Research Paper

Research on the Path of Cultural Identity Reconstruction in the Old Town of Lijiang Based on Value Orientation

Jianing LEI, Yan WANG, Southeast University, China;

Wei WU, ARCHITECTS & ENGINEERS CO., LTD. of SOUTHEAST UNIVERSITY, China.

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Abstract

With the dual impacts of globalization and urbanization, historic towns are increasingly facing challenges such as fragmented value perception and limited community participation. As a typical historic town inscribed on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List in 1997, the Old Town of Lijiang preserves rich ethnic cultural characteristics and historical wisdom embodied in its historic dwellings. Its cultural identity is under increasing pressure from tourism-driven economic development, commercial capital penetration, and the loss of indigenous residents.

To address this core issue, this study proposes a value-oriented framework for the diagnosis and reconstruction of cultural identity, taking 147 historic dwellings-the core carriers of Lijiang's cultural identity-as the key research object. A quantitative assessment system covering five dimensions was established, combining the Analytic Hierarchy Process and entropy weight method to determine indicator weights (with cultural value at 0.32, historical value at 0.23, social value at 0.20, scientific value at 0.12, and artistic value at 0.13), the study conducted a systematic diagnosis of the 147 historic dwellings, classifying them into four value grades. This used GIS technology to visualize the spatial differentiation characteristics of these dwellings, revealing that high-value dwellings cluster along the water system while low-value ones are impacted by excessive commercialization. This diagnosis further identifies the essence of Lijiang's cultural identity crisis as a triple rupture: the rupture of historical stratification, the dissipation of collective memory, and the aphasia of contemporary narrative.

Based on the results, it put forward a selected reconstruction approach. 1) Anchoring historical stratification: Implementing hierarchical conservation tailored to dwelling value, focusing on preserving core cultural elements while adapting to contemporary needs; 2) Activating collective memory: Establishing support systems for indigenous residents and creating participatory memory scenarios; 3) Innovating contemporary narratives: Designing routes of holistic cultural experience, enriching experiences by transforming intangible cultural heritage, building an international dialogue platform.

It turned abstract cultural identity into measurable value indicators and set up a "value quantification-crises diagnosis-path reconstruction" technical framework. A paradigm shift have come true from single physical conservation to the coordinated development of "physical carrier-emotional identity-living inheritance", providing intuitive scientific evidence for the future culture responsiveness and sustainable development of the Old Town of Lijiang. Meanwhile, a "conservation-utilization-governance" ternary paradigm has been provided for other heritage sites seeking to balance conservation and development.

Keywords

Cultural Identity Reconstruction, Value Orientation, Crisis Diagnosis, The Old Town of Lijiang, Historic dwellings.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As critical carriers of cultural heritage, historic towns embody the historical memory, cultural traditions, and social values of local ethnic groups. Under the dual pressures of globalization and urbanization, historic towns generally face dilemmas such as fragmented cultural identity, inadequate community governance, and alienated commercial development. The root cause of these challenges lies in the erosion and dislocation of cultural identity. How to sustain and reconstruct the cultural identity of historic towns amid dynamic development has become a global issue.

The Old Town of Lijiang, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997, is a typical historic town featuring the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. Its historic dwellings embody the regional architectural art and living wisdom. Currently, these buildings are confronted with problems such as impaired authenticity, weakened cultural bearing capacity, and alienated functions, which directly undermine the foundation of the town's cultural identity. Traditional qualitative descriptions and single-dimensional physical preservation are insufficient to address this complex issue. There is an urgent need to establish a technical framework that enables the quantification of cultural identity, crisis diagnosis, and targeted intervention.

1.2. Research Significance

While current heritage conservation theories generally recognize the importance of living inheritance, there remains a lack a systematic analytical framework for exploring the dynamic evolution mechanism and the causes of value logic disruption. Guided by a value-oriented approach, this study establishes a systematic framework encompassing heritage value quantification, crisis diagnosis, and cultural identity reconstruction. It transforms the abstract concept of cultural identity into measurable value indicators.

