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Art Empowering Rural Revitalization and Urban Renewal Is Always an Ongoing Process

Gao Ling

Abstract

In the diverse explorations of contemporary Chinese art's engagement with social reality, the practice of painter Wang Wanbin offers a unique case worthy of in-depth study. As Chairman of the Wuyuan County Artists Association in Jiangxi Province, Wang is not a widely recognized figure within the national art world, yet he has exerted profound influence on local development and community life. He was the first to discover and spearhead the restoration of Huangling, the core landscape of what is hailed as "China's Most Beautiful Village," transforming it into one of the Best Tourism Villages designated by the World Tourism Organization of the United Nations. This article argues that the significance of Wang Wanbin lies not merely in the successful completion of individual projects, but in his departure from the traditional artist's one-dimensional practice model of "field research—creation—departure," achieving a continuous progression that spans from landscape painting on paper to three-dimensional garden design, and ultimately to village restoration and urban renewal. He translated his aesthetic sensibilities and artistic imagination into urban and rural spaces that are habitable, navigable, and capable of sustainable operation, while establishing corresponding mechanisms for production and daily life. This multifaceted practice—combining the roles of artist, planner, builder, and community co-creator—offers an important theoretical reference for understanding how art empowers rural revitalization and urban renewal. Drawing on the academic context of artistic intervention, this article analyzes the intellectual origins of Wang Wanbin's philosophy that "a master painter makes a master garden designer," examines representative cases of his urban-rural placemaking, and distills the core tenets of his vision for sustainable ecological development; it further explores the practical logic of how artistic empowerment shifts from a "completed state" to an "ongoing process."

Key Words

Wang Wanbin, Art Empowerment, Rural Revitalization, Urban Regeneration, Sustainable Ecological Development Outlook, Interventional Art

Who is Wang Wanbin? Within the broader art world, his name is not widely recognized. He is an artist who works primarily with ink landscapes on paper, serving as Chairman of the Wuyuan County Artists Association and

Vice Chairman of the Shangrao City Artists Association. Even within Jiangxi province's cultural circles, he is not a household name. Yet, in the eyes of the municipal and county governments of Shangrao—and especially

among the people of his hometown, Wuyuan—he is a figure of considerable renown. It was precisely his vision and tireless dedication that transformed Wuyuan’s pastoral idyll—first glimpsed through the lenses of a few photographers in the 1980s and lingering in the wood smoke of scattered farmhouses in the 1990s—into a fully realized destination. Today, it stands as “China’s Most Beautiful Village” and a “Most Beautiful Symbol of China,” attracting a constant stream of enchanted visitors. At the heart of this transformation is Huangling. Through Wang’s pioneering discovery, leadership in restoration, and ongoing renewal efforts, Huangling has become the visual emblem of Wuyuan, a must-visit gathering place for countless domestic tourists, and a selected entry on the UN World Tourism Organization’s list of “Best Tourism Villages.”

1. From Sketching Excursions to Interventional Art

Throughout Chinese history since the Wei and Jin dynasties, scholars and literati have kept company with nature—painting, composing poetry, and giving free rein to their inspiration—leaving behind many celebrated masterpieces that have immortalized green mountains for a thousand years. Even in the decades after the founding of the People’s Republic, artists and photographers discovered, explored, depicted, and captured towering peaks and wondrous landscapes such as Zhangjiajie, Wulingyuan, and Tianzi Mountain, whose reputations surged as their beauty was extolled far and wide. In these encounters, the aesthetic sensibilities, discerning vision, conceptual frameworks, and expressive power of artists converged with nature, revealing its intrinsic beauty. Over the past decade or so, particularly within the art world, China’s rapid urban construction and economic growth have entered a new stage focused on quality enhancement and efficiency. In this context of cultural and artistic recalibration, a growing number of painters have begun rethinking the trajectory of artistic development. Departing from the studio and the city to enter villages and wilderness has thus emerged as a deliberate

choice. Reengaging with nature and the countryside, they seek through fresh observation and expression to draw renewed creative energy for their art.

We recognize this as a widespread reality: artistic cultivation and aesthetic vision are capable of discovering the beauty of the vast external world. Through the poetry, paintings, and photographs of scholars and artists, spectacular landscapes and shifting mists have been immortalized as images of an idyllic countryside—preserved in written texts and framed upon walls. Yet we also note that such representations have seldom brought genuine change or exerted tangible influence upon the lives of local residents, who live day in and day out amidst these scenic wonders. Nor have they, through the nurturing of aesthetic awareness, enriched or fulfilled the spiritual world these communities deserve, or reshaped their ways of perceiving material life.

All too often, when art “steps into life” or “enters the village,” it does so merely as a vessel for the artist’s own emotional projection. The inner emotional worlds of the local inhabitants, by contrast, remain unaddressed—their needs, aspirations, and lived experiences overlooked in the process.

We have also observed another notable phenomenon: since the year 2000, certain forward-thinking figures within the art world have sought to move beyond the enduring, and indeed intensifying, tradition of sketching from nature and fieldwork. Their artistic endeavors have been characterized by some researchers and critics as “interventional art”—a term intended to distinguish them from the long-standing mimetic practices rooted in reflection theory, wherein artists depict the external world (whether natural or social). It also marks a departure from the overtly confrontational and critical forms of “intervention” seen in the avant-garde movements of the 1980s and early 1990s, which targeted specific social problems and phenomena.

These newer practices place renewed emphasis on art’s tangible role in society and on the relationship between art and social realities. Since the turn of the millennium, art has increasingly functioned as a tool for artists to reshape reality itself. Rather than serving as an escapist utopia for avoiding the world or an

idealized realm for expressing instinctive emotions, art has instead become a concrete means of addressing existing social issues and proposing viable solutions.

Viewed through the lens of the integral and comprehensive relationship between artistic creation and the real world—and based on the specific public spaces involved—Chinese interventionist art since the turn of the millennium can be categorized into three types: interventions in urban spaces, interventions in rural areas, and interventions in the ecological environment. This classification serves to outline the general trajectory of the genre's development in China.

