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From an Ideal Village to a Cultural Landscape: Rediscovering People's Commune Heritage

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Abstract: As an important ideal social practice in world history, the people's commune system and its organized architectural activities took the first step in promoting rural modernization in modern China and had a significant impact on the built environment of urban and rural areas. This study aims to discuss how to view the legacy of rural people's communes in service of contemporary society. Taking the Weixing Commune, which was the earliest established commune in China in 1958, as an example, through a comparative study of relevant planning and construction archives and the literature, combined with onsite investigations and through the perspective of the cultural landscape, this study delves into the history of local rural construction and sorts out the types, specific compositions, and value elements of the commune's remains from four dimensions: environment, industry, architecture, and memory. The heritage of the people's commune is unique. It was a comprehensive transformation of land to farmland, water conservancy, and other natural environmental patterns carried out by residents and related professionals to realize the ideal life of socialism and ultimately resulted in the shaping of a unique type of cultural landscape, presenting the coexistence of political landscapes that hold ideals and vernacular landscapes that carry life.

Keywords: ideal society; rural heritage; cultural landscape; people's commune; political landscape

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1. Introduction

After the founding of New China in 1949, owing to the country's urgent need to promote industrialization and modernization, under the economic development model of promoting labor through agriculture, the people's commune movement was set off in the vast rural areas of China in the late 1950s, and the rural commune system officially withdrew from the historical stage in 1983 [1]. During this period, under the ideal demands of the gradual transition to a communist society, which enveloped the whole country, many architectural and geographical professionals also went into rural areas and, together with local villagers, carried out large-scale construction activities to transform nature [2], which had an important impact on the built environment of rural China. During this period of collectivization, top-down special social practices not only profoundly affected the modernization process of China but also left much historical heritage. China's modernization has been stamped with socialist characteristics from the very beginning, and at the same time it is part of the modernization of the Third World [3]. As an early social practice in socialist China, a renewed understanding of the activities of the people's commune and its legacy will not only benefit the cause of rural revitalization in contemporary China but can also provide useful lessons for the modernization of non-Western countries around the world. However, the characteristics, experiences, and values of rural people's communes have remained unexamined in current historiography. Therefore, this study focuses on the historical activities of communes and then explores the cultural value behind the architectural practice to promote sustainable rural development in service of contemporary society.

At present, all sectors of the community's knowledge of the people's commune is still stuck in the overall context of the negative evaluation of the historical legacy, which is

not only due to the overall evaluation of "total rejection" brought about by the eventual disintegration of the commune as a system but also due to the exposure of the elements of idealism and the consequent human decision-making errors [4]. This has caused the commune to be largely neglected or even ignored, so that its historical legacy is facing a real crisis of complete disappearance and has an urgent need to be protected and utilized.

In recent years, there has been some progress in research on the history of modern architecture in China from 1949, and among them, urban and rural construction activities during Mao's era have begun to gradually enter the research field. For example, Xue et al. [5,6] focused on China's construction aid works and the imported projects designed by foreign architects, which were both related to China's diplomatic policy. Song and Zhu [7,8] focused on the production of architectural theory in new China and its dissemination worldwide through the analysis of architectural activities in Beijing and Guangzhou. These studies began to analyze and discuss modern Chinese architecture in its political, social, and cultural contexts, which greatly expanded research horizons. However, these studies predominantly concentrate on urban architecture or foreign aid architecture, and not enough attention has been paid to rural architectural activities in Mao's era.

Although research on the rural people's commune has achieved stage-by-stage results in recent years, it still focuses on the planning and design proposals of the commune at that time to explore the spatial "design" of the people's commune and subsequently discusses the issues of rural space and utopia [9], collective form [10], and architectural academics [11]. In sum, these studies focus on the intellectual elite and their knowledge-producing activities in rural communes, exploring the relevance of the planning and design of communes to politics.

In terms of the research on historical heritage, some scholars have begun to investigate the historical remains of this period and the theoretical exploration of heritage construction [12–14], but they have focused either on the value of a single specific architectural legacy or on the theoretical discernment of concepts such as the vernacular legacy and vernacular built legacy.

Rural people's commune heritage is concerned with two dimensions. Firstly, it belongs to modern heritage in time and, secondly, it belongs to vernacular heritage in space. In terms of modern Chinese heritage research, the systematic study of modern architectural heritage by Jiang and Wang [15] provides a detailed reference for the value assessment of the architectural heritage of rural people's communes; and the study of China's modern industrial heritage in terms of its value composition and assessment by Aoki and Xu [16] provides theoretical references for the investigation and research of the rural industrial heritage of communes. In terms of spatial attributes, earlier studies, such as Chen and Li, [17], conducted systematic studies on the concept, content, and conservation strategy of vernacular architecture, which enriched the knowledge of rural architectural heritage before the 1950s, and Sun's [18] compendium of China's agrarian cultural heritage contributed to the expansion of the types of vernacular heritage in the commune. Recently, Zhu and Yu et al. [19] analyzed the spatial distribution of people's communes in Henan Province, which contributed to the protection of rural commune heritage at the regional level. However, these studies do not specifically address the topic of the people's commune heritage. Its specific composition and value have yet to be discussed in detail, and the value of the commune is not clear.

Although authoritative documents at home and abroad, such as the Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999) [20] and the Protection of Vernacular Architecture in China—Wuxi Initiative (2007), have provided guiding opinions on the definition and protection of rural heritage, it is still necessary to combine the specific national conditions, history, culture, and other humanistic elements to carry out the localization and re-exploration of heritage. The investigation and basic research of heritage is still the most urgent task in the field of heritage research in China [21].

At the level of social practice, the Party Central Committee, the Ministry of Housing and Construction, local governments, and other organizations at all levels vigorously

promote the cause of rural revitalization, which certainly promotes China's urban and rural integration. However, in this process of rapid urbanization, a number of rural cultural relics have been demolished or destroyed due to neglect [22]. According to a recent survey of the commune remains in Jiangsu province conducted by Yu et al. [23], limited to the economic and technological conditions at that time, the facilities and other remains built during the commune period were demolished as "dangerous buildings" due to the low quality of construction [24], especially in economically developed areas, and the protection of modern vernacular heritage was in a worrisome situation. Although some scholars have long since raised the alarm [25], the lack of awareness and protection of specific types of heritage, coupled with the momentum of rapid urbanization by local governments, has added to the urgency of preserving the cultural heritage of the people's commune.

In summary, the research group has been carrying out a nationwide survey and a study on the utilization of the vernacular heritage of this period, aiming at clarifying the following questions through well-preserved representative cases:

1. Apart from the "Great Hall" and "Office Building", what heritage did the rural construction activities of the people's commune period leave behind? What types can it be divided into and what are the specific components?
2. If there are still traces to follow, in what aspects is its value reflected? What are its characteristics?