This study proposes a three-dimensional cultural identity reconstruction framework of "historical layering-collective memory-contemporary narrative", providing practical management tools and decision-making support for the Old Town of Lijiang. Furthermore, this framework can serve as a practical reference for other heritage sites of the same type.

1.3. Definition of Core Concepts

1.3.1 Cultural Identity

It refers to the characteristic cultural symbol shaped by the historic town in its long-term historical evolution. It is a concrete system of values that is embodied in historical, cultural, and social dimensions. Cultural identity is a dynamic organism that depends on a specific ecosystem to sustain its vitality.

1.3.2 Cultural Identification

It refer to the subjective perception, emotional belonging, and value recognition of the cultural identity of historic towns by diverse subjects, and serves as the core objective of cultural identity reconstruction.

1.3.3 Value Orientation

The essence of human efforts to conserve cultural heritage lies in the multiple values it carries. Guided by a value-oriented approach, this study anchors the abstract cultural identity in specific value indicators, ensuring that the reconstruction of cultural identity does not deviate from the authenticity of heritage.

1.4. Literature Review

1.4.1 Progress on Cultural Identity and Cultural Identification

Internationally, cultural identity is widely viewed as a product of continuous negotiation, with research focusing on how interactions between residents, tourists and governments affect place authenticity. In China, studies have mainly examined cultural identification under rapid urbanization and tourism development, introducing concepts such as sense of place and nostalgia to emphasize its role in shaping belonging and urban uniqueness. Research perspectives have expanded from physical carrier conservation to include intangible heritage inheritance and public participation.

1.4.2 Progress on Pathways for Reconstructing Cultural Identity

International studies on reconstruction have developed multi-dimensional practices: emphasizing historical layering in physical conservation and stakeholder participation in memory activation. Chinese research has achieved fruitful results in physical protection and living activation. Physically, efforts focus on façade renovation and historic street restoration; intangibly, traditional crafts and folk activities are promoted to sustain cultural genes.

1.4.3 Progress in Specialized Research on the Old Town of Lijiang

Research on Lijiang Old Town shows a clear evolution. After its 1997 World Heritage inscription, early studies focused on authenticity and dwelling restoration. Between 2006 and 2015, research shifted to balancing tourism and conservation. Since 2016, studies have increasingly addressed community participation and cultural revitalization. Although heritage value identification has received growing attention, a systematic link between value dimensions and cultural identity remains insufficient.

1.4.4 Summary

Heritage conservation aims to sustain cultural significance and vitality, of which cultural identity is the core representation. However, existing studies rarely anchor cultural identity construction in a measurable heritage value framework. Relevant discussions remain theoretical and descriptive, lacking quantitative diagnostic tools. Current reconstruction practices (e.g., physical restoration, digital presentation) are often fragmented rather than integrated into a systematic framework.

2. Research Overview

2.1. Research Object

The Old Town of Lijiang is located in the Gucheng district of Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, and covers 7.435 square kilometers in total Figure 1. Its Outstanding Universal Value, as defined by UNESCO, is manifested through the following attributes: an outstanding example of human settlement in harmony with the natural environment; the functional utility of its ancient and complex water-supply system; an outstanding example of traditional architecture and townscape; a living testimony to the fusion of diverse cultural traditions over time; and a perfect integration of historical legacy with contemporary life.

