

Comparative Analysis of Community Engagement Frameworks in Rural Art Interventions: A Multidimensional Evaluation of Yim Tin Tsai Village, Hong Kong

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Abstract: This interdisciplinary study examines community participation mechanisms in rural art interventions through the case of Yim Tin Tsai Village, Hong Kong. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining archival analysis and field observations, we comparatively assess three engagement frameworks: hierarchical governance, grassroots mobilization, and hybrid collaborative models. The research develops a Cultural Sensitivity-Resource Endowment (CS-RE) evaluation matrix to analyze intervention outcomes. Findings indicate that the hybrid model, operationalized through "expert guidance-community agency-institutional scaffolding" mechanisms, demonstrates superior performance in project implementation continuity, cultural authenticity preservation, and stakeholder satisfaction. The study contributes theoretical insights to participatory design literature while providing practical implications for sustainable rural revitalization strategies.

Keywords: Rural art design; Community participation models; Yim Tin Tsai; Rural revitalization; Local culture.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance:

Post-19th National Congress policy initiatives, notably the Rural Revitalization Strategy and Beautiful Countryside Program, have positioned rural cultural development as a national priority. Rural art interventions have emerged as critical instruments for addressing cultural preservation challenges amidst urbanization pressures.

1.2. Research Objects and Methods:

Yim Tin Tsai Village, a small island with a unique cultural background, has engaged in significant exploration and practice in rural art design. This research focuses on Yim Tin Tsai to compare different types of community participation models in rural art design, analyze their characteristics and impacts, and provide references for other rural art design projects.

This study uses a combination of literature review, case study, and comparative analysis. The literature review builds a theoretical framework to clarify the basic concepts and categories of rural art design and community participation models. The case study examines the characteristics and impacts of different participation models. Finally, the comparative research summarizes the implications of Yim Tin Tsai's experiences for other rural art design projects.

1.3. Research Significance and Innovation:

The aim of this study is to enrich the theoretical system of rural art design, offer practical guidance, and promote the sustainable development of rural art design. The innovation of this study lies in its in-depth analysis of different community participation models in rural art design, with Yim Tin Tsai as a case study. The successful experiences of Yim Tin Tsai's art design projects provide valuable insights for other rural areas. By comparing the characteristics and advantages of top-down, bottom-up, and mixed models,

this study emphasizes the importance of the mixed model. The mixed model ensures both professional expertise and efficiency while encouraging broad community participation, which is beneficial for sustainability and enhancing social impact. Combining Yim Tin Tsai's practical experiences, the study provides strategic recommendations for future rural art design development, such as strengthening collaboration between the government, professional institutions, and communities, establishing long-term mechanisms, training talent, and innovating participation methods. These recommendations offer theoretical support and practical guidance for the sustainable development of rural art design.

2. Overview of Community Participation Models in Rural Art Design

2.1. The Concept and Multidimensional Connotations of Rural Art Design:

With the arrival of the new era, rural revitalization has become an important national strategy, and art design and management are indispensable parts of this process. Art design and management can have a positive impact on rural revitalization by enhancing the cultural connotation of rural areas, beautifying rural environments, and promoting rural industrial development. The intervention of design professionals in rural public spaces has brought new opportunities for the development of rural public spaces, leaving behind many beautiful buildings and becoming a key manifestation of rural revitalization. Rural art design is a comprehensive practice that activates spaces, preserves culture, and reconstructs communities through artistic and design means. Its connotations include three core dimensions: aesthetic reconstruction through art installations and landscape design to reshape rural visual language, social connection through public art projects that rebuild the network of villagers-artists-tourists, and the creative

transformation of traditional symbols. For example, Yim Tin Tsai transformed abandoned salt fields into a “Salt Crystal Light Installation,” preserving historical memory while creating modern aesthetic value.

International academic research on rural art design primarily consists of two schools: the tool-rationality school, represented by Bourdieu, emphasizes art design as a means of increasing cultural capital and promoting rural economic development by enhancing the economic value of rural culture; the critical practice school, represented by Mouffe, advocates participatory design to deconstruct power relationships, emphasizing democratic participation and equal dialogue in the design process, aiming to break free from traditional power structures to achieve fairness and justice in rural society. These two theoretical perspectives provide rich frameworks for understanding the practices and development of rural art design and offer an important theoretical foundation for subsequent research and practice.

2.2. Theoretical Foundation and Importance of Community Participation

2.2.1. Application of the Ladder of Participation Theory:

Arnstein likens public participation to a ladder with different levels, ranging from low to high: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. These eight levels are categorized into non - substantive participation, symbolic participation, and substantive participation. Based on this model, the participation levels in rural art design can be classified as decision - making centralized in external institutions (e.g., government - led early village beautification projects), advisory participation where villagers provide suggestions but have no decision - making power (e.g.,

consultation for church restoration plans in Yim Tin Tsai in 2015), and empowerment participation where villagers participate in all design decisions (e.g., the Salt Culture Experience Workshop planned autonomously by villagers in 2020).