The answers to the above questions are conducive to the construction of a sound view of the cultural heritage of the commune, with the goal of correcting the historical "biases" of the people's commune by all sectors of the society in the past, preserving the precious collective memory of the exploration and practice of the ideal rural society in the history of modern China and even in the history of the world, and constructing a new typology of the vernacular heritage world widely.

2. Research Methods and Object

A key difficulty in the study of the people's commune is the lack of basic historical materials and the unknown status of the existing remains. Coupled with the continuous advancement of urbanization, the countryside is changing rapidly, which has led to certain challenges in the study of this history. In recent years, although the compilation of information in the field of humanities continues to show results [26], most of them are official historical documents, news studies, and magazine materials. They are often records of commune production data, and the content is relatively singular and has a strong ideological color, rarely touching on the construction process of physical space and the current status of the remains. The oral history of the architectural activities of this period is also insufficient. Therefore, the study of communes in the field of architecture must be combined with field research work and many more local archives.

2.1. Research Methods

This study uses a multidisciplinary approach involving the survey of historical archives and field investigation. The archival research involved examining the *Jianzhu Xuebao* [Architectural Journal], which is the official publication of the Architectural Society of China (ASC), records of local cultural archives, and unpublished materials displayed in the commune site. The analysis of these textural materials enables us to grasp the history of the construction activities of rural communes and the significance of the commune. We have conducted fieldwork mainly on people's communes of Henan Province, which was a major agricultural province in China and has well preserved the remains of the commune period. Referring to the list of national key cultural relic protection units, we finally chose the Weixing Commune in Henan Province as the representative survey object. Through field surveys, we completed the mapping of the administrative center complex at the former site of Weixing Commune, confirming the current status of these remains and their protection. Interviews conducted with local managers of the commune site provided

valuable information on the architectural history of the commune and the management of the site.

In terms of the methods of data analysis, different specific approaches were used in responding to different issues. In the study of the commune history of architectural activities, the inductive method was mainly used to analyze and summarize the general contents of the commune period. Mapping and recording commune historic relics were used to analyze the components of rural commune heritage and their respective values.

In categorizing the composition of the heritage and its analysis, we refer mainly to the existing related theories and charters on heritage preservation. Before classifying the heritage of the rural commune, it is necessary to analyze the specific composition of the contents of the construction historically. Therefore, this study mainly refers to Yoshizaka Takamasa's community circle ('KENIKI' in japanese) theory [27]. The theory of "community circle" originated from Japan and provides theoretical feasibility for this study, which is mainly reflected in three levels.

First, the theory of community circle aims at exploring the correlation between "life style" and "spatial carrier" within the organization of a settlement at different scales. The people's commune, as a basic living unit with a complete circle of life within a certain administrative scope, coincides with the target of this theory. Secondly, in order to solve the core problem of architectural activities and their heritage relics, it is necessary to expand the research perspective at two levels: (1) from the architecture scale to the whole space of the entire commune territory, including water conservancy and farmland, etc.; (2) from the architectural field to the planning, geography, and other fields. This is due to the wide variety of factors involved in rural construction, and the community circle theory provides a comprehensive cross-field research method from the settlement circle to the whole built environment. Third, Takamasa Yoshizaka and his disciples had made field visits to China's rural people's communes, which had not yet been dissolved at that time, in the 1970s, and then incorporated them into their reports as a practical model of the community circle [27].

Therefore, based on the above theories and the characteristics of the people's commune system, this study develops the analysis and discussion of the heritage of the rural people's commune from four dimensions:

(a) Environment: large-scale heritage, including natural and artificially transformed environmental remains like landscape, reservoirs, etc.
(b) Industry: since the people's commune was an ideal rural society that wished to promote the comprehensive development of various industries, such as agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, sideline fishing, etc., this study introduces "industry" as an important dimension of the commune's legacy. Under this categorization, the heritage of various industries is included.
(c) Architecture: the most popular architectural remains like buildings, monuments, etc.
(d) Memory: tangible and intangible heritages that carry the story of the social practice of the commune like diaries, oral history, etc.

Each of these dimensions encompasses a variety of specific heritage forms, with some instances of overlap between them. The main purpose of this study is not to try to summarize a universal set of criteria for classifying the heritage of communes, nor to stop at specific case studies. Instead, this study aims to reflect on the value of the people's commune as heritage from a theoretical and diachronic perspective and tries to summarize the essential features of its legacy through the analysis of a specific case, which ultimately contributes to the preservation of commune heritage.

2.2. Research Object

In this study, we use Weixing Commune (which also named as Chayashan People's Commune, hereinafter referred to as Weixing Commune), the first nationally established people's commune in 1958 as the research object. It is located in the Suiping county, Zhumadian city, Henan Province (Figure 1).