This represents a spontaneous shift within the art world, moving beyond the singular identity of the artist—traditionally focused on en plein air sketching and field research—toward diverse roles such as designer, urban-rural community worker, and volunteer. Against the backdrop of policies prioritizing ecological conservation, sustainable development, and the construction of an ecological civilization—alongside initiatives for rural revitalization and urban renewal—these spontaneous efforts have converged over the past decade or so to form new trends in the art world, such as art-led rural revitalization and community-based art.

There is no doubt that, since the turn of the millennium, the pioneering efforts of a small number of far-sighted individuals within the art world—voluntarily exploring new relationships between art and reality—have expanded the value assessment of art from the dimension of subjective consciousness to the level of social functionality in its reception by audiences. This shift has transformed what was once a relatively simple structure of “artistic creation → audience reception” into a far more complex, multi-layered configuration within the realities of urban and rural society.

The traditional criteria for evaluating artistic value now face challenges and counterbalances from an increasing number of links and factors within social reality itself. Consequently, such evaluation must be examined and researched within the context of an unprecedentedly holistic and diversified structure of real-world society and the chain of ecological development.

Viewed within this novel and holistic deve-

lopmental structure and chain, we contend that the long-established and habitual ecology of artistic creation mentioned above remains singular and rudimentary—it requires fundamental change and breakthrough.

The scenario in which landscapes—mountains, rivers, and self-sufficient rural hamlets—once eternally silent, rose to fame through the discoveries of literati who drew moral parallels between nature and human virtue, was essentially one-way. The process by which these scenes were transformed by the evocative hands of photographers and painters into fine artworks adorning urban living rooms—to be admired, traded, and collected—remained a niche phenomenon. And the efforts of well-intentioned artists who visit communities and reside in villages—gathering folk customs, unearthing history, and listening to local voices, only to subsequently display artistic representations of those streets and fields within urban spaces—ultimately amount to little more than a form of wishful thinking.

Why is that? For whether in mountain villages or urban communities, artists come—and then they leave. Another new batch of them arrived, and then left again. Whether their stay was short or long, in the end, they left.

They certainly brought with them a variety of fresh ideas and concepts—sparking passionate discussions across both print and online media—yet these ideas have still not taken root or translated into new ways of living and working for community residents and rural villagers.

A famous saying in Huainanzi long ago highlighted the flaws and shortcomings inherent in their efforts: “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.” Viewed from today's perspective, this profoundly philosophical ancient saying represents a holistic mindset characterized by complete openness and ecological development.

Unless the transformative relationship between art and reality is understood from the dynamic perspective of a complete chain—one capable of sustainability and organic growth—the efforts of those in the art world will ultimately amount to nothing more than fleeting, superficial wishful thinking and empty theorizing, failing to offer solutions that can

sustain or regenerate new modes of production and living.

For art to play a truly tangible and effective role in society and human life—and for aesthetics to genuinely transform people's real-world living environments and elevate the quality of the relationships between individuals, social reality, and the natural environment—there is a need for individuals who possess both refined aesthetic sensibilities and artistic insight, alongside a strong spirit of practical engagement.

They are by no means limited to translating aesthetic images from their personal consciousness and ideas into works created with established artistic media and materials—or to displaying them in the galleries and exhibition halls where people are accustomed to seeing art; rather, they seek to physically shape and manifest their artistic understanding and imagination of the real world within that very world.

This newly forged world is not only a new form of reified reality but also possesses a new system of mechanisms adapted to that reality. Within this new systemic framework connecting people, social reality, and the natural environment, there exist green hills and clear waters, cottages and roads, communities and residents; there are static landscapes alongside the vitality of human activity and the warmth of daily life. In short, it offers a tangible, visible means of unfolding new modes of production and living, supported by mechanisms for continuous, sustainable improvement.

Such individuals are, of course, no longer artists who fit into neat categories, nor applied designers who revolve around the client, let alone aestheticians who engage in theoretical deduction and inquiry; rather, they are multifaceted agents and practitioners possessing a diverse range of capabilities and competencies.

2. The Dialectical Interplay of the Actual and the Virtual

Wang Wanbin is precisely this kind of person: he has sought out, restored, transformed, and

shaped—within the real world—his own aesthetic interpretations and artistic visions of nature, landscapes, and local life. Moreover, he has innovatively conceived, planned, and organized the mechanisms of production and daily living that enable this created world to operate and develop sustainably.

There, people live their lives—a place to visit and to dwell; everything there is growing, sustainable, and enduring.

Wang Wanbin harbors a deep affection for the natural beauty of the mountain scenery and the cultural charm of the architecture in his hometown, Wuyuan: "I have studied traditional Chinese painting since childhood, focusing particularly on landscapes; I have a profound understanding of the subtle composition of gardens and pictorial realms, finding a resonance between the structure of brush and ink and the arrangement of the subjects." One often reads Chang Jian's poem *Inscribed at Poshan Temple*; its profound artistic conception and rich Zen spirit invite contemplation, sparking boundless imagination regarding the ideal garden.

The Tang dynasty poet Chang Jian's inscribed poem "Inscription at the Back Meditation Hall of Poshan Temple" unfolds with an unaffected grace and subtlety of feeling, its mood deepening progressively into infinite stillness: "At dawn I enter the ancient temple, the morning sun shines on the lofty woods. A bamboo path leads to a secluded spot, where blossoms and trees surround the meditation hall. Mountain light gladdens the birds' spirits; the pool's reflection empties the human heart. All sounds here fall into utter silence—save for the echo of bell and chime.

For thousands of years, such exquisite poetry has inspired countless later generations, yet it may never have had the chance to find its real-life counterpart—to dwell with such scenery day after day. Wuyuan, one of the six counties of the traditional Huizhou prefecture, lies at the crossroads of three provinces, embraced by encircling mountains, where hills rise and fall in harmonious rhythm with rivers and streams. Its tropical humid climate brings abundant rainfall and lush vegetation, shaping an unforgettable landscape of idyllic mountains and countryside.

In this peerless environment grew Wang



Figure 1. Cultural Landscape of Vernacular Architecture in Wuyuan.