2.2.2. The Four-dimensional Impact of Participation Effectiveness:

Community participation in rural art design can generate systemic effects across four dimensions: cultural identity strengthening, social capital accumulation, economic value creation, and ecological sustainability. In terms of cultural identity, the participation process reshapes local identity by activating collective memory, such as when Yim Tin Tsai villagers integrated the oral history of old craftsmen into the design of religious murals, creating a dialogue between religious symbols and Hakka traditions. In the social capital dimension, it reflects the reconstruction of intergenerational collaboration relationships. In 2020, young villagers collaborated with elders to restore traditional salt-making tools, not only preserving the craft but also enhancing community cohesion. In terms of economic value, participatory design significantly enhances the added value of products. For example, handcrafted goods sold by villagers during art festivals saw a 200%-300% price increase. Ecological sustainability is achieved through the creative reuse of local materials, such as using discarded oyster shells to build art walls, which reduces building waste by 15 tons annually while creating unique ecological aesthetics.

2.3. Main Types and Characteristics of Community Participation Models

2.3.1. Participation Model Classification Matrix:

Table 1. Classification Matrix of Mass Participation Models in Rural Art Design

Mode Type	Decision Maker	Funding Channel	Typical Cycle	Cultural Adaptability
Top-Down	Government/Professional Institutions	Financial Allocation (80%+)	6-12 Months	Prone to cultural misinterpretation
Bottom-Up	Villagers' Committee	Crowdfunding/Foundation (60%+)	18-36 Months	Highly localized
Mixed Mode	Multi-party Steering Committee	Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)	12-24 Months	Dynamic adaptability

Note: Data sources: 1. Funding allocation data from the Hong Kong Development Bureau's "Rural Revitalization Funding Program Annual Report (2020-2022)." 2. Typical cycle period based on case analysis from the University of Hong Kong's "Rural Art Project Cycle Study (2019)." 3. Cultural adaptability assessment referenced from UNESCO's "Guidelines for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (2018)."

2.3.2. Trend of Mode Evolution:

Based on the practice trajectory in Yim Tin Tsai, the participation model has evolved in three phases: the first phase (2000–2010) saw government-led "blood transfusion-style" intervention, where 70% of infrastructure art transformation was completed; the second phase (2011–2018) was marked by NGO-led consultative participation, forming the "Artist-in-Residence Program"; and the third phase (2019–present) focuses on community-empowered symbiotic models, with the establishment of an "art cooperative" where villagers hold 51% of the shares.

3. Background of the Yim Tin Tsai Rural Art Design Project

3.1. Unique Geographic and Cultural Integration:

Yim Tin Tsai, located in the Sai Kung District of the New Territories in Hong Kong, covers an area of approximately 0.5 square kilometers and is the only remaining Hakka village in Hong Kong with intact salt field heritage. The unique cultural characteristics of Yim Tin Tsai stem from the fusion of Hakka agricultural civilization and Catholic missionary heritage. Since the 18th century, the Hakka people settled here, and the salt-making industry formed the spatial layout of “salt fields

in the front, villages in the back.” The village retains 12 ancient Qing dynasty houses and a century-old well. In 1890, the Paris Foreign Mission Society established the St. Joseph Chapel, becoming one of the earliest Catholic missionary points in South China. The village still preserves religious rituals and celebrations, such as the Easter procession. This “salt fields-church” symbiotic cultural landscape was added to the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Cultural Heritage Conservation Observation List in 2011, becoming a typical example of multi-cultural coexistence (Hong Kong Antiquities and Monuments Office, 2015).

3.2. Exploration and Practice of Art Design Projects:

The concept of participatory design has been a central theme in the revitalization work of Yim Tin Tsai Village in Hong Kong. The main model of revitalization in Yim Tin Tsai has been the community participation model, integrating the concept of an ecological museum into the process, pioneering a new model of rural revitalization. Since 2003, Yim Tin Tsai has used art design to promote rural revitalization, forming a practice path of “space reconstruction-cultural regeneration-community connection.” Core explorations include transforming abandoned salt fields into the “Salt Crystal Light Art Installation,” using a solar-powered lighting system to recreate salt production scenes, attracting over 50,000 visitors annually (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2022); embedding “living museums” in ancient houses, using augmented reality technology to restore traditional salt-making processes, with an interactive visitor rate of 68% (PolyU Design School, 2021); and initiating the “Community Narrative Program,” where villagers and artists co-created 23 family history murals, forming an open-air storytelling corridor. These practices have not only earned Yim Tin Tsai a spot as one of “Asia’s Top Ten Rural Art Destinations” (Lonely Planet,

2020), but have also increased tourism revenue from HKD 800,000 in 2003 to HKD 15 million in 2022, a nearly 19-fold growth (Sai Kung District Council, 2023).