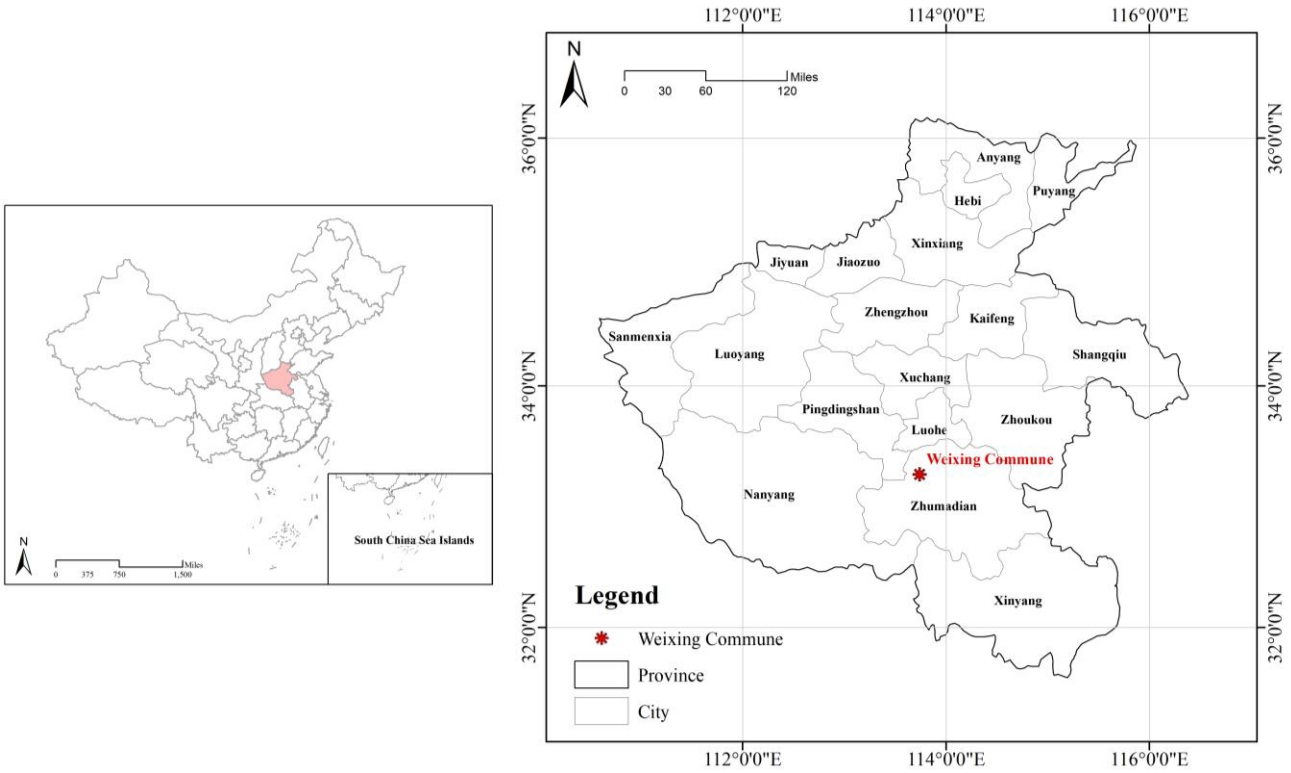


Figure 1. The geographical location of the Weixing Commune. (Source: drawn by the authors based on the map of National Platform for Common GeoSpatial Information Services, China, Approval Number: GS(2020)4619, https://www.tianditu.gov.cn/).

This object is exemplary not only because it was designated a model by Mao Zedong at the Beidaihe conference [28] but also because it reflects the planning and design ideas of architectural practitioners at that time [29–31]. Furthermore, in 2006, the former site of the Weixing Commune was registered as a national key cultural relic protection unit under the category of "Important Historical Sites and Representative Buildings of Modern Times" [32], which means that the core building complex of the former site has been preserved well, and the value of its architectural heritage has been recognized at the national level.

Although a series of studies centering on the Weixing Commune have been recently conducted in the architecture field [33,34], they focus mainly on the planning and design of the Weixing Commune from different perspectives. However, there are several shortcomings in all of them, mainly in three aspects: (1) the materials used are mainly concentrated in published historical documents in the field of architecture, such as the *Jianzhu Xuebao* [Architectural Journal], and lack new interdisciplinary research materials; (2) in terms of research perspectives and concerns, the current research focuses more on the planning history of the upper elite, such as architects, and lacks attention to the reality of the bottom rural areas; and (3) insufficient attention is paid to its legacy in service of contemporary rural development. The protection of its heritage value still needs to be explored and discussed.

3. Results

3.1. Overview of Rural Construction in the People's Commune Period

3.1.1. Economic Development Planning

Rural construction under the people's commune system involved industry, agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, fisheries, commerce, and cultural and educational endeavors, covering the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. To realize this development and production plan, the commune usually began its spatial construction with a detailed survey of its geography, in conjunction with the policy of sending young people to the countryside,

which was practiced by the state at the time. During this period, the survey teams, which were composed mainly of local universities and research institutes, produced a great deal of output. For example, at that time, more than 100 teachers and students from the Geography Department of Kaifeng Normal College participated in research on the natural environment of the Weixing Commune area, which resulted in detailed geography reports and development proposals [35].

According to the finalized economic zoning plan of the report, the land usage planning within the administrative scope of the commune included the following four main aspects:

(1) Based on the natural geographical features and resources, various operations, such as agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and mining, were carried out according to local conditions, that is, industrial planning. For example, Chaya Mountain is mainly mountainous and hilly in the western region. In the commune development plan, mountain agriculture, medicinal materials, and forestry and animal husbandry were adopted, whereas in the alluvial flat area in the east, grain and cash crops were produced.

(2) To strengthen the circulation of raw materials, products, and people between regions, transportation facilities such as roads and railroads were planned.

(3) To avoid floods, droughts and other disasters that decrease crop yields, water conservancy planning was carried out for reservoirs, hydroelectric power plants, barrages, etc.

(4) The construction of a series of living facilities such as houses, villages, towns, colleges, and clubs was carried out.

After geographic specialists formulated an economic development plan through detailed surveys of rural nature, they faced the issue of the concrete transformation of nature, i.e., the construction of rural physical space.

3.1.2. Construction of Space Production

Through reading the *Jianzhu Xuebao* [Architectural Journal] and the history of planning and design in the commune, the construction of rural space in the people's commune period can be categorized into three levels, namely general land planning, settlement layout, and architectural facilities (Figure 2), and ultimately resorts to local construction materials, techniques, and construction.

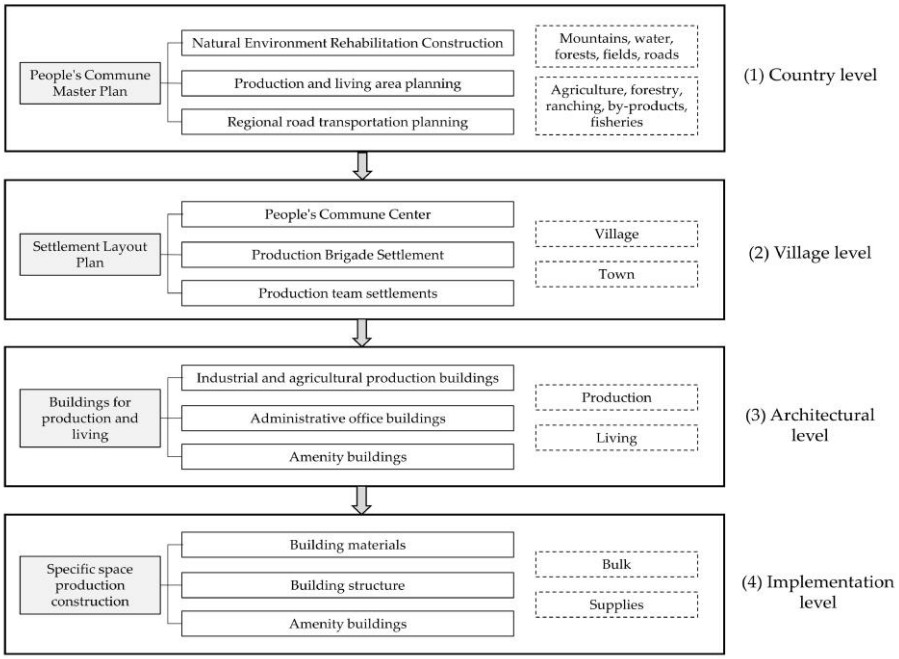


Figure 2. Construction levels under the commune system. (Source: author).

