

# The Decline and Revival of Sanshui's Fisher Community: Challenges, Policy Impacts, and Sustainable Solutions

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**Abstract.** This research paper delves into the multifaceted challenges the fishing community faces in Sanshui, China. Once flourishing in the 1970s and 80s, the district has experienced a decline, marked by the disappearance of younger fishermen, safety concerns, pollution, and societal disconnect. A thorough analysis of the governmental policies reveals a mixed impact. At the same time, some measures, such as restrictions on fishing practices and affordable housing, were intended to support the fishers. However, they have inadvertently driven many away from the water. The research paper offers an insight into the cultural significance of the fishing community and proposes sustainable strategies for its revival. Recommendations include spreading the unique cultural heritage for tourism, rigid regulations to halt pollution, and support for fishers during the fishing off-season. The findings underscore the urgency for a balanced approach that recognizes the cultural value of Sanshui's fisher community and aligns it with contemporary economic and environmental realities, to foster a harmonious and sustainable future.

**Keywords:** government policies, environmental issues, socio-economic changes, intangible cultural heritage.

## 1. Introduction

SanShui, in Chinese meaning three water, has three large rivers covering it. This geographical attribute gave the locals unprecedented opportunity, nurturing a unique lifestyle — the fishing industry. During the 1950s, many people could not afford property on land, nor could they even afford to live a sustainable life. The rivers of Sanshui emerged as the solution to this problem. People catch fish to have food to eat while setting foot on boats to provide shelter.

Additionally, the sale of fish plays a crucial role in ensuring a sustainable and steady source of income for these individuals. Over years of development, the prosperous community has grown drastically. Not only in Sanshui but during the era before the 21st century, many other regions that contain water in their area have developed fishing communities similar to Sanshui. However, the downfall of this community came not long after the 21st century. The table below reveals fishing village units from 1980 to 2019. Specifically looking at the numbers before 2010 and the indices afterward, the units of villages for all on-water villages boomed but soon followed an immediate drop in the following years.

**Table 1.** Number of fishing villages, Sea fishing villages, and freshwater fishing villages in China [1]

Type/Year	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
Fishing Village	316	400	404	407	787	690	1073	753	718
Sea Fishing Village	260	304	326	325	429	394	424	381	389
Fresh Water Fishing Village	56	96	78	82	358	296	647	372	329

Resources are always limited, and in the fishing industry, fish is a scarce resource in the fishing community. Over years of extensive fishing, the government has noticed a dramatic fall in fish. To keep a sustainable ecosystem for water life in Sanshui, the city government had to place restrictions

on fishers. Although this was a noble action from the government, it catastrophically affected the fishing community. One of the policies that hit hardest to the community is the “fishing off-season” period. Published in 2011 in SanShui, this policy prohibited fishers from fishing in the river for commercial purposes. The period lasts for four months, from March to July. During this period, alternatives for fishermen are to work onshore or prepare for the post-fishing off-season period. This period was a harsh time for fishermen to sustain life due to their specialized ability, which made them incapable of handling any skills for land jobs. Another policy is the mesh size requirement. To secure fish from going extinct, the government had set a requirement on a minimum size of the mesh to keep juvenile fish out of the net caught by the fisher, which forced fishermen to expect a smaller yield from their catch per net.

After years of ramping policies against fishing and opportunities on land, only 8000 fish boats remain in the region of Sanshui. But this is not merely a tale of loss but a call to action.

Using literature Review and Document analysis, content analysis, and interview, this research paper gives a descriptive explanation of the current issues the community is facing today. Most of the problems are due to the policies published by the government in recent years. Thus, the research compares the intentions of government policies and how they have impacted the community and their prosperity. Lastly, the research paper mentions proposals for how the government could take action to revive the vulnerable community that is going extinct.

## **2. The Gradual Decline of the Fishing Community**

### **2.1. Education**

The fishing community thrived in the 2000s and 2010s, with many young residents emulating their parents, leading to a dramatic rise in the number of fishers in Sanshui. However, that era also marked a time when China began to emphasize education. With the introduction of mandatory and free education in 1986, all citizens were granted free schooling up to grade 9. This provided the younger generation with an alternative to fishing. As they learned different skills and broadened their horizons, many chose occupations beyond the water. This trend was not an isolated incident but became a prevalent decision in the community. As a result, no more fishermen born in the 80s or 90s exist today.

### **2.2. Safety Concerns**

Education is not the only factor contributing to this shift. Safety issues have also played a role. The ability to swim is not enough to ensure safety from the dangerous river waters. Tragic accidents have taken lives in the community, and since children often are brought by their parents on fishing boats, many fishers had to tie ropes to their children to prevent them from being swept away. Such threats may have been tolerated in the past when there were no alternatives. But in today's age, when opportunities exist outside of fishing, safety has become a compelling reason to choose a different path.