Wanbin—a man as wise as he is gifted. In his mind must have flickered countless aesthetic images, where reality and imagination blend seamlessly, where the tangible and intangible give birth to each other. Again and again, he sketched upon paper the verdant green of forested peaks and the timeless beauty of white walls beneath dark tiled roofs. Even today, after enduring workloads far beyond ordinary limits, he still devotes his nights to painting.

He has “resolved to infuse the artistic conception of traditional Chinese ink painting into garden design, merging it with the natural landscape.” From the visions on his drawing table, he channels the spirit within into the real mountains and waters, shaping authentic mountain dwellings and gardens in a way that “defines what is meant by the new realm of grand landscapes and grand gardens.”

It was precisely this enduring nourishment of culture, together with the gifts of nature absorbed through daily life, blended deeply with his own innate talent, that solidified Wang Wanbin’s ambition and confidence to merge the art of painting on paper with the creation of gardens in reality.

Transitioning from a passion for two-dimensional painting to the creation of three-dimensional landscapes—thereby uniting artistic mastery with the craft of garden-making—Wang Wanbin, originally a painter, stepped beyond the confines of the art world to immerse himself in a realm of lush landscapes and traditional architecture defined by white walls and dark-tiled roofs. He transitioned from painting to garden design, extending his expertise beyond water and stone features to include architecture and construction; the



Figure 2. Rural Art: The picture within a picture.

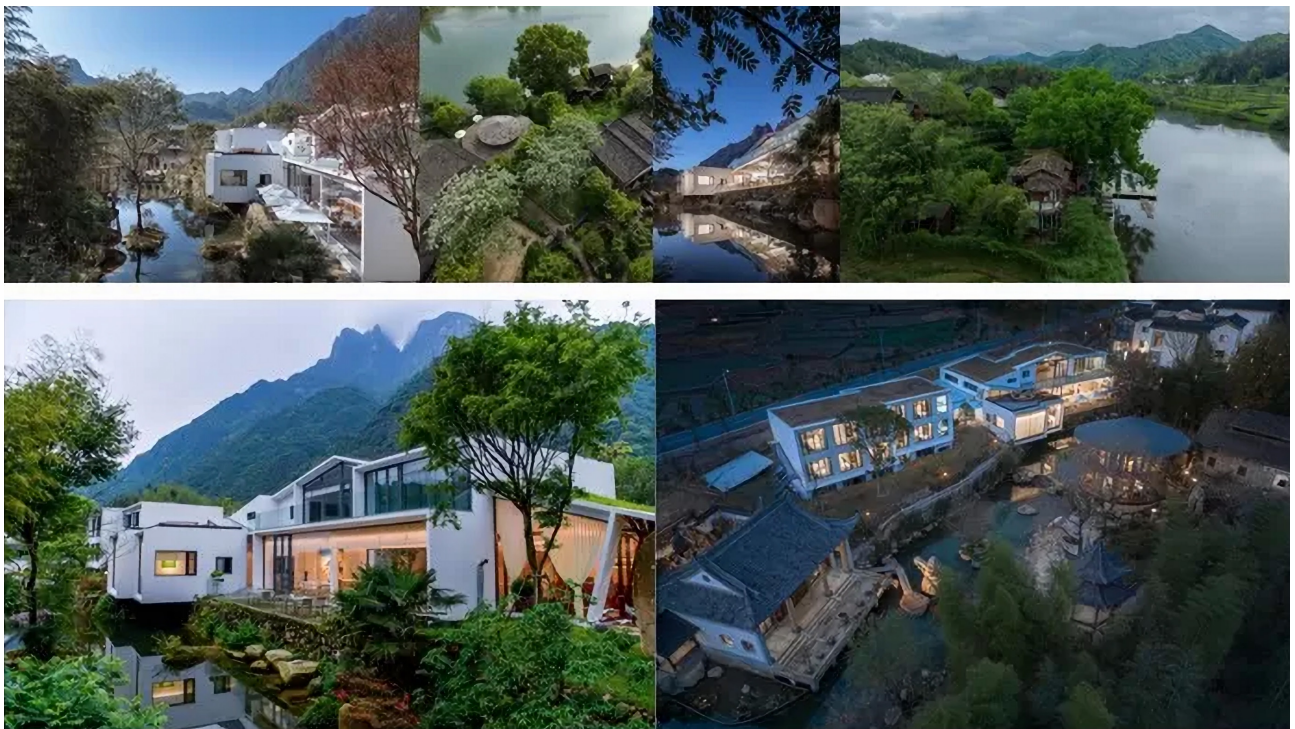


Figure 3. Those adept at painting are equally adept at arranging mountains and crafting gardens.

of his vision, the extent of his capabilities, and the uniqueness of his aesthetic sensibilities are truly astonishing.

Reflecting on the history of art—setting aside masters like Wang Wei and Zhao Ji from the Tang and Song dynasties—and looking merely at the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties, figures such as Ni Yunlin, Zhang Nanyuan, Li Yu, and Shitao all shared a unified underlying principle, even as their approaches differed: whether they used brush and ink to evoke the forms of hills and valleys, or employed earth and stone to create textures akin to the *cun* (texturing strokes) of landscape painting, the interplay of void and substance remained consistent in spirit. They excelled in both painting and calligraphy as well as in the arts of rockery construction and garden design; truly outstanding masters of diverse artistic disciplines.

Those skilled in painting are adept at arranging rockeries and creating gardens. Wang Wanbin's magnificent transformation represents a contemporary revival of the poetic charm and the distinctive artistry of garden design found in history.

Visitors fortunate enough to visit or stay at the "Wang Sanqing Art Colony" and "Wang Wuyuan: Liusu Cottage" will discover that these sites represent the aesthetic embodiment of the landscapes and scenery found in Wang Wanbin's landscape paintings. Unlike the project at Huangling in Wuyuan—where he spearheaded joint development and served as chief designer—these two parks are entirely the external materialization of the inner aesthetic vision of Wang Wanbin, an ink-wash painter deeply attuned to the natural landscapes of northeastern Jiangxi.

Scenes that once existed solely on the flat surface of paper have now transformed into three-dimensional realities; mountain ranges and valleys, originally outlined in ink, have evolved into meticulously arranged rocks and artificially sculpted hills. The desire to capture the form and spirit of the mountains and waters took root in him during his youth; today, that aspiration has materialized into settlements nestled at the mountain's foot and secluded retreats by the water—a realization of a dream, and a masterpiece by a man who has traversed countless landscapes and holds their essence

deep within his heart.