In terms of the history of the construction of the countryside itself, unlike the traditional pattern of spontaneous growth and evolution of villages, the commune, as an

institutional system striving for a socialist ideal of life, was more of an active construction of spatial production, surpassing the amount of construction in the ordinary countryside in terms of scale of construction, types of construction, people involved, and materials. In this regard, for example, in the old society before the founding of new China, people lived by consuming the resources they already had, which eventually led to resource depletion. Although they were aware of the need to utilize the resources close to them, they did not have long-term planning and demonstrated a rough, small-scale, decentralized, and smallholder natural economy, which also led to the destruction of the natural environment, such as the indiscriminate cutting of forests, which improved only after the establishment of the commune system.

On the other hand, unlike urban construction, which is detached from the land and is more associated with mature production systems such as capital and the market, the construction activities in the commune period were a program of transformation of the entire rural habitat, from buildings to farmland and water conservancy, which was deeply rooted in a piece of land. The implementation of such a program involves not only natural environmental elements such as topography, geology, and geomorphology but also the participation of the main body of construction (Figure 3), and social factors such as institutions, the population, and local customs. Although not as technically costly and efficient as in the city, rural construction in the commune period demonstrated the local people's active use of resources to improve their lives, and the introduction of the commune system further catalyzed this action.

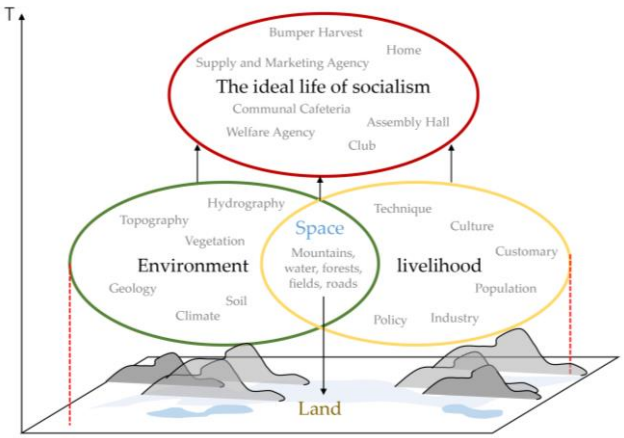


Figure 3. Construction structure under the commune system. (Source: author).

Above, we initially provided an overview of village construction in the commune, defined its layers from economic development planning to physical space construction, and constructed a vertical livelihood structure from the ideal life goal to the foundation of the natural environment. Thus, how can we look at its heritage? What are the layers?

3.2. The Rural Heritage of the People's Commune

Although the urban people's commune also appeared in the collectivization movement launched in 1958, the object of this study refers directly to the rural people's commune, which had wider coverage and greater influence at that time. Therefore, the discussion of the heritage of the commune belongs to the category of rural heritage from the spatial dimension. According to the Guidelines on Rural Landscape Heritage issued by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) [36], rural heritage involves material elements such as settlements, land, and water bodies, and intangible elements such as local traditions and customs, which expand the type of rural heritage from the cognitive dimension. Moreover, UNESCO categorizes rural heritage as a continuous cultural landscape [37]. The cultural landscape, an academic concept that originated in the field of geography, has influenced the academic community's perception of cultural

heritage, expanding the spatial and temporal types of heritage from the dynamic process of human–nature interactions, and some scholars have directly stated in the interpretation of relevant concepts that cultural landscape heritage includes the results of large-scale collective action shaping [38,39]. In international standards such as those mentioned above and the studies of related scholars, two core meanings of the concept of the "cultural landscape" can be seen. First, compared with the natural landscape, the cultural landscape, in a certain sense, strengthens the intervention of human social activities. Second, compared with buildings or monuments, its object has a longer range and wider extension. However, as a part of the collective production narrative of China in the early period of the founding of the country, the "cultural landscapes" left behind by large-scale collective construction activities such as water conservancy construction and "Making Green the Motherland" [40] carried out during the period of the rural people's commune were not given enough attention or exploration.

If we consider the rural commune as a special segment of the history of rural development in China, its specificity is reflected in the characteristics of the commune system at that time, which induced the collective economic behavior of "putting the farmer first". The "cultural landscape" produced during this period was characterized by constant change, and it also involved many types of heritage. What are the dimensions of the commune's heritage, and how can its specific composition be comprehensively summarized? The key to answering these questions lies in grasping the content of production and life involved in the people's commune. According to the community circle theory by the Japanese architect Takamasa Yoshizaka et al., the rural people's commune is a model of the "circle" (Figure 4) [27]. As mentioned previously, the community circle theory provides an abstract model for studying the relationship between the constituent elements and spatial patterns of the different levels of the commune's circles, from the settlement circle to the production circle to the trade circle, and helps to clarify the construction of the material space of the commune and the various legacies it has left behind.

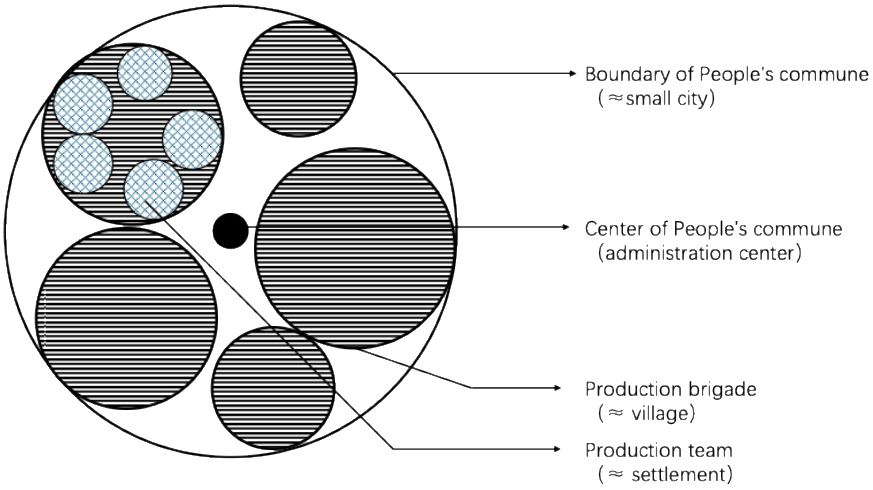


Figure 4. Administrative hierarchy of the People's commune. (Source: drawn by author according to [27]).

Taking the Weixing Commune of Suiping in Henan Province as the center, the following section accordingly sorts out the composition of its circles from the outside to the inside and unfolds the composition of the heritage of the commune from four dimensions: environment, industry, architecture, and memory. As mentioned previously, the interaction between human and land during the people's commune period can be summarized as follows: rural society carries out the production of various industries and the corresponding production of physical space through collective labor. Thus, as shown in Figure 5, this study categorizes this historical man–land relationship into four quadrants of heritage types.