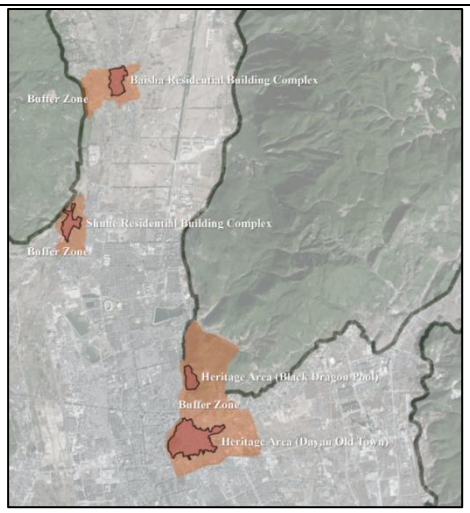
This research limits itself to the core area of the Old Town, known as **Dayan Old Town**, which has an area of 4.54 square kilometers to precisely identify the points for cultural identity reconstruction. With this basis, it translates the abstract problem of cultural identity into concrete, carrier-specific problems through quantitative heritage value assessment and diagnostic crisis analysis.



(a) Lijiang City



(b) Gucheng District



(c) Scope of the Old Town of Lijiang

Figure 1. Location map of the Old Town of Lijiang. Source: Author's own work.

2.2. Technical Route

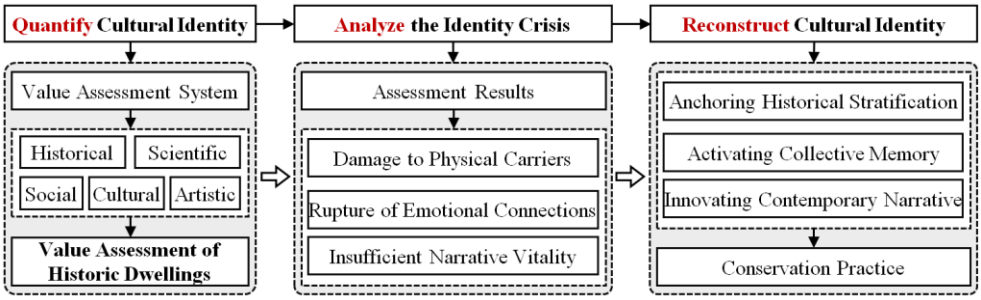


Figure 2. Technical Route. Source: Author's own work.

2.3. Research Methods

2.3.1 Literature Analysis

It involves the study of historical records, local gazetteers, archaeological reports, and academic publications. This will reveal its historical setting, social change, and the transmission of culture.

2.3.2 Field Investigation

Field research was conducted through site surveys, mapping, photographic documentation, and semi-structured interviews with residents, business operators, and management officials. This yielded first-hand data on the current state of buildings and stakeholder perceptions.

2.3.3 Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis

By integrating AHP, expert scoring, and entropy weight method, it establishes a value assessment system to realize quantitative assessment. Meanwhile, qualitative content analysis is applied to conduct in-depth interpretation of the quantitative results.

2.3.4 Spatial Analysis

Assign attribute data to their respective locations in space using GIS. The cartographic visualization and spatial overlay analysis expose the spatial distribution patterns of cultural values and their correlations with other spatial factors.

3. Value-Based Analysis of the Cultural Identity of the Old Town of Lijiang

3.1. The Cultural Identity of the Old Town of Lijiang

The establishment of the town's cultural identity, with an evolutionary perspective from history, has passed through three key phases of accumulation. During the Ming Dynasty,it formed a pattern of multi-ethnic integration; during the Qing Dynasty, it evolved into a regional commercial node facilitated by the Ancient Tea-Horse Road; In the contemporary era, it has transformed into a global living heritage site. Based on this, five core identities are extracted.

1) Plateau Settlement-embodying the geographic environment and rich species resources.

2) Composite Hub-connecting early multi-ethnic trade with modern international exchange.

3) Multi-Ethnic Coexistence-bearing witness to historic ethnic integration and the nation's pluralistic unity.

4) Living Homeland-contains natural geographical features and humanistic spirit.

5) Heritage Highland-characterized by multiple historical layers and multi-ethnic culture.

Concurrently, it recognized both the tangible and intangible carriers of those identities. Of these, the historic dwellings are key spaces where residents establish emotional connections with the old town and form their cultural identification, serving as the core carriers of Lijiang's cultural identity. Therefore, the 147 identified historic dwellings are selected as the core study samples for the value assessment and crisis diagnosis (Figure 3).