Traditional Chinese ink painting emphasizes brushwork that is either *litiback*—charged with power piercing through the paper—or *mianlicangzhen*, soft on the surface yet hiding a needle within. Its use of color operates between “finding splendor in simplicity” and “treating blank space as ink.” Through the interplay of void and solid, dense and light, thick and thin, focused and diffuse, these dualities transform, blend, and give birth to one another.

While these aesthetic categories and sensibilities originate from the artist's observation, internal comprehension, and distillation of the surrounding natural world, they also require a physical site for realization. By breaking ground and arranging mountains within a garden base, the artist ventilates the spirit within and seeks confirmation from nature itself. Furthermore, when the fluid, ethereal imagery conveyed by ink on paper—be it on a small scroll or a large hanging—resonates with the vast, unspoken yet magnificent natural and human landscape, the interplay of void and solid in the painted scene transforms into a mutual reflection between the artificial void and the natural solid.

The meaning extends beyond the words themselves; reinforced and underpinned by the blue of the mountains, the green of the waters, and the verdant hues of the trees, the sentiment becomes all the more vivid and elevated. For Wang Wanbin, the interplay of emptiness and substance is no longer merely a brilliant concept on paper, but rather the experience of seeing the vast within the small—realized right there in the garden. The imagery of wind and clouds within the painting—once a mere blueprint or preliminary sketch—has transformed into the actual mountain peaks and morning dew of the natural world. Emptiness and fullness are found everywhere; everywhere, there is emptiness and fullness. Its progressive evolution perfectly embodies the artist's freedom from the constraints of form and the burdens of material objects—a state where imagery and physical form, as well as artistic realm and breadth of vision, interact and mutually define one another through the interplay of the tangible and the intangible.

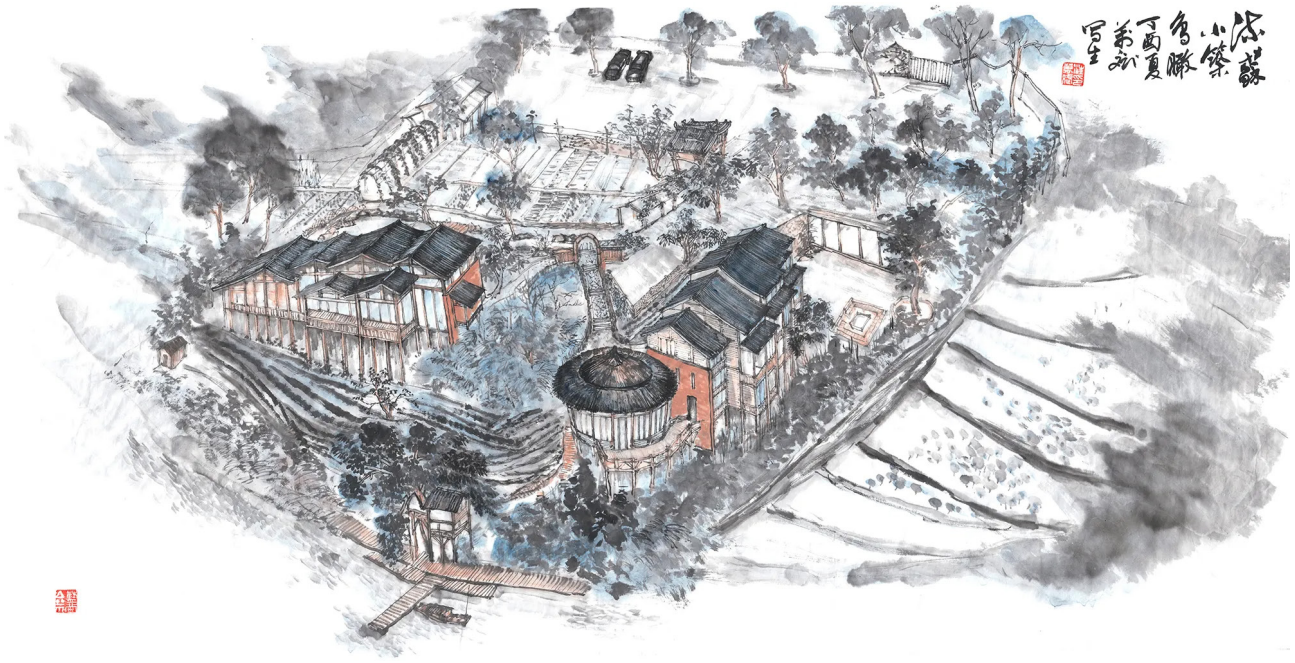


Figure 4. Wang Wanbin's Tassel Lodge.

3. Grand Cities and Humble Gardens, All as Picturesque

Wang Wanbin is thoroughly at ease with both painting and garden design, possessing a profound understanding of the craft: "In painting, the element of 'void'—manifested through the use of negative space—evokes boundless imagination and lends the composition an ethereal, profound quality; conversely, the element of 'substance'—rendered through bold ink and rich color—delineates concrete forms and establishes the composition's foundation." In the creation of gardens, "emptiness" manifests as the vastness of space and the seclusion of scenery, beckoning one to explore step by step; "solidity" is found in rugged rockwork, orderly structures, and murmuring waters, together forging a harmonious blend of the natural and the human-made.

Moving from painting to garden-making, Wang Wanbin, as a contemporary figure, has directly emulated the masters of the Ming and Qing dynasties mentioned above—a truly rare achievement. Yet what makes him even more worthy of study and high praise is his grand vision and capacity for renovating and transforming villages and towns.

Among modern practitioners devoted to the spatial illusion and "void-solid" dialectic of Chinese ink painting, few have managed the transition from flat silk or paper to three-dimensional gardens; even rarer still are those who, in the restoration and renewal of houses, pavilions, corridors, walls, woodlands, and cityscapes, can bestow upon entire village clusters and urban districts a harmony where movement and stillness coexist, void and solid generate each other, and objects resonate with scenery. This is unprecedented.