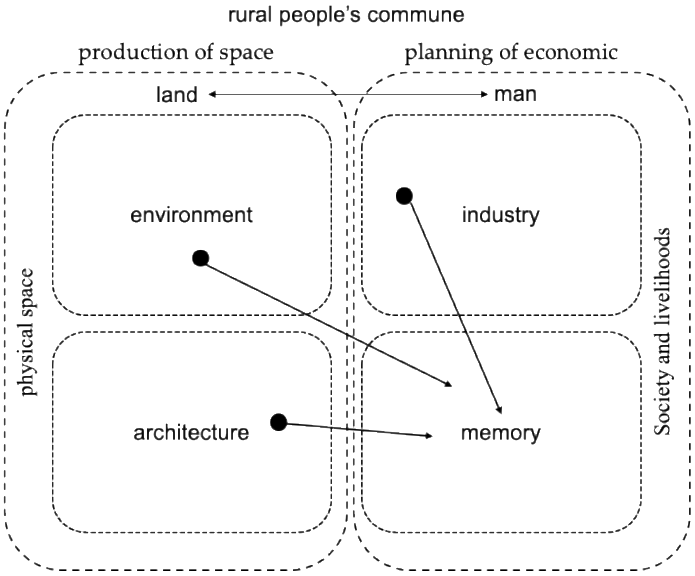


Figure 5. Four dimensions of the people's commune heritage. (Source: author).

In terms of the physical space, this study divides it into two categories based on the scale of space: environment and architecture. In a narrow sense, the former refers to large-scale natural and artificially modified heritage and the latter to the most common productive and living buildings. On the other hand, the society of the people's commune is also characterized by the integrated development of various industries. Therefore, in terms of society and livelihoods, this study divides it into industry (production) and memory (livelihood). There is also a simultaneous containment and inclusion relationship between these dimensions. For example, the environment, architecture, and industry both contribute to the presentation of memory heritage. Some architecture can also be categorized as an "industry" dimension.

3.2.1. Environment: Artificially Modified Landscapes

If the vertical structure of the commune space construction is expanded horizontally along the Earth, combined with the "community circle" model, it can be initially summarized as a three-tier composition. Along the administrative boundaries of the commune, from the outside to the inside, it is the natural environment circle, the artificially transformed environment circle, and the village and township settlement circle (Figure 6). Among them, the natural environment circle refers to the purely natural landscape within the boundary without traces of artificial modification, which can be interpreted as a natural landscape in the common sense, such as the scenic area of the mountain in this case. The second level of the artificially transformed environmental circle refers to the common result of human action on nature, under which large-scale rural landscapes such as terraces, reservoirs, and planted forests are produced.

Hence, in the environment dimension, the rural commune cultural heritage involved large-scale heritage, which was represented by water facilities. These rural relics reflected the significant work of transforming the natural environment by the villagers during the commune period. For example, the Xiasong reservoir (Figure 7), which was constructed in 1958 by hand-dug excavation and earth filling in the Weixing Commune for the purpose of regional agricultural irrigation, has been expanded and reinforced and still plays an important role in flood control, irrigation, and aquaculture.

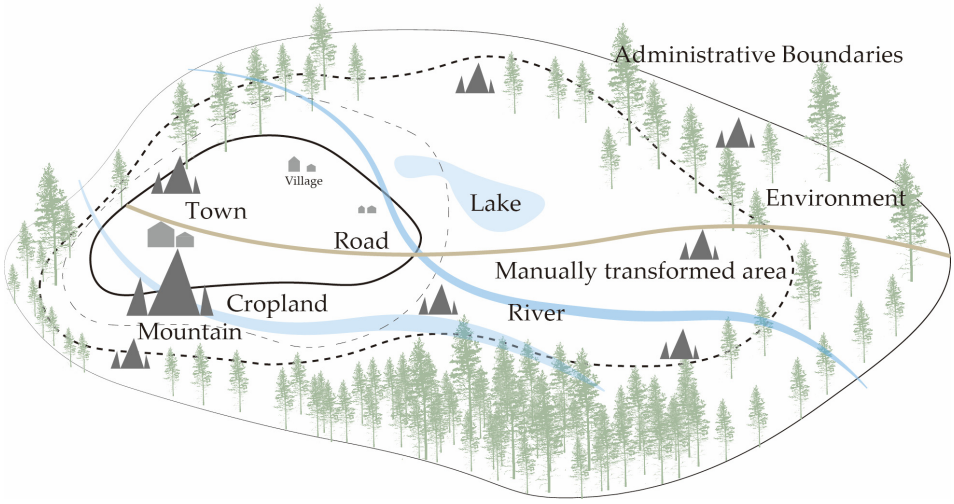


Figure 6. Spatial structure of the commune circle. (Source: author).



Figure 7. Current situation and introduction of Xiasong reservoir constructed by hand in 1958. (Photos taken by the authors, 2018).

In addition to the many water conservancy facilities at that time, the members of the commune carried out a reforestation campaign on the bald mountains formed by indiscriminate logging and planted trees driven by the "National Landscaping and Gardening Movement" [40], which is a direct product of the landscaping of the land at that time and is a masterpiece of the joint work of mankind and nature. Although the landscape has changed over time, and it is difficult to fully reconstruct the history of the changes, it is an indisputable historical fact that various construction activities under the commune system have changed the characteristics of the landscape to a certain extent. Moreover, cultural landscapes with the imprint of human social activities have been formed and will continue to evolve dynamically with production and life.

3.2.2. Industry: Industrial Culture Under Collective Management

After the large-scale transformation of natural geography, one of the key qualities of rural construction during the people's commune period was its institutional character. This top-down system prompted China's rural areas to expand beyond a single agricultural economy and effectively promoted the comprehensive development of various industries, such as agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and sideline fishing, leaving behind a large amount of rural industrial heritage. In the industry dimension, the rural commune cultural heritage involved those industry-related legacies, which included tangible and intangible heritage. These rural relics reflected the efforts of rationalizing the use of resources for economic activities. Its role can be summarized as follows.