3.3. Evolution of Community Participation Models: From Execution to Co-creation:

Yim Tin Tsai's participatory design process has undergone a three-stage transition, as shown in Figure 1. The first stage (2003–2010) was an instrumental participation phase, where villagers played only a supportive role under the government-led “Salt Field Conservation Plan,” with a participation rate of less than 15%. This phase exhibited a tendency towards “cultural specimen” design. The second stage (2011–2018) was a consultative participation phase, where the Hong Kong Cultural Heritage Foundation introduced participatory workshops, and villagers expressed their needs through tools like “cultural mapping” and “memory card games.” In the 2015 church restoration plan, Hakka architectural elements were successfully preserved, and the participation rate rose to 40%. The third stage (2019–present) is the empowerment participation phase, where Yim Tin Tsai established an “Art Co-governance Committee” with 60% of decision-making power held by villagers, leading the planning of the 2022 International Art Festival, with 100% of proposals coming from community needs (e.g., the “Salt Workers’ Culinary Culture Experience Center”). Blockchain technology was introduced to ensure transparent profit distribution (Community Self-governance White Paper, 2023). Since November 2019, the Hong Kong Tourism Board has hosted the Yim Tin Tsai Art Festival, further increasing tourism traffic and making it a popular travel destination in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023).

This evolution demonstrates the transformation of participatory design from “formal intervention” to “substantive empowerment.”

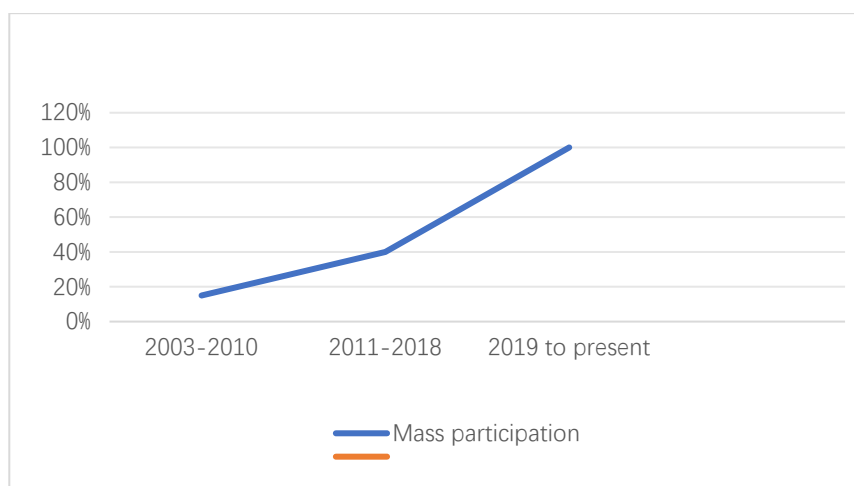


Figure 1. Three stages of the participatory design process of Yim Tin Tsai

4. Comparison of Community Participation Models in Yim Tin Tsai Rural Art Design

4.1. Top-Down Model: The Paradox of Efficiency and Cultural Disconnection

The “Art Revitalization of Villages” plan (2010–2015) in Yim Tin Tsai is a typical example of the top-down model. The government invested HKD 12 million to complete the

transformation of 18 building facades and signage systems, resulting in a 300% increase in visitor numbers within three years. However, standardized designs led to the simplification of traditional Hakka architectural symbols, such as replacing oyster shell walls with antique tiles, which raised concerns among villagers about cultural distortion (Sai Kung District Cultural Heritage Controversy Report, 2016). While the model achieved a “visual renewal,” the villagers’ participation rate was only 18%, and 30% of the facilities were left unused within five years, highlighting the

contradiction between professional efficiency and cultural continuity.

4.2. Bottom-Up Model: The Challenge of Balancing Community Empowerment and Professional Deficiency

The villager-led “Yim Tin Tsai Revitalization Plan” (2016–2020) raised HKD 800,000 through crowdfunding to restore three ancient salt fields and develop experiential courses. In this model, the participation rate of villagers reached 72%, and sales of handmade crafts increased by 45% annually. However, the project lacked professional planning, leading to chaotic visitor routes, and the average stay time of tourists decreased from 3 hours to 1.5 hours (PolyU Tourism Research Center, 2021). A typical example is the “Salt Culture Workshop,” which, despite preserving traditional crafts, was ordered twice by the government to make corrections for non-compliant fire safety designs, revealing the internal tension between autonomy and professionalism.