The reconstruction, renewal, and renovation of Wuyuan Huangling and Xian'gao Ancient City stand as two more monumental masterpieces by Wang Wanbin. Here, he employs the fluid, painterly quality of shifting voids and solids—executing strategic layouts with sweeping scope and decisive calculation, yet handling weighty matters with effortless grace and meticulous craftsmanship. The rapid surge in rave reviews and the influx of visitors following the completion of the renovation and development of these two major sites—which blend natural beauty with cultural significance—can best be described as "reaching the pinnacle the moment they opened."

By this time, Wang Wanbin was no longer

content to merely "emulate the essence of the Great Void" on xuan paper using the brush in his hand—an idea famously articulated by the Southern Song dynasty painter Wang Wei in his treatise *Xu Hua* (On Painting). He transforms the movement and shifting gazes of visitors, residents, and tourists—as they wander through the undulating lanes and alleys of the village—into a dynamic force that plays upon the interplay of the tangible and the intangible; meanwhile, the densely packed white-walled, black-tiled structures and the secluded courtyards framed by high walls and winding paths serve as vital visual elements and physical vessels that shape the layout, accentuate the rhythm, and infuse the space with vibrant life.

When considering the Huangling rural scenic area—spanning eight square kilometers with 51,000 square meters of renovated architecture—and the 278-mu Xuangao Ancient City, the philosophical essence of "being and non-being giving rise to each other" and "difficulty and ease complementing one another," alongside accolades praising "exquisite craftsmanship" and "unique ingenuity," signify far more than just the countless meticulously executed details of the construction itself. Rather, they reflect the exceptional level of mastery achieved by Wang Wanbin and his team through their dedicated, holistic approach—sculpting and synthesizing the entire landscape, from the surrounding forests and hills to the streets and dwellings, into a unified whole.

Unlike the deliberate use of negative space in a painting—which invites boundless imagination and reflection—the challenge Wang Wanbin has set for himself lies in the realm of rolling valleys and dense architectural clusters. He seeks to harmonize pavilions, flora, and the rhythms of daily life, allowing them to flow together with the vitality of a living organism; amidst the intricate, mundane details of the human world, he aims to cultivate a sense of effortless ease and infinite, delightful harmony—a unique challenge that few other artists undertake.

In recent years, figures in the art and cultural circles who have engaged with Wang Wanbin or witnessed his rural and urban renewal projects—large and small—have been

struck with incredulous astonishment. They marvel at how he constantly breaks free from the singular identity of a painter, making a radical crossover into planning, design, and construction. There are those of shallow opinion who claim that painters lack knowledge of architectural regulations. Yet, the truth is: just as painters can build gardens, garden designers are equally adept at creating fine art. As the ancient saying goes: "He who excels in painting excels in garden-making; he who excels in garden-making excels in painting."

Ink painting and garden-making share the same aesthetic sensibility and employ identical principles of layout and artistic conception. Ji Cheng, the Ming dynasty master, was not only a theorist of unparalleled skill in garden-making but also a painter of equal distinction: "In my youth, I was known for painting. My nature loves seeking the extraordinary, and I am most fond of the brushwork of Guan Tong and Jing Hao, whom I always revere." The complementary role played by his painting was indispensable to the supreme achievements of his theoretical contributions to garden art.

Today, Wang Wanbin has gone even further. Beyond ink painting and garden-making, he stands alone in restoring villages, towns, and cities. He has expanded from borrowing scenery from nature in gardens to returning scenery to nature in villages and towns. Beyond the realms of ink and garden, he possesses a comprehensive understanding of the overall balance between people and nature within entire cities and settlements. In his hands, a small garden extends outward to embrace society at large. What a mighty stride and leap this is!

If statesmen throughout history have favored the Tao Te Ching's maxim—"Governing a large state is like cooking a small fish"—to illustrate that governance should align with the natural order and be handled with effortless grace, then we might extend this analogy to Wang Wanbin's artistic approach to rural development and urban renewal. Whether dealing with a sprawling town or a tiny private garden, the underlying principles of his craft—akin to the art of painting—share a remarkable affinity.

4. Artistic Empowerment: Never Finished, Only Perpetuated

Evaluating the value and significance of Wang Wanbin's creative practice depends not only on the green homelands and landscape aesthetics depicted in his ink-wash works, or on how he physically manifests the relationship between humanity and nature through stone-stacking and garden-making; it hinges even more on how he comprehensively and holistically integrates and coordinates various factors, resources, and conditions—across both rural development and urban renewal—to envision new, sustainable modes of production and living, as well as spiritual spaces, for the residents of villages, towns, and cities within the broader context of the relationship between society and nature.

Whether winding through the bustling lanes of the ancient Huangling village or strolling amidst the lively, everyday atmosphere of Xuangao Ancient City, one finds visitors on the flagstone paths vying for the perfect vantage point to photograph the stunning "Shaiqiu" (autumn harvest sun-drying) scenery; beneath the iconic horse-head gables, winding processions of fish lanterns and fiery "fire pot" performances weave through the crowd. These pavilions, residences, and covered walkways—embodying the historic character of Huizhou-style architecture—have been revitalized through the tireless efforts of Wang Wanbin and his team, who are dedicated to a philosophy that prioritizes people and nature, restores structures to their original state, and breathes new life into cultural heritage.

Immersed in a poetic landscape of mountains, lush greenery, historic homes, and flowing waters, one is naturally moved by a profound sense of enduring heritage and the timeless continuity of life. This is the story of a local painter from Wuyuan: a passion for art led him to sketch his hometown's natural scenery, while years of sketching revealed the unique beauty of that very landscape.

From sketching two-dimensional forms to capture the bamboo seen by the eye, to constructing rockeries and gardens that materialize the aesthetic imagery of landscape paintings, and finally to transforming existing

rural and urban landscapes into vast, natural gardens where humanity and nature coexist in harmony—what manner of artistic vision, aesthetic breadth, and creative energy must have driven such endeavors!

It is often said that the times create heroes; yet, for the mission and sense of responsibility associated with heroism to fall upon Wang Wanbin, certain prerequisites had to be met. This "prerequisite" is, in fact, the accumulation and preparation undertaken beforehand—specifically, the artistic sensibility, sense of agency, and mastery that the individual already possesses.