First, in terms of the type of industry, it includes not only the industrial heritage of townships, which has attracted much attention, but also primary and tertiary industries, such as agricultural cultural heritage. Of course, some of the valuable heritage of traditional agricultural civilization was abandoned because of factors such as "over ambitiousness" and ideology at that time [18]. However, new production methods such as "deep ploughing

and planting" emerged under the limited technological conditions of the commune period. According to the local archives, during the World Agricultural Exposition held in India in 1959, the Weixing Commune also exhibited and attracted many international friends. In addition, the local leaders participated in international exchange activities as members of the agricultural delegation at that time, which reflected the world advancement of the commune construction in terms of agricultural production at that time. Second, the specific composition of heritage not only includes the material spatial dimension of rural factories, agricultural machinery stations, field stations, and other production buildings and facilities but also covers objects such as machinery and implements used for production, and intangible elements such as the technology of production in various industries. For example, the Weixing Commune was an important experimental base for the implementation of mechanized farming at that time (Figure 8) [41]. Finally, with respect to the temporal and spatial changes in industrial heritage, as mentioned earlier, there is a "breaking down of the old" and a "building up of the new", and this new and old does not take place only in the material dimension (space, tools, etc.). In terms of its core form of industrial organization, after the implementation of the household contract responsibility system, the collective economic system, which was most prominent during the commune period, did not disappear completely. In contrast, it continues to be vitalized, leading to the vigorous development of the rural economy, and, in the new period, it has gradually transformed from an "ism" of the past into a unique "cultural" heritage [42,43]. The people's commune system opened up and promoted the industrial development of the countryside to a certain extent, and its remains are rich in connotation and still have certain practical application value, for example, the collective economy.



Figure 8. Scenery of mechanized farming and the tractors of Weixing Commune. (Source: Chayashan People's Commune Museum archives).

3.2.3. Architecture: Regional Architectural Styles Integrating Institutional Characteristics and Local Techniques

The level of commune villages, towns, and settlements is below the circle of artificially modified natural environments, which are also the main living areas of the commune as a self-sufficient rural community. It contains many functional buildings, such as residences, halls, guest houses, office buildings, and cafeterias, which are used for the daily life of the members of the commune. As a historical representation of the economic development

process during the socialist construction period, the administrative center complex of the Weixing Commune (Figure 9) has been open to the public as a museum of modern and contemporary architecture since 2010, presenting a general layout arranged symmetrically along the central axis, embodying a strong characteristic of order. The buildings are mostly bungalows, most of which were constructed in 1958. In terms of architectural style, the buildings all adopt traditional two-slope roofs (Figure 10), highlighting the national form and local characteristics. At the level of building construction, on the one hand, local crop materials such as acacia grass were utilized, and on the other hand, the custom of folk houses was inherited [29], reflecting the principle of adapting to local conditions and making the best use of things. In addition to these buildings, which were built intensively in the 1950s, the auditorium building (Figure 11), which was completed approximately during 1968 according to interviews, utilized giant columns on its façade to create a large-span political space for public gatherings. In terms of the building scale, materials, technology, and style, it was the highest expression of rural architectural production techniques at the time.

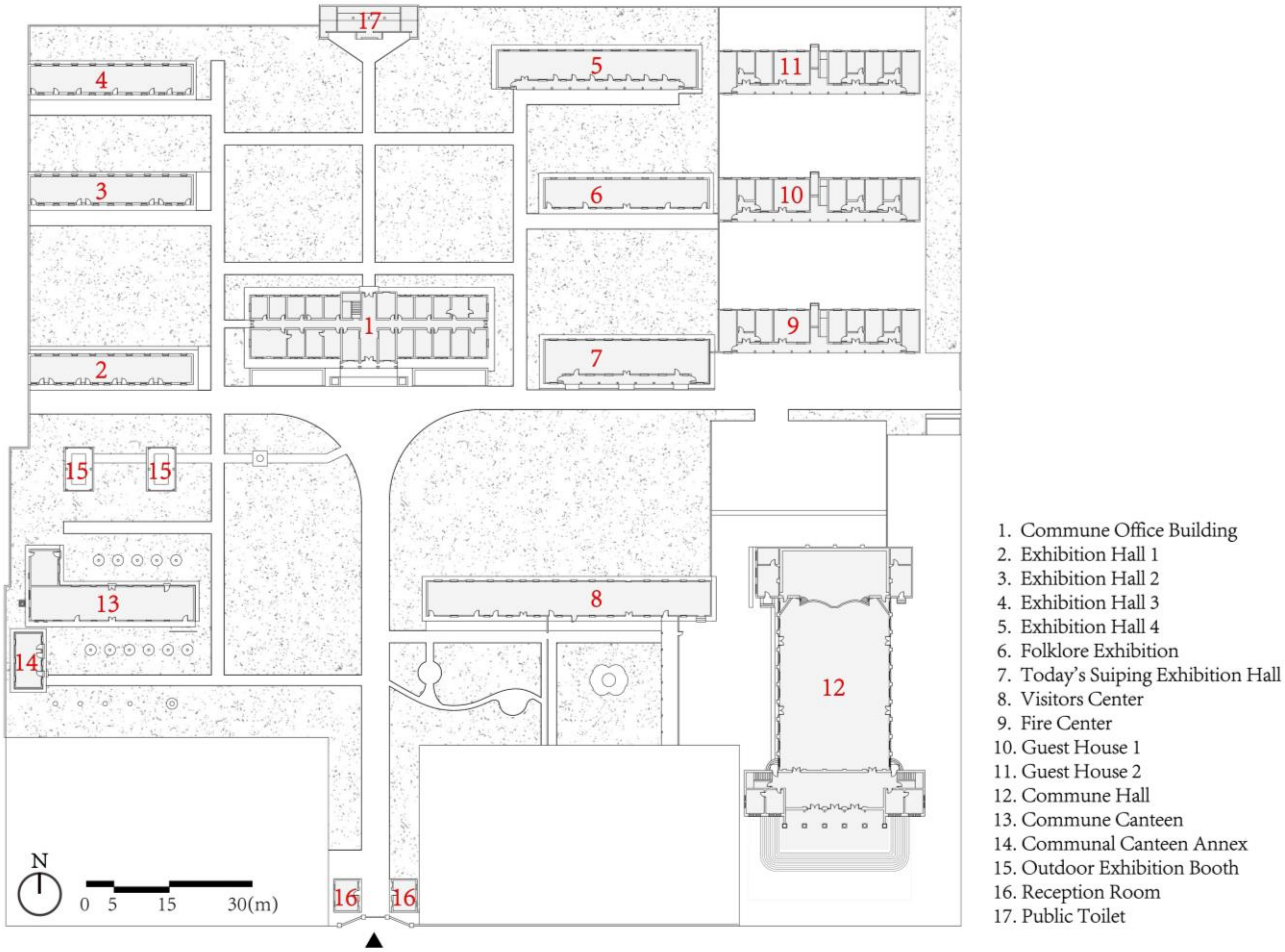


Figure 9. Layout of the Weixing Commune Museum. (Source: [33] and revised by author).