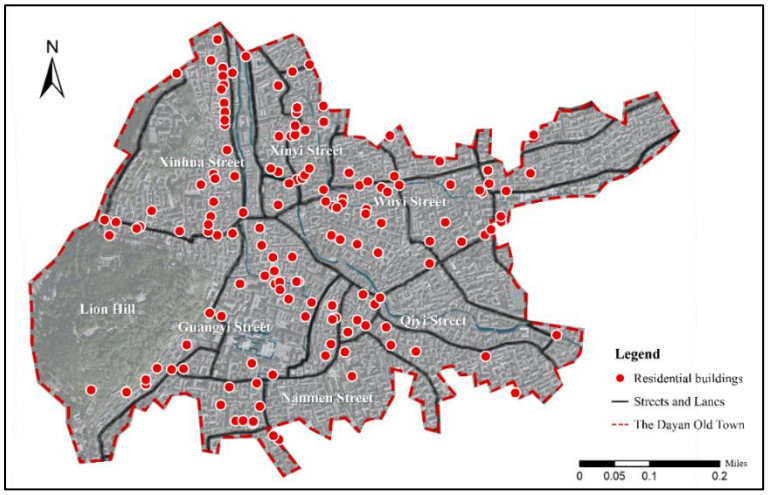


Figure 3. Core study samples-147 historic dwellings. Source: Author's own work.

3.2. Constructing a Quantitative Assessment Tool for Cultural Identity

A customized quantitative assessment tool is required to evaluate the status quo of Lijiang's cultural identity preservation manifested in its physical carriers. Guided by the principles of comprehensiveness, scientificity, hierarchy, universality, and operability, this study develops a hierarchical model for assessing the value of historic dwellings. The five core cultural identities identified in the previous section, translated into evaluative dimensions of historical, cultural, social, scientific, and artistic value. The model includes 1target layer(A), 5 criterion layers(B), and 18 factor layers(C).

By using the combination weighting method of Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) and entropy weight method, and passing the consistency test, the value assessment index system is constructed (Table 1).

Table 1. Value Assessment System of historic dwellings.

Target Layer	Criterion Layer	Weight	Factor Layer	Weight
Comprehensive value assessment of historic dwellings in the Old Town of Lijiang (A)	Historical value (B_1)	0.23	Longevity of History (C_1)	0.04
			Integrity of History (C_2)	0.06
			Authenticity of History (C_3)	0.06
			Association with Historical Events (C_4)	0.04
			Conservation Level (C_5)	0.03
	Cultural value (B_2)	0.32	Bearing of Dongba Culture (C_6)	0.08
			Inheritance of Naxi Culture (C_7)	0.08
			Integration of Multi-ethnic Cultures (C_8)	0.10
			Relevance to Intangible Cultural Heritage (C_9)	0.06
	Social value (B_3)	0.20	Influence of Cultural Communication (C_{10})	0.05
			Residents' Recognition (C_{11})	0.08
			Vibrant Inheritance (C_{12})	0.07
	Scientific value (B_4)	0.12	Structural Stability (C_{13})	0.03
			Functional Integrity (C_{14})	0.05
			Traditional Construction Wisdom (C_{15})	0.04
	Artistic value(B_5)	0.13	Coordination (C_{16})	0.05
			Construction and Decoration Art (C_{17})	0.04
			Landscape Aesthetic Value (C_{18})	0.04