We were truly amazed by the incredible ability to devise holistic concepts and strategically allocate elements—demonstrated by Wang Wanbin, who is not an architect—when restoring, renovating, and revitalizing dilapidated mountain villages and historic towns such as Huangling and Xuangao. In the restoration of historic buildings, approaches range from "restoring the old to look old" and blending the new with the old to concealing modern elements within ancient structures; specific measures include the wholesale relocation of original inhabitants and the "fostering" of historic buildings—reconstructing them at new sites. Navigating these various aspects and issues involves a complex web of considerations.

These very facts demonstrate that, even in his early days as a painter, Wang Wanbin—while observing and sketching the natural and cultural landscape of his hometown and conceptualizing his compositions—had already firmly established the mindset and capability to integrate vast spatial and temporal perspectives with holistic layouts and three-dimensional modeling, all while attending meticulously to both the big picture and the finest details. His early artistic training and the cultivation of his aesthetic sensibilities laid a solid foundation—providing both the energy and the confidence—for his subsequent, extraordinary journey of restoring and revitalizing the beauty of his hometown through the creation of artistic environments.

Moreover, Wang Wanbin possesses a commendable quality: he never allows his knowledge and skills to stagnate, placing great emphasis on updating his knowledge and

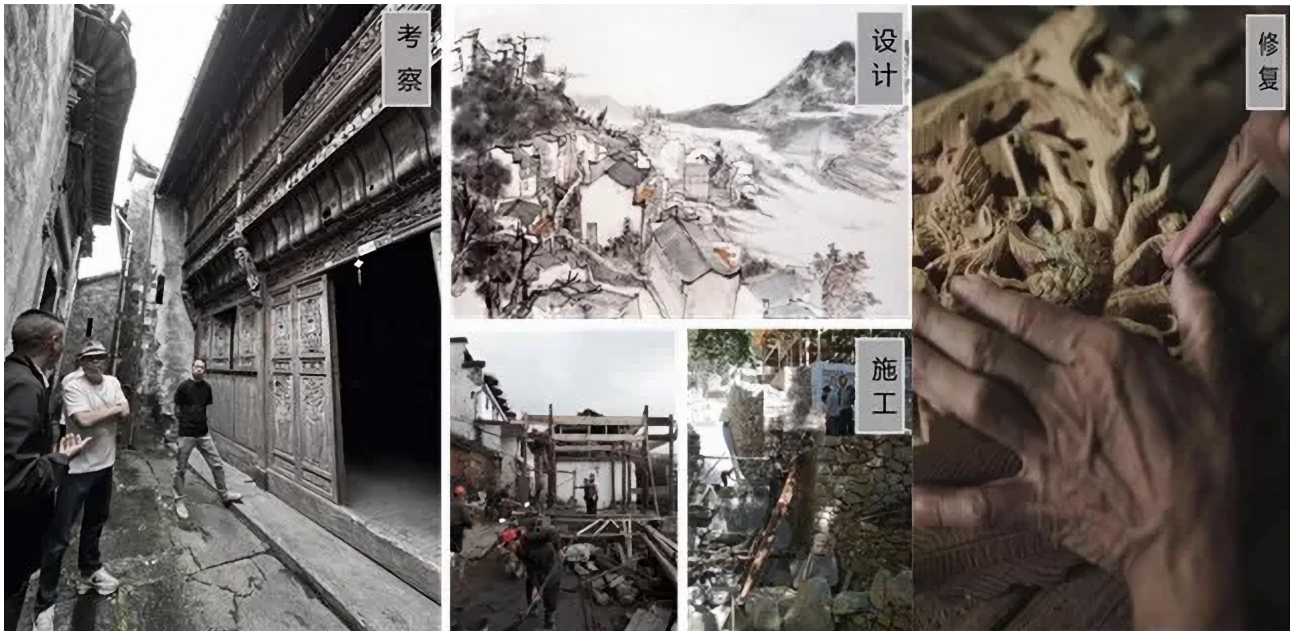


Figure 5. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 1.

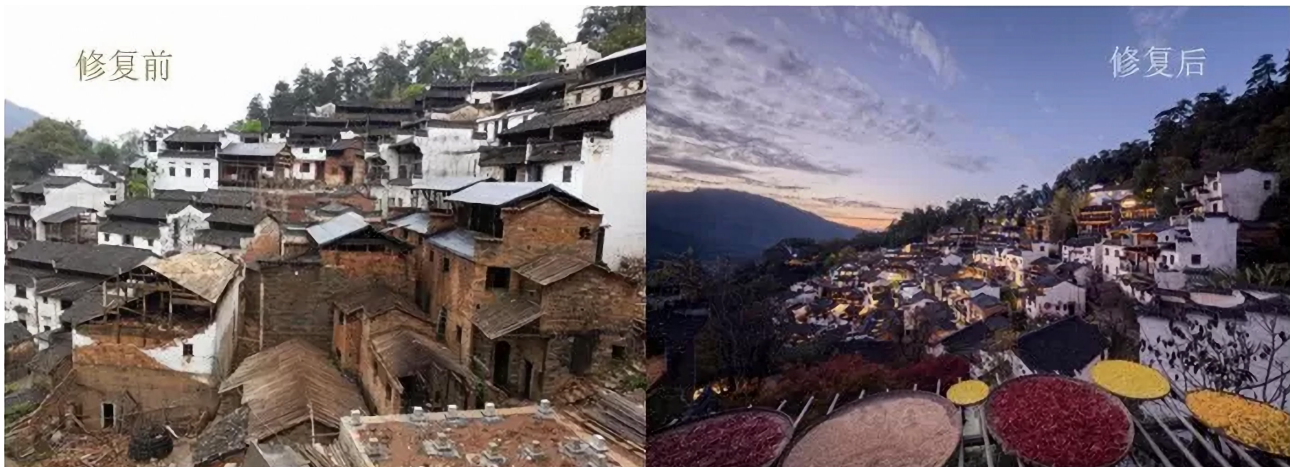


Figure 6. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 2.

committing to lifelong learning. At the sites and regions of the numerous projects and works he has created, planned, presided over, organized, implemented, unfolded, and completed, one senses the omnipresent, myriad forms of life—vigorously sprouting from the earth and history, continuously flowing onward. Like celestial maidens scattering blossoms, different genetic codes of life are distributed and embedded in every corner of the gardens, villages, and towns he has painted and planned. On one hand, these stem from the

naive perceptions of the growth and change in villages and wilderness formed in his youth; on the other, they derive from his later deepening through extensive travels, voracious reading of classics, and seeking guidance from masters.