The architecture of the commune period is characterized by a strong symbolic order of the system while simultaneously incorporating local techniques and construction methods. In addition to the abovementioned architectural heritage that has been preserved to this day, the commune period also gave rise to a number of temporary buildings and facilities based on the needs of production and daily life, such as the standardized modular shed at the water conservancy construction site, the field canteen, and the mobile projection stage, among others. These various forms of "mobile buildings", together with the administrative space anchored in the earth, carried the lifestyle of the people in the countryside at that time.



Figure 10. Appearance and interior scenarios of the Weixing Commune office. (Photos taken by the authors, 2018).

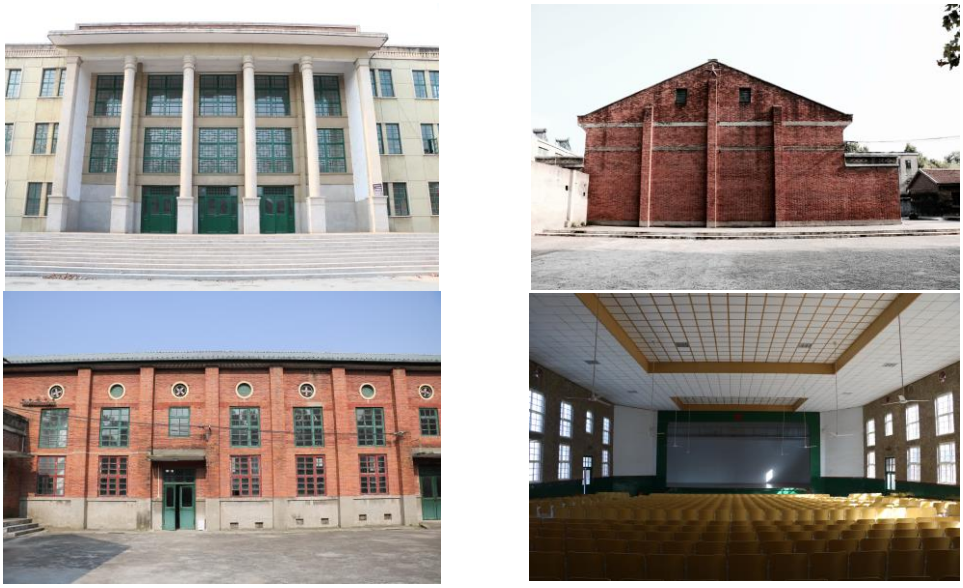


Figure 11. Appearance and interior scenarios of the Weixing Commune hall. (Photos taken by the authors, 2018).

3.2.4. Memory: Spatiotemporal Narratives Oriented Towards the Ideal Life of Socialism

As generations change and as the commune system has been dismantled for nearly 40 years, the tangible and intangible heritage left behind will eventually be transformed into a national collective memory. Because all objects, texts, images, etc., cannot speak for themselves, their preservation and transmission depend on the construction of memory at the intergenerational, ethnic, regional, and even national levels. In this sense, the ontological value of heritage is not the inheritance of the material and nonmaterial "mantle" of the past but the transmission of collective memory and then the construction of a national and universal cultural identity [44]. Hence, in the memory dimension, the rural commune cultural heritage involved all those memory heritages related to construction activities during this period.

The rural construction promoted by the people's commune represents a special practice of pursuing an ideal collective life in the early stage of China's national economic construction. Based on the aforementioned production of rural space, a "cultural landscape" was formed with traces of the times, and, at the same time, a special "cultural memory" was produced [45]. This memory can be categorized into three main levels in terms of content attributes. First, at the institutional and national levels, the commune, as a fragment of socialist construction, has itself formed a rich red culture [46], carrying the memory of the Party's leadership of the masses into the battlefield of economic construction, which is evident in the economic form, revolutionary slogans, and the five-pointed-star

symbol in the meeting hall. Second, from the level of township construction and region, the commune has, to a certain extent, promoted the modernization of rural areas and created the great achievement of artificially transforming the natural environment and the spirit of self-reliance behind it. Third, at the intergenerational and community levels, the commune carries the memory of the life of the generation before and after the founding of the PRC, which was scattered around education, medical care, production, and artistic creation.

Of course, as far as the value of memory is concerned, not only do we need to carry forward the good experiences of the past, but the so-called "negative" memories of the mistakes of progress and decision making are even more worthy of being remembered in comparison. In this way, we can learn from the past and draw lessons for the future.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Characteristics of the Commune Cultural Heritage

In the current domestic studies on China's modernization during the period of collectivization, most of them have already involved the systematic sorting out of the "third front construction" and its heritage [47,48]. In contrast, the value, experience, and evaluation of the commune heritage, as a special category of rural heritage, have not been sufficiently explored.

The construction and the composition of the cultural heritage under the people's commune system have been categorized and summarized. What are the qualities of the cultural landscape created by spatial production under this system?

J. B. Jackson, a famous American landscape geographer, constructed two ideal landscapes for human beings from the two essential attributes of human beings' biological and social needs [49]: the vernacular landscape and the political landscape. The former refers to an idyllic, local, and changing habitat landscape, which shows a strong sense of vernacularity and purposelessness. The latter, on the other hand, is often characterized by walls, borders, squares, monuments, and other types of landscapes that symbolize civic identity, imprinting a strong geometric order and subjective purposefulness. The two landscapes are diametrically opposed to each other in many aspects of content and identity [50], as he clearly states that spatial traces of political organization are largely or completely absent in vernacular landscapes. As an outstanding work in the field of Western cultural landscapes, the theory of Jackson was first published in the 1980s, which helps us understand the connotations of cultural landscapes. According to this framework, we believe that the cultural landscape shaped by the people's commune in rural China reflects the qualities of the coexistence of political and vernacular landscapes, which are manifested mainly in the following aspects.

First, the external form, from the central axis of the symmetrical administrative buildings of the commune to the evenly distributed and regularized land and from the national gardening landscape to the temporary sheds at the construction site, together constitute one side of the political landscape of the commune. At the same time, the commune is still filled with terraced fields, river ponds, and other landscapes of earthly habitats, and these landscapes of habitats show a remarkable vernacular character.

Further, although the production teams of the commune embody subjective planning in the construction of reservoirs, farmland, roads, etc., limited to technology, labor, etc., many natural environments still exist within the commune that are seldom touched by human beings, revealing the appearance of spontaneous growth.

Furthermore, in terms of basic characteristics, although the political space of the commune, which seeks permanence, has survived to this day, the rural traditions that have been handed down from generation to generation have survived through the ages before and after the commune system, and the characteristics of the changes in mobility have always existed and will continue to do so.