4. Value Assessment-Based Diagnosis of the Cultural Identity Crisis of the Old Town of Lijiang

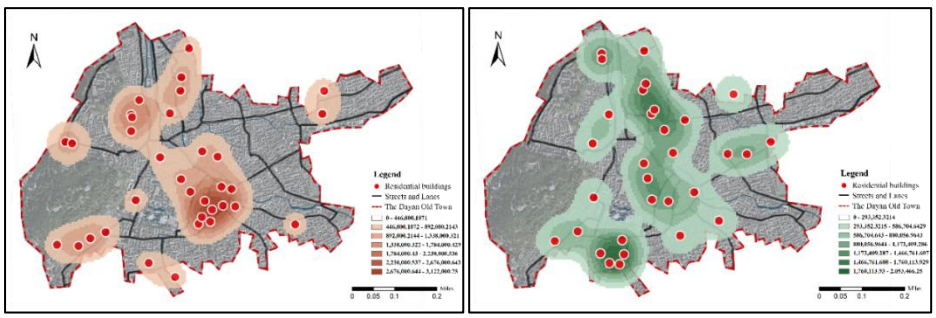
4.1. Value Grading Assessment Results and Spatial Characteristics

According to the value assessment index system, the 147 historic dwellings were scored by literature analysis and field survey. By calculating the weighted scores of all resource points under the criterion layers, the value assessment results of the historic dwellings in the Dayan Old Town were finally obtained.

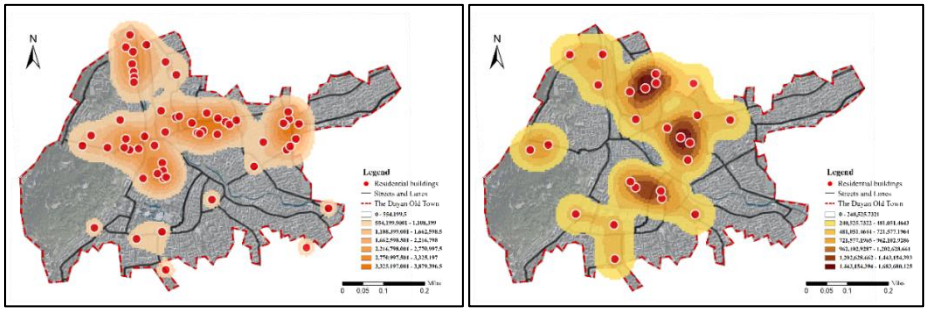
The assessment results were divided into four value grades according to their natural distribution characteristics (Table 2). The value grading and visual expression were implemented with GIS spatial analysis tools to clarify the value distribution characteristics (Figure 4-5).

Table 2. Value Grading of historic dwellings.

Comprehensive Value Score	86-100 points	71-85 points	56-70 points	0-55 points
Comprehensive Value Level	Level I (Extremely High Value)	Level II (High Value)	Level III (Medium Value)	Level IV (Low Value)
Number of Residential Buildings	34	31	57	25



(a) Level Ⅰ Residential Buildings (b) Level Ⅱ Residential Buildings



(c) Level Ⅲ Residential Buildings (d) Level Ⅳ Residential Buildings

Figure 4. Kernel Density Estimation of Historic Dwellings at Four Levels. Source: Author's own work.



Figure 5. typical historic dwellings in Dayan Old Town. Source: Author's own work.

1) There are 34 Grade I historic dwellings, mainly distributed in areas such as Xingwen Lane and Guangbi Lane. These dwellings retain traditional layout and carry living historical memories, serving as the core anchors of the cultural identity.

2) There are 31 Grade II, mainly distributed in areas like Zhongyi Lane and Xingren Section. These dwellings preserve the core features of traditional architecture but have shortcomings in aspects such as the living inheritance of culture and residents' cultural identification.

3) There are 57 Grade II, mainly distributed in areas including Xingren Section and Huangshan Section. These dwellings have obvious deficiencies in terms of historical authenticity and cultural value.

4) There are 25 Grade IV, mainly distributed in areas such as Xingwen Lane and Xinyi Street. They are most affected by commercial development. Most of these dwellings have been transformed into homogeneous homestays and shops, with traditional cultural symbols basically disappearing.