This emphasis on difference, variability, process, and growth—viewed through the lens of artistic creation itself—also originates from the painter’s meticulous refinement of complex, changing, and uncertain aesthetic imagery during creation. Furthermore, it stems from the open “appellative structure” of artistic



Figure 7. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 3.



Figure 8. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 4.

value, which necessitates the co-creation and sharing between the artwork and its audience.

Emphasizing knowledge accumulation while prioritizing knowledge renewal is dictated not only by the inherent laws of artistic creation, but also by the necessity of using art to empower rural revitalization and urban renewal—thereby driving cultural and tourism consumption. Culture demands difference, while tourism must avoid homogeneity. In the “deep waters” of the cultural tourism industry, consumption requires both commensurate universal benefits and personalized community segmentation.

However, how should the parallel relationship between personalization and knowledge updating be understood? Amidst increasingly fierce, homogenized competition in the cultural tourism sector, leveraging art’s inherent drive for novelty and innovation allows localized art to identify the unique visual markers, iconic objects, tools of production, and customs specific to rural and urban settings. By looking beyond tangible, visible, and immovable artifacts to uncover intangible, invisible, and mobile elements—such as experiences, craftsmanship, and oral traditions—artistic empowerment becomes more personalized. This approach transcends short-sighted, immediate utilitarian goals, enabling art to touch the very heart and core of local culture.

This form of art-driven empowerment—characterized by localization and personalization is a dynamic, renewing process of continuous, cyclical movement: one that involves delving ever deeper while simultaneously engaging in constant self-negation and self-adjustment. Looking at the trajectory of Wang Wanbin’s twenty years of practice—specifically his work in Huangling over more than a decade of restoration and renovation—centered on using art to empower cultural tourism development within the contexts of rural revitalization and urban renewal, we gain a profound realization: true, distinctive, and vital art-led empowerment is never a completed state, but always an ongoing process.

5. The Concept of Sustainable Ecological Development: The Core of Enduring Vitality in Artistic Empowerment

To better empower rural revitalization and urban renewal, art itself must undergo continuous renewal and empowerment; likewise, the perspectives, pathways, means, modes, and methods through which it empowers urban-rural revitalization and renewal require constant empowerment and updating. An effective and rational approach to avoiding the “cookie-cutter” uniformity often seen in rural construction and urban renewal is to view art-driven revitalization as a vital activity that co-evolves with the existence and development of rural areas and cities, characterized by a complete, long-term, and sustainable growth cycle.

Wang Wanbin grounds his practice of using art to empower rural revitalization and urban renewal in a “long-termism” of sustainable development—underpinned by profound ethical values and strategic thinking—and an “indigenism” of ecological development rooted in the primal, the material, the folk, and the wild natural.

This understanding resonates with and aligns with the contemporary development of art. Contemporary art practice is undergoing a profound and unprecedented shift: moving away from an emphasis on the techniques required to create definitive, fixed, and masterful works that express an understanding of the real world, and toward the exploration of diverse media and methods that reveal the mutability, dynamism, and vitality of that world.

This shift highlights a crucial divide between old and new art: art is no longer about “manufacturing” a form or technique to reflect the world; rather, it is about revealing the world’s inherent vitality and capacity for growth in a more natural manner. The intellectual logic behind this move—from “manufacturing” art to letting art “grow”—is a transition from long-dominant anthropocentrism to materialism (or object-oriented ontology). It recognizes that humanity is not only social but fundamentally natural; the fulfillment of human life is ultimately



Figure 9. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 5.

achieved through balanced, harmonious coexistence with all living beings—animals and plants alike.

This implies that all human activities, including artistic creation, must liberate themselves from the singularity of anthropocentrism and embrace a more pluralistic, egalitarian, interactive, and open ecological perspective. Deep discoveries in biotechnology and the life sciences continue to reinforce the logical inevitability of the reflection and critique of rationalist-driven anthropocentrism within international philosophical circles since the 20th century. Simultaneously, this has inspired Chinese scholars and artists to look back to tradition and history, excavating and transforming the fine genes of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

Wang Wanbin is neither a philosopher nor a scientist, yet having traveled to many countries and conducted thorough investigations into the trends of global cultural thought, he is far from unfamiliar with them. His meticulous research into how artistic empowerment can revitalize dilapidated towns and cities by reclaiming ecological natural environments has solidified his confidence in empowering China's local rural revitalization and urban renewal. It has also clarified the underlying logic for ensuring

the long-term efficacy of artistic empowerment: namely, establishing a sustainable ecological development perspective and constructing a long-term, whole-process ecological chain mechanism for artistic empowerment.

Drawing upon his years of practical experience and synthesizing academic research on rural construction and urban renewal, we can outline the following key dimensions for the sustained development of artistic empowerment:

First, the restoration and preservation of the authenticity of traditional building materials. In the process of urban and rural restoration and renewal, two approaches are taken. On one hand, there is the salvage restoration and protection of the overall structures, key components, and artifacts of aged houses that bear historical traces, adhering to the principles of “restoring the old to appear as it once was,” “integrating old and new,” or “concealing the new within the ancient.” On the other hand, the method of reconstruction in new sites is employed to reinforce and highlight the historical patina of these old dwellings.

These measures aim—without resorting to massive demolition or reconstruction and while preserving the authenticity of the physical fabric—to provide temporal openness and continuity, enabling generations to read history,



Figure 9. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 5.



Figure 11. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 7.

engage with past cultures, and cultivate a sense of dialogue and coexistence with tradition. This is an energy field—created through an artistic concept—where history and the future gaze upon one another.