As Jackson argues, every utopian vision of a better world begins with the proposal of a political infrastructure [49]. The commune organization, which was born from the construction of water conservancy and other large-scale projects that broke through the

original boundaries of the countryside, has spent decades surveying the terrain, measuring the land, building dams and embankments, and planting trees. Eventually, it creates another type of landscape that coexists with the political landscape that symbolizes the image of the state and the collective order and the vernacular landscape that carries the customs and traditions of the region.

As for the interactive relationship between four dimensions (environment, industry, architecture, and memory) in the ideal political landscape and the vernacular landscape, it can be concluded that these four dimensions of heritage interact and complement each other in shaping the cultural landscape of the commune, and each dimension contains aspects of both the political landscape and the living vernacular landscape. Moreover, if the political landscape is characterized by the order of the collective, and the vernacular landscape is characterized by individual life, it embodies more of the character of the political landscape in the environment dimension, which is produced under collective labor for the ideal socialist life. In contrast, in the daily agricultural production and daily life activities of the commune members, the living rural landscapes arose naturally, that is, in the industry and architecture dimensions. Of course, it should not be ignored that, in both dimensions, there are also political landscapes such as office buildings in commune administrative centers or collective industrial buildings in villages. In terms of the memory dimension, it is showing more neutral qualities in shaping two different landscapes due to its volatility and instability.

In short, if the cost of labor and time spent on construction activities during the commune period are measured, it can be concluded that the greater the expense the more it will converge on the political landscape, and conversely the more it will return to the everyday living vernacular landscape. Moreover, as time progresses, the political landscape will gradually return to the living vernacular landscape, a culture landscape that is constantly renewing and growing.

4.2. The Applicability of the Commune Cultural Heritage

In current rural areas, other paths of development should be explored in addition to agriculture and other industries. Among them, the unique natural and cultural landscape of the countryside has undoubtedly become an important resource for development. They will bring a lot of potential opportunities for the villages to develop tourism industry and other industries of their own. As a fragment of China's rural development history, the cultural heritage created during the people's commune period has been precisely neglected. The applicability of the commune heritage can be seen in three main aspects: First, they can be developed as tourist resources to promote exchanges between rural and urban areas. Second, some of the old building facilities can be converted into contemporary functional buildings for villagers while preserving them. For example, the commune hall can be converted into a public center for villagers. Third, the intangible cultural heritage developed during this period should be objectively documented in order to be well preserved and inherited. However, we should also pay attention to the balance between protection and utilization to avoid the damage caused by excessive commercialization. The commune cultural heritage should neither be totally neglected nor over-exploited, but should be rationally preserved and reused based on the reality of the countryside.

In addition to the visible cultural heritage, the construction experience and lessons accumulated during the commune period should also be summarized. For example, under the common goal of improving productivity and living a happy life, members of the commune, in the spirit of self-reliance, form a new social relation of mutual help that is embodied in the construction of the political landscape. Such local self-help mechanisms would facilitate large-scale projects for rural construction today and during times of special events. Meanwhile, in the process of rural modernization, planning and construction should be carried out through respecting the reality of rural areas.

4.3. Research Limitations

Although this study provides a preliminary framework for discussing what constitutes the heritage values of rural people's communes and how they should function in contemporary rural society, it still has the following limitations. First, this study is limited to an overview of the cultural value from the analysis of the Weixing Commune, which is the most representative case, and the results have not been fully examined through comparison with other cases. Second, research on the vernacular-built heritage is still ongoing, and the evaluation and criteria of the rural cultural heritage is a challenging task, which still needs to be explored and developed. Third, a quantitative analysis with more historical data and field research materials will add scientific rigor and eventually contribute to preserving rural people's commune heritage throughout the country.

4.4. Recommendations and Future Works

Further research on rural people's commune heritage may be conducted as follows:

(a) In order to recognize the legacy of the people's commune more comprehensively, it is still necessary to study the history of the construction of the people's commune in depth.
(b) In terms of the identification of the value of the people's commune heritage, it also needs to be explored at the theoretical level, considering the relevant heritage charters and the national condition of China.
(c) In addition to the identification and theorization of the commune heritage, there is a need to develop research on the presentation and use of the cultural heritage.

In future work, the study of the historical experience of the modernization of rural China in the early stages will be conducted. Furthermore, the path of rural revitalization that is suitable for China's national conditions by fully exploiting the cultural value of rural heritage has yet to be systematically studied.

5. Conclusions

The construction of the people's commune, as a special social practice carried out during a special period of time, is a unique phenomenon in Chinese history and even in world history, a product of the agricultural collectivization movement carried out in the context of the Cold War and in conjunction with China's own national conditions, and belongs to the early stage of exploration of Chinese-style modernization based on China and solving China's problems. Guided by the goal of increasing productivity and pursuing a socialist ideal life, the members of the local commune, together with geography, architecture, and other related professions, worked together in a group and participated in a series of construction initiatives to transform the country, integrate resources, and diversify economic operations, giving full play to the spirit of self-reliance from the formulation of economic development plans to spatial production and construction. It has left behind a number of important cultural heritages and shaped a kind of unique cultural landscape. This specificity can be attributed to two aspects. Firstly, in terms of content, it ranges from man-made landscapes at the regional environmental level to architectural spatial heritage at the micro level. At the same time, its institutional characteristics have given rise to a variety of industrial heritage, involving agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, sideline fishing, and other operations. What is more important is that the collective economic organization common to these industries is continuing to be vitalized in the contemporary countryside as a form of cultural heritage, embodying the heritage characteristics of richness of content and spatial and temporal continuity. Second, in terms of landscape quality, it shows the coexistence of the political landscape and the vernacular landscape. On the one hand, it is a place for social ideals; on the other hand, it carries daily life. There are both nationally constructed image narratives and regional traditions of terroir presentation.

In recent years, the heritage of the commune is in danger of being overthrown at any time amidst the torrent of dangerous housing reconstruction that promotes urbanization. These spaces, which carry local people's active transformation of nature and management

of life in the early period of the founding of the nation, together with the rational knowledge behind them, should be inherited and remembered as a fragment of cultural memory, and together they should construct a national and global cultural identity. Against such a background, firstly, local governments should consider the issue of rural heritage preservation when promoting construction to avoid the damage of rural relics. For example, the former site of the Weixing Commune has been developed into a public museum to preserve the heritage and attract tourists at the same time. Second, the preservation and utilization of the commune heritage ultimately requires the participation and implementation of the villagers. Therefore, it is imperative to strengthen the education of villagers on heritage conservation awareness. And for academics and researchers, the investigation and documentation of the commune heritage is also urgent.

This study discusses the composition and characteristics of commune cultural heritage from the perspective of cultural landscape, with a key point to accelerating the conceptual transmutation of the people's commune from an ideal rural village to a cultural landscape, which in turn will help to promote the excavation of its rural cultural value and the proposal of strategies for its preservation and adaptive use.

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