Moreover, with a significant increase in overfishing and pollution, the well-being of the fish and the fishermen has been impacted. The taste of the fish has deteriorated, and instances of mass deaths have occurred, affecting the livelihood of fishers. Take instance the mass death of fish in the Zhujiang River region, covering over 500 meters of the river. Experts attribute the cause to a mix of weather conditions and ongoing pollution affecting the river's ecosystem [2]. Although China has been focusing on pollution control, the growing demand has led to a surge in pollution from riverside factories. This problem threatens future mass deaths and undermines the fishers' credibility as citizens grow hesitant to buy fish from polluted waters News Report.

### **2.3. Societal Disconnection**

Furthermore, the societal disconnect is also a problem that led to the decision to leave water for fishers. In earlier times, the community, or even a whole village would live on water, in boats. This

makes communication not a problem among people. Furthermore, many fishermen never had the chance to socialize outside of their community. As people have moved onshore due to education opportunities, the socialization among fishers has declined. Many fishermen spend most of their time on the water, with some even sleeping on their boats to start fishing early in the morning. Thus, this separation from the land has distanced them from information and opportunities. Many older fishers, due to poverty and lack of education, never had the chance to learn to read or write. Even when online internet community technologies were mature, many still would not be able to catch on with the society onshore. When the younger generation has the chance to see the outside world, they no longer seal their social life in water but choose to explore the outside world.

According to Sina News, the remaining population of the fisher community stands at about 1700 Sina articles [3]. In comparison to the past, if the number of the population was once a hurricane, today it would be considered a drizzle. The factors leading to this decline may seem unrelated, but ultimately, the main catalyst for these changes has been the shifting policies of the Chinese government.

### **3. Government Policies and their Impacts on the Fishing Community**

#### **3.1. The Fishing Off-season**

In light of the overfishing that has resulted in catastrophic damage to the aquatic ecosystem, SanShui's government implemented stringent policies in 2011 to address the urgent issue [4]. These policies, including mesh size requirements and the establishment of a Fishing off-season, were designed to alleviate the situation.

Within the SanShui region, the mesh size requirement stipulates that the mesh size must be at least 4 centimeters in diameter. This regulation aims to protect juvenile fish, allowing them to reach maturity and sustain the population. Moreover, the Fishing off-season, typically lasting from March to July, prohibits fishing for commercial sale. The pause in fishing activity provides security for offspring to flourish and endangered species to recover, thereby rejuvenating the river environment.

These regulations are not only seen as a lifeline for the ecosystem but are also framed as benefiting the fishing community. Theoretically, the increase in fish population would lead to higher yields for fishermen [5]. In the long term, a stabilized fish population would reduce the risk of extinction in local waterways.

Nevertheless, the policies' impact on fishermen's lives is multifaceted and presents substantial challenges. The compensation provided during the off-season, at 1100 CNY per month, barely covers daily expenses. Many fishermen are forced to use their savings or find alternative employment on land, often a difficult transition given their specialized skills. While the policy's intention is noble, aiming to preserve the ecosystem and the sustainability of the fishing industry, the reality for many fishermen is a struggle for survival. Despite a potential increase in fish supply post-off-season, the price drop negates any financial gains. The result is a large amount of leaving from the water, as fishermen seek more stable opportunities on land.

#### **3.2. Inexpensive Offers of Residential Buildings**

Addressing the instability in the lives of fishermen, the government enacted a policy first in 2008 to provide affordable housing for those who wished to relocate to land [6]. These subsidized residential buildings were priced at a mere 1 CNY per square meter, coupled with additional compensation of up to 15 thousand CNY to encourage the move[6]. As a result, 759 fishermen without land property took the opportunity to move onshore, many of whom eventually sought alternative employment on land. After seeing such successful results, the government built more onshore residential buildings after 2008, bringing more fishermen on land [6].

In conclusion, while the government's policies were devised to support and sustain the livelihood of the fishing community, the practical outcomes tell a more complex story. Unintentionally, these

policies led to more fishermen leaving the water, drawn by the allure of stable opportunities on land and discouraged by the deteriorating conditions within the fishing industry.

## **4. Proposals for Revitalization of the Remaining Fishing Community**

### **4.1. Tourism**

The decline of the fishing industry is irrevocable, it is only a matter of time. However, the rich cultural heritage of the fisher community presents unique values that ought to be preserved and integrated into broader society. Looking at the economic transition of the JiangNan fisher village, the government has pivoted its focus to cultural heritage and tourism, by vigorously developing the recreational fishing industry, the traditional culture of fishing villages can be promoted and glorified.