Secondly, the principle of prioritizing local natural materials. In the restoration and renovation of rural dwellings, the practice adheres to maximizing the use of natural materials—including biological substances—sourced from the immediate local environment. Renewable, recyclable, and repairable properties serve as the guiding criteria for material selection. Every effort is made to ensure that the texture, grain, and color of the building materials harmonize seamlessly with the local natural landscape. A panoramic view of the dozens of villages, landscapes, and urban projects spearheaded by Wang Wanbin

reveals a pervasive consciousness of excavating and utilizing inherent local natural materials—a consciousness deeply imprinted into every project.

Thirdly, integrating architectural forms into nature through a symbiotic perspective. Traditional building codes originated from the laws of harmonious coexistence with the local natural geography; this imposes a requirement for sustained, future-oriented growth in the restoration and renewal of modern rural and urban architecture. Under this paradigm of restoration and renewal, buildings must not only emulate the laws of biological growth in their materials but also in their structures and forms. That is, they must utilize or mimic the indigenous local ecosystem to achieve structural and formal verisimilitude.

At the same time, the focus must be on



Figure 12. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 8.

fostering a symbiotic relationship between the architecture and native flora, stone, soil, and water systems. The building should be rooted in and grow from the existing natural environment, becoming an integral part of nature rather than standing apart from it, thereby acquiring enduring vitality and the capacity for continued growth. Wang Sanqing Art Cluster and Wang Wuyuan Liusu Cottage serve as the concentrated, material embodiments of this concept.

Finally, establish a long-term mechanism for cultivating talent through art. Art-driven rural revitalization and urban renewal differ from the aforementioned practices—such as sketching trips to the countryside, artist residencies, and interventionist art aiming to dissolve the distinction between subject and object—precisely because of their enduring, long-term, organic, and generative nature. Artistic empowerment is neither a one-off charitable act nor a mere project-based endeavor; nor is it



Figure 13. Renovation and Transformation of a Village 9.

the exception of a single individual or a single generation. Rather, it is an enduring cause passed down persistently by groups of people, across one generation and many generations.

Therefore, establishing a long-term talent cultivation mechanism is critically urgent. Specifically, alarmed by the dwindling ranks of traditional craftsmen proficient in ancient architecture, Wang Wanbin has consciously served as an advocate and activist for the protection and salvage of Huizhou-style village and architectural craftsmanship. Through years of practice, he has discovered, hired, nurtured, and mobilized over a hundred skilled artisans specializing in landscape gardening and ancient architectural restoration. He has organized trips abroad for them to study garden-making techniques and revive traditional craftsmanship.

Not only does he lead by example, remaining consistently active on the front lines of ancient architecture restoration and urban-rural renewal, but he also welcomes numerous young artists and garden-making enthusiasts

drawn by his reputation. He provides them with every convenience to observe and learn traditional skills in garden-making, architecture, and the “Three Carvings” (wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving). Furthermore, in his capacity as a member of the Shangrao Municipal Committee of the CPPCC (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), Wang Wanbin has submitted proposals calling for the establishment of special funds for intangible cultural heritage inheritance, encouraging young people to devote themselves to the study and transmission of traditional crafts.

Furthermore, everyone is a participant and co-creator in artistic empowerment. The reason this endeavor is described as long-term, effective, ever-growing, and full of potential lies not only in the first three aspects—reinvigorating the hardware of infrastructure with lasting vitality—nor solely in the fourth aspect regarding the sustained cultivation of specialized talent. Wang Wanbin’s holistic ecological view of artistic empowerment

also encompasses empowering the “souls” of villages and towns: the growth, livelihood, and behavior of the local residents themselves.

Artistic empowerment for rural revitalization and urban renewal has always been for the people. To truly serve the people—especially the locals—the primary task is to gain the acceptance, trust, and participation of the villagers and residents. This is particularly critical in rural areas across China. Through artistic conception and design planning, the renovated and activated townships have seen a dramatic improvement in living environments; traditional means of production and livelihood have been carefully collected and preserved; and regionally distinctive folk cultures have been continuously excavated, studied, and systematized... All of this is to ensure that the original villagers and residents can keep their roots, and preserve their nostalgia.

Simultaneously, based on this foundation, a rich and diverse cultural and tourism industry has been formed. This arrangement absorbs and employs local residents, allowing them to work right at their doorstep, solving employment challenges locally.

This signifies that art does not merely empower the hardware and infrastructure of villages and towns on a sustainable basis; through its inherent capacity for growth and expansion, it also transforms the original residents—who were once merely recipients of empowerment—into participants, collaborators, fellow travelers, and co-creators. Within a rational structure that balances production and livelihood, art subtly reshapes how villagers and residents perceive and cherish their new environment—an environment born from the creative transformation of local historical and cultural contexts—thereby empowering the cultivation of new aesthetic cognitive abilities.

Only when artistic empowerment ceases to be the exclusive prerogative or monopoly of a small clique within the art world, and instead becomes a collective endeavor involving the participation, cooperation, and co-creation of all residents—including the local natives—will the long-term, effective, ecological, and developmental nature of artistic empowerment, along with its enduring vitality, possess a true safeguard mechanism.

Thus, art-driven empowerment guided by the concept of sustainable ecological development is neither a superficial, fleeting visit to the countryside for sightseeing or novelty-seeking, nor a one-sided, residency-based attempt to impart expertise; rather, it is a grand, future-oriented, and comprehensive undertaking that involves the continuous monitoring of the protection, restoration, renovation, and renewal of urban and rural infrastructure, the preservation and cultivation of skilled artisans in relevant fields, and the active participation of all residents.

It is precisely this comprehensive planning and capability regarding an industrial ecosystem—one characterized by sound, holistic, and sustained development—that has revealed to us Wang Wanbin: a multifaceted doer and practitioner who, despite his background as a painter, possesses a diverse range of skills and qualities.

Empowered by art and journeying alongside people—it is a process that is always unfolding, never truly finished.

Wang Wanbin put it well: "We hope to create an 'open space'—one brimming with infinite possibilities and constantly renewing itself." This is a settlement rooted in tradition yet facing the future, one that gives rise to natural beauty and poetic charm.

By adopting a people-oriented approach rather than an anthropocentric one, everything humanity does can coexist harmoniously with nature and endure over the long term.

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