Overall, the value of historic dwellings shows spatial differentiation (Figure 6). High-value are distributed along the water system; low-value are concentrated in tourist flow-intensive entrance areas, and the intensity of commercial development shows a negative correlation with the value grade of the dwellings.

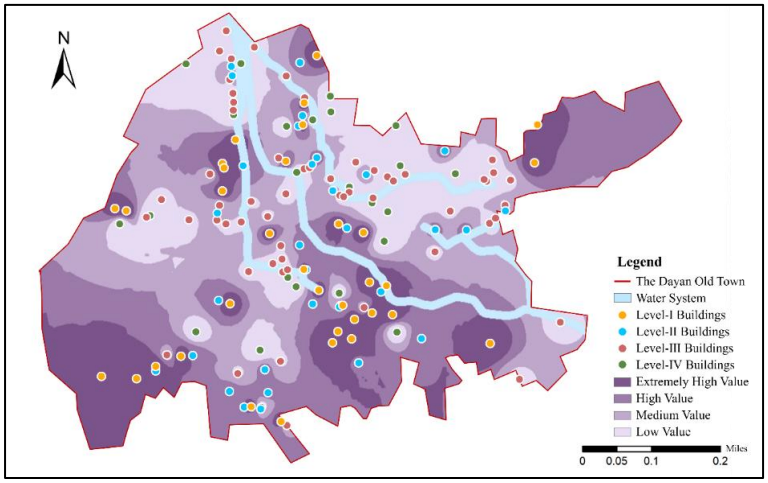


Figure 6. Schematic Diagram of the Overall Value Level Distribution. Source: Author's own work.

4.2. Manifestations of the Cultural Identity Crisis

4.2.1 Loosened Foundation of Cultural Identity

The core problem is the damage to physical carriers bearing historical information, which mainly corresponds to the deficiency in historical and scientific values.

Grade IV dwellings are normally subject to homogeneous commercial transformation. Surveys show that 72% have become standardized guest rooms and 20% into ordinary restaurants (Figure 7). Historical elements like Dongba wooden carvings have disappeared, which makes it hard to carry the cultural identity of a "Multi-Ethnic Coexistence". Among Grade III, 56% have issues of modern materials replacing traditional ones (Figure 8). Moreover, Grade I dwellings face problems like faded Dongba scripts due to weathering and loose "Xuan Yu" (suspended fish-shaped decorations) without restoration. These do not shake the foundation of cultural identity, but long-term accumulation may still cause gaps in cultural memory details.

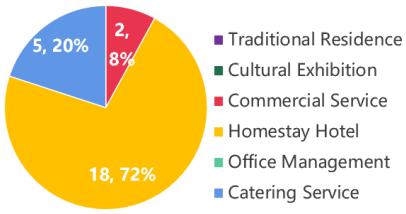


Figure 7. Statistics on the Functional Usage of Grade-IV. Source: Author's own work.



Figure 8. Typical Issues. Source: Author's own work.

4.2.2 Emotional Disruption of Cultural Identity

The emotional connection of cultural identity relies on communities' sharing and inheritance of collective memory, mainly corresponding to shortcomings in social value. This is mainly manifested as the loss of indigenous residents, disappearance of living scenarios, and inheritance gaps.

The out-migration rate of indigenous residents reaches as high as 80% in Grade IV areas. Author's own work living scenarios such as neighborhood interactions and festivals have been replaced by homogeneous commercial operations (Figure 9-10). Among Grade II and III, young residents have vague understanding of history, resulting in intergenerational gaps in collective memory. While traditional festivals are hosted in Grade I, some have a tendency toward performativity, turning inheritance activities from daily necessities to commercial accessories.

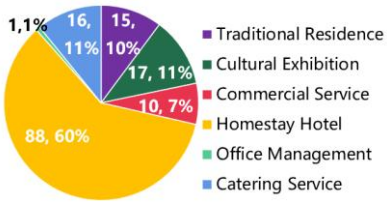


Figure 9. Statistics on the Functional Usage of Historic Dwellings in Dayan Old Town. Source: Author's own work.