By promoting the distinctive culture of fishing, villages can attract visitors and stimulate tourism, not just locally but also among international travelers. Research and statistical analysis have demonstrated the viability of this change in focus, which can still yield favorable economic benefits for fishers in Jiangnan [7]. SanShui's fisher community could emulate this process.

Moreover, SanShui's fisher community offers an array of unique cultural activities that can be showcased through performances and applications for intangible cultural heritage projects. The community's captivating 70-year history, highlighted by its fascinating wedding traditions, presents an appealing facet that can be shared through tourism [8]. Like ShenZhen's Southern Fisher community, Sanshui's fisher community could apply for an intangible cultural heritage program, ensuring the sustainability and broader dissemination of these cultural activities with government support [8].

Having support from the government is crucial if the fishing community is working towards this path of tourism. Looking at the Fishing Village of Zhoushan Island, with the support of the government on the spread of the development in spreading culture and tourism, its tourism development has worked out successfully [9]. To spread culture while attracting tourism more efficiently, the help from government, either funding or spreading messages, is critical and necessary for the long-term prosperity of the fishing community.

Other than working on the cultural part when the fishing community is attracting tourism, the community can develop the site of the fishery industry into an entertainment activity that attracts tourism by drawing them to fish themselves in the river of Sanshui. This method has been used during the development of recreational fisheries in the United States, which had a conspicuous impact on the revitalization of the fishery community there [10]. Exploring different facets of tourism would bring many other opportunities to the community, and picking the right one would contribute greatly to the revival of the community from its extinction.

### **4.2. River Water Pollution Regulations**

In addition to cultural preservation, the government must safeguard Sanshui's fisher community's sustainability by regulating pollution in the river region. Though there has been marked concern for the river's fish ecosystem, there must be equally stringent measures to control pollution levels.

The skyrocketing societal demands have led to increased industrial development along the river, which in turn has elevated pollution levels. This escalation threatens the sustainability of the fisher community, accelerating their decline. The government must implement rigorous regulations and policies to restrict pollution, thus preserving both the ecosystem and the livelihood of the fisher community.

### **4.3. Occupation Opportunities for Fishermen during the Fishing Off-season**

Finally, attention must be given to the hardships faced by fishers during the fishing off period, a time when they suffer significant financial strain. The government must consider strategies to ensure the economic stability of fishers during this time, assisting them in securing short-term employment opportunities to maintain their livelihood.

This could include the creation of efficient apps and websites or the establishment of accessible lines of work specifically tailored to the skills and needs of the fisher community. Such targeted initiatives would offer critical support to the fishers, enabling them to thrive even in the face of industry challenges and transitions.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of Sanshui's fishing community reveals a complicated, multifaceted landscape. The government's well-intentioned policies, aimed at ecosystem preservation and economic support, have inadvertently precipitated a decline in fishing as a livelihood. The fading tradition has been hastened by safety concerns, pollution, and economic strains. The significant drop in younger fishermen, and shift towards land-based occupations mark a transformation within this once-thriving community.

While there are challenges, solutions lie in embracing the cultural heritage and unique characteristics of the fisher community. Drawing inspiration from JiangNan's economic transition, a focus on tourism and the promotion of cultural aspects present a valuable method for economic revival. Rigid pollution control and tailored employment opportunities during the off-fishing season could alleviate some of the hardships faced by the fishers.

The complex interplay of the policies also underscores that theoretical support does not always translate into practical benefits. The fishers' struggle for survival during changing regulations and worsening conditions is a reminder of the importance of considering the human element in policymaking.

In light of the presented findings, this research holds significant relevance for policymakers, local governments, and communities aiming to understand the effects of external forces on traditional occupations. It emphasizes the fragile balance between rapid modernization and the preservation of traditional practices, showcasing the ripple effects that large-scale decisions can have on micro-communities.

While this study provides a comprehensive examination of Sanshui's fishing community, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Every research has boundaries set by the scope, time, and context of the study. Although the methodology employed and the researcher's perspective have guided this exploration, there are facets of the community's experience that may not be entirely captured.

Looking forward, there is an opportunity for future research to delve deeper into the community, focusing on the individuals of those who transitioned from fishing to other occupations. By doing so, it might offer a better understanding of the emotional and sociocultural implications of such shifts. Additionally, comparative studies involving similar fishing communities across China or even globally could provide broader insights into common places and differences in their challenges. Such explorations can pave the way for collaborative solutions that resonate across diverse settings.

Ultimately, the fate of Sanshui's fishing community rests on a new path that is unprecedented in their mainstream business. The rich history and vibrant culture of this community should not merely be a memory but must find expression in new, sustainable forms. Embracing this approach is proof of respect for tradition and a path toward a sustainable and flourishing future for the community.

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