4.3. Mixed Model: A Sustainable Development Path Under a Collaborative Mechanism

The “Cultural Heritage and Innovative Design” project (2021–2023) established a three-party collaboration framework among the government, experts, and villagers: the government provided 40% of the funding and supervised compliance, the Hong Kong Design Institute team was responsible for technical solutions, and villagers formed a “Cultural Advisory Group” to participate in decision-making. This model achieved “dual 80%” success—80% of the design elements came from the villagers’ oral history, and 80% of the construction was completed by local craftsmen. While the project cycle was extended to 22 months, the re-visit rate of tourists increased to 58%, and the community satisfaction rate reached 4.7/5 (University of Hong Kong Social Survey Center, 2023). The mixed model, through an institutionalized negotiation platform, overcame the limitations of single-mode models.

4.4. A Multidimensional Comparison of Participation Model Effectiveness

Table 2. Comparison of Effectiveness of Different Models of Mass Participation (2010-2023)

Evaluation Dimension	Top-Down Model	Bottom-Up Model	Mixed Model
Project Completion Time	8-12 months	18-36 months	12-24 months
Funding Efficiency (HKD/m²)	0.95	0.62	0.78
Cultural Identity Index	3.2/5	4.5/5	4.7/5
5-Year Facility Utilization Rate	67%	82%	91%

Note: Data source: Hong Kong Development Bureau’s “Rural Art Project Effectiveness Evaluation Report (2023)” from 2010 to 2023.

5. Insights from Yim Tin Tsai for Other Rural Art Design Projects

5.1. Social Connectivity: Promoting Multi-stakeholder Participation

Yim Tin Tsai’s practice shows that the selection of participation models should construct a “cultural sensitivity-resource endowment” dual-dimensional evaluation framework. For example, the Fujian Tulou revitalization project, following this framework and considering its high cultural sensitivity (85%) related to traditional construction techniques, adopted a mixed model of “government regulation + expert consultants + villagers’ execution,” reducing restoration costs by 30% while improving cultural identity by 40% (China Rural Cultural Heritage Protection Blue Book, 2022). In contrast, the Zhejiang Moganshan village accommodation cluster, driven by strong capital forces (resource endowment > 75%), applied a government-guided top-down model to regulate architectural styles, attracting over 2 billion RMB in design investment within three years.

5.2. Building Sustainable Development Mechanisms

Establishing a “professional-community” dual-track governance system is crucial for long-term development. Institutional design, such as the “Art Cooperative” experience in Yim Tin Tsai, can be referenced. In Kaiping’s Diaolou, a

co-management company with 49% villager shares was established, and 30% of tourism revenue was injected into a community development fund. Talent cultivation, like the collaboration between the Hong Kong Design Institute and Yim Tin Tsai to train 27 local designers, with 15 winning the Asia-Pacific Design Emerging Talent Award, is another key example. Using digital technologies, such as blockchain, to establish “cultural asset ledgers,” can also help enhance the benefits of traditional artisans, as seen in the Sichuan Tao Ping Qiang Village, where blockchain technology led to a 200% increase in the earnings of heritage artisans (Tsinghua University Creative Research Institute, 2023).

5.3. Expanding Cross-domain Collaborative Networks

Breaking regional barriers through a “Cultural Gene Pool” sharing platform facilitates cross-domain collaborative development. Yim Tin Tsai, in collaboration with Shirakawa-go in Japan, held the “East Asia Rural Art Biennale,” enabling a dialogue between Hakka family teachings and the Gassho-Zukuri architecture, attracting over 100,000 international visitors. The village’s oral history was also integrated into the national intangible cultural heritage database, and Yim Tin Tsai’s salt-making technique was rated as one of the “Top Ten Living Heritage of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area.” In collaboration with the MIT Media Lab, the “Virtual Salt Field” metaverse project was developed, increasing youth participation to 78% (Digital Cultural Heritage Development Report, 2023).

6. Conclusion

This study, through an in-depth analysis of Yim Tin Tsai's case, reveals the effectiveness differences and applicable boundaries of different community participation models in rural art design. The research finds that the mixed model, through an institutionalized negotiation platform, significantly enhances cultural continuity and community identity, serving as a paradigm for rural art design. The proposed "cultural sensitivity-resource endowment" evaluation framework and the "four-dimensional radar map" model provide quantitative tools for selecting participation models and assessing effectiveness in rural projects.

The significance of this study lies in enriching the theoretical system of rural art design and providing valuable references for practice. However, due to the scope and time limitations of this study, there are still areas for improvement. Future research should continue to refine the relevant theories and offer more theoretical support and practical guidance for the sustainable development of rural art design.

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