Figure 10. Traditional living scenarios have been replaced. Source: Lijiang Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism.

4.2.3 Lack of Vitality in Cultural Identity

It is the effective transformation of traditional connotations into modern expressions that makes up the real contemporary vitality. The core of the current crisis is the static display of cultural and artistic values.

Homestays converted from low-value dwellings only use Dongba script and Naxi costumes as superficial decorations, reducing cultural identity to mere photo spots. Grade II dwellings preserve traditional wood carvings but display them statically without interactive experiences. As the core carrier of the "heritage highland", Grade I dwellings need greater international narrative capacity.

5. Reconstruction Path of the Cultural Identity of the Old Town of Lijiang

5.1. Anchoring Historical Stratification: Hierarchical Conservation

Grade I dwellings are prioritized for refined restoration with traditional crafts and materials, supported by digital archives, and renovation that alters courtyard layouts is strictly prohibited. Grade II dwellings will gradually replace inappropriate modern components with traditional ones. For low-value dwellings, stylistic restoration will be carried out, and architectural culture will be integrated into commercial operations, with five dwellings selected as cultural business demonstration projects.

Three spatial units are designated: core conservation, transitional restoration, and risk rectification. Core conservation units impose rigid commercial controls, allowing only ICH inheritance and cultural exhibitions. Transitional restoration units adopt commercial format ratio control and encourage the "front-shop, back-residence" model. Risk rectification units reduce commercial scale, improve service quality, and add a historical interpretation system for the old town (Figure 11).

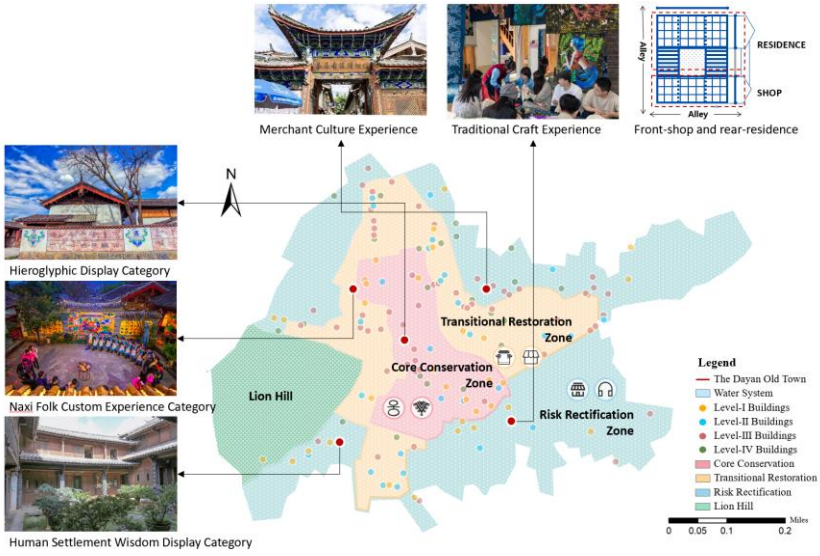


Figure 11. Anchoring Historical Stratification. Source: Author's own work.

5.2. Activating Collective Memory: Value Inheritance

An indigenous resident supporting system will be established, offering subsidies for housing renovation and living assistance. The business formats of daily life such as community vegetable markets and convenient barbershops will be preserved. Based on this, combined with the spatial characteristics of different value grades, participatory and perceptible memory carriers will be created. In Grade I dwelling areas, indigenous residents and ICH inheritors will be invited to jointly participate in traditional festival interactions. In Grades II and III, courtyards with low utilization will be transformed into multi-functional public spaces. In the Grade IV renovated areas, 5 sites will be selected for construction of "Old Town Life Experience Halls", where tourists can perceive the authentic memory of courtyard life.

