The Shaolin Temple has adopted a model combining Buddhism and martial arts tourism, attracting untold numbers of domestic and foreign tourists. This is a very successful case of religious tourism that boosts the local economy while saving funds for the repair and maintenance of the Shaolin Temple. The above case shows that religious heritage is important for community development. Individuals in the community, as stakeholders of heritage values, are the core force driving the formation of a "community-heritage" integration. The formation of it can realise the public engagement in the bottom-up heritage conservation mechanism, thus strengthening the sense of participation and responsibility of the individuals in community and promoting the healthy interaction between the community and the heritage. (Refer to Figure 2).

3.2. Link between Heritage Conservation and Community Development

Heritage conservation from a community perspective needs to fully recognise the reciprocal relationship between heritage and community development. Heritage is the main medium for enhancing community cohesion and cultural identity, while religious heritage has a high degree of spiritual cohesion for community residents. The intangible power of local heritage can contribute to the collective shaping of the community, which in turn can lead to the shaping of community consensus, and community culture, and strengthen the collective identity of individuals in the community. Thus, the value of heritage conservation can be a major driver of community development.

Community engagement can contribute to the preservation and continuation of heritage values. By stimulating public participation, an important synergy can be formed by many parties in heritage conservation. At the same time, scientific research and holistic heritage conservation can be better accomplished by examining the significance of heritage from a daily and micro perspective and exploring ways of conservation. Ultimately, heritage conservation and community development can form a good interactive relationship and symbiotic development mechanism, which is of great significance in shaping the community heritage conservation unit.

In summary, the creation of a "community-heritage" integration is a prerequisite for community engagement in heritage conservation. The formation of the integration requires bottom-up participation, taking into account the perceived value of heritage in contributing to community development. It needs to fully recognise the reciprocal relationship between heritage and community development. The value of heritage conservation can be a driving force of it, thereby strengthening the sense of participation and responsibility of individual in communities and promoting positive interaction between communities and heritage.

4. Conclusion

Communities are where heritage values are nurtured and grow. Communities have significant potential for heritage conservation and are key to promoting heritage conservation and revitalisation. Encouraging public participation in the community, fostering cultural confidence in the community, and forming a cultural community to establish a bottom-up model of heritage conservation are key to achieving heritage conservation and community development. At the same time, the Chinese government is also promoting the concept of heritage revitalisation and supporting the development of creative design for heritage, cultural and creative industries and other areas. These policies provide important support and guarantee for heritage conservation.

In the future implement of religious heritage conservation, it is all the more important for us to analyse and solve the social problems from the perspective of the community, so as to achieve the living conservation of heritage, thereby ensuring that our religious heritage conservation practice and sustainable development can be carried out in a more harmonious and orderly

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manner. By forming a community-heritage integration through extensive community engagement, we can achieve the long-term goal of conserving and revitalising religious heritage, and giving it a new lease of life in the modern society.

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