It will systematically collect oral histories and old photos from residents to build a digital platform. The historical stories can be viewed by tourists by scanning a QR code, while residents can upload memory materials independently (Figure 11).

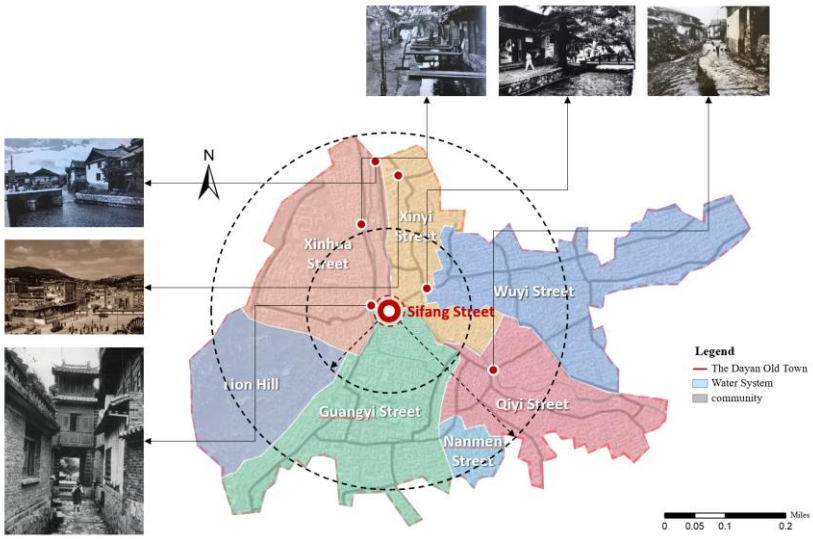


Figure 11. Activating Collective Memory: Value Inheritance. Source: Author's own work.

5.3. Innovating Contemporary Narrative: Value Transformation

With historical context and cultural characteristics as the link, a comprehensive cultural experience route is designed.

1) Tea-Horse Road Traceability Route. Starting from the courtyard of Hengyugong Trading House, it connects heritage sites of different values including former caravan post stations and trading house courtyards. The core of this route will be the ICH Market at the south entrance.

2) Multi-Ethnic Symbiosis Construction Route. This route starts with He Family Courtyard, linking houses that represent the integration of multi-ethnic groups. Architectural wisdom workshops, experiencing ethnic life scenarios, and participating in handicrafts are some activities integrated into this route.

3) Plateau Settlement Wisdom Route. Starting from Jishan Lane, it goes south along the water system, connecting dwellings, ancient wells, and other sites. This route helps visitors understand the wisdom reflected in the Old Town's living by water pattern.

The ICH transformation shall enrich the experience of such routes. In Grade I, Dongba culture innovation workshops will be established. For Grade II and III, ICH experience activities shall be set up. In the renovated Grade IV, an ICH Market will be built to showcase Naxi silverware and Bai ethnic group's tie-dye.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

6.1. Conclusion

This study, based on the value grading through a value assessment system, determines that the fundamental issue with the Old Town's cultural identity crisis lies in the rupture of physical carriers-emotional connection-contemporary narratives. **A cultural identity reconstruction path** of "anchoring historical stratification-activating collective memory-innovating contemporary narrative" is proposed to realize the living inheritance of the Old Town of Lijiang's cultural identity.

Guided by value orientation, this study transforms the abstract cultural identity into a quantifiable indicator system. The technical framework of **"diagnosis-reconstruction"** gives a specific plan for the living inheritance of the Old Town of Lijiang's cultural identity. Meanwhile, it offers experience for the sustainable conservation and inclusive development of other historical towns.

6.2. Outlook

The cultural identity of historical towns is developing dynamically, and a dynamic model should be established. Although the reconstruction path is designed based on the regional characteristics of Lijiang, proposing the idea of general framework + personalized adjustment, its universality has not been verified through multi-case comparison. It is necessary to carry out cross-regional research to extract common laws and supplement personalized modules.

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