Fluid Vernacular Architecture
—Spatial Ethnograpy in the Rural Area of Southeastern China

Naifei Liu, Tsinghua University, China
Kaijian Yue, Tsinghua University, China
Xiaoyue Zhang, Tsinghua University, China

Abstract

After the 1970s, the Chinese rural area has been shaped by two forces. One is from the rural community, which is internal and reflected in the inheritance of traditions and old habits; the other is from outside the community, which is external and manifested in the penetration of urbanization and the intervention of the strong government. Under the influence of internal and external forces, the contemporary Chinese rural community presents a complex and fluid state, and can directly be observed on the vernacular architecture, which is regarded as the materialization of social relations. This paper examines the vernacular architecture spaces in a rural community in southeastern China and uses "spatial ethnography" as the main research method. "Spatial ethnography" enriches the level of investigation of social facts by coupling classical anthropological ethnography with architectural mapping and space analysis. The research is organized by three dimensions of time as clues, which are historical time, everyday life time, and immediate time. Historical time dimension examines the evolution of space forms under social and historical changes; everyday lifetime dimension shows the redevelopment of the space under people's everyday activities; immediate time dimension time presents the transformation of the function and atmosphere of space in an instant situation. The intervention of multi-level time dimensions helps to reveal the different levels of fluidity shaping process of spaces, and to understand the complexity and contradictions of the decisions made by the rural people during these processes, and to reveal the shaping mechanism of the internal and external tension on the rural space.

Keywords: Vernacular Architecture, Space, Spatial Ethnographic, Architecture Anthropology, Rural China

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

1. Introduction

The contemporary Chinese countryside after the 1970s has always been in a field full of internal and external tension. On the one hand, the traditional Chinese rural society and culture have not yet been completely disintegrated, and the internal culture and daily life inertia of village communities dominated by blood or geography still support the basic operation of rural society. On the other hand, with the rapid development of the country's economy and the continuous advancement of urbanization, many rural people have flowed into the cities, and the economy, culture, and institutions from the cities have also poured into the countryside like never before. Under the influence of external urbanization penetration and strong grass-roots government intervention and internal village cultural traditions and daily life inertia, contemporary Chinese rural society presents a complex and changing state. Rural self-built houses, as living spaces independently built by villagers, reflect the spontaneous habits, preferences and economic level of villagers; on the other hand, self-built houses are inevitably constrained and influenced by policies and regulations. This makes the rural architecture in China after the 1970s present a state of diversity, complexity, and change in terms of shape, space and function. Therefore, paying attention to rural self-built houses can help us find a window to observe the changes of contemporary Chinese rural society.

The rural houses in the pre-industrial period are typical representatives of traditional Chinese architecture, and their construction techniques and decorative arts have important cultural value. In the early days, the construction society represented by Dunzhen Liu [1] conducted in-depth research on rural houses from the perspective of architecture, the research at this stage focused on the aesthetics, technology, and cultural value of architecture. Space, as the core concept and object of architecture, is also applicable to the study of vernacular architecture. Many scholars have analyzed the space of vernacular architecture, discussing functions, culture, the association of society and space and why. And based on this, a typical research paradigm of vernacular architecture was developed. However, with the deepening of research and the disintegration of traditional Chinese rural society, the research paradigm of traditional vernacular architecture has gradually begun to break through the scope of architectural aesthetics and technology and turn to think about the correlation between space, society and culture, especially vernacular architecture in the contemporary context, as a product of pragmatism, the aesthetic value is limited, and it becomes more necessary to discuss the social and cultural significance, and the social turn of architecture has become a trend.

As a kind of living space, rural self-built houses are closely related to people's production and life and have been paid attention to by social science researchers very early. However, in the early social science research, housing and living space did not become the center of the research, but more as the preconditions and background of the history and culture of the research object were introduced by researchers by a background or context, but gradually, more and more anthropologists regard space as the center of research and even regard space as a dimension of social change to be studied [2].

The significance of residential spaces in human societal development has made them a focal point of anthropological inquiry. For instance, Marcel Mauss conducted meticulous observations of Inuits dwellings, demonstrating the correlation between spatial forms and their corresponding social patterns of life [2]. Pierre Bourdieu explored the spatial arrangements of northern African homes, elucidating how Berber people's cosmology and ideologies are materialized through space [3]. Marshall Sahlins studied the housing spaces of

the Moala people and Kabyle people, finding the symbolic relationship between internal spatial structures and gender, and contending that their architectural forms reflect the division of labor [4]. French sociologist Levi-Strauss even proposed the concept of "house society," placing the home as the central focus of research and emphasizing its animate nature and comparative relationships with individuals, thereby opening up avenues to study social structural patterns through the symbolism and meanings embedded in space [5]. Beyond the classical anthropological focus on primitive societies, residential spaces in developed societies have also increasingly attracted the attention of anthropologists. Like Tim Ingold also argues the ongoing processes of dwelling transformation, highlighting the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between humans and their surroundings [6]. Michel de Certeau focuses on the power of individual behavior to shape space in daily life from a more microscopic and narrative perspective [7].

Architecture and social science pay attention to vernacular architecture from different starting points, but the social turn of architecture and the space turn of social science make the two interact and intersect to a certain extent. The difference in research focus and methods of the two disciplines makes architecture more inclined to think about space pictorially and devotes more energy to the interactive relationship between technology, aesthetics, and space. For social sciences, space is still a perspective or method to some extent, and its research objects are still society and culture, and it also relies more on literal narratives to show space in the development of research. Therefore, the existing architectural scholars tend to ignore the "non-substantial" part of space, and the dynamics of space are ignored; anthropology scholars make the study of space a mere narrative due to the lack of pictorial thinking. Some technical unspoken facts over-interpreted.

Therefore, for the complex and mobile rural society and rural architecture and settlements, an interdisciplinary research method that bridges the limitations of the two disciplines in the study of space is essential. One such area is spatial ethnography, and scholars from different disciplines such as anthropology, geography, architecture, and urban studies have contributed to the development and advancement of spatial ethnography. Spatial ethnography combines classical ethnographic methods with spatial analysis techniques to understand the interconnections between space, place, and culture. It combines traditional ethnographic methods with spatial analysis techniques such as cartography, geospatial analysis, or other spatial tools to visualize and analyze spatial data. Many scholars have explored the method of spatial ethnography, For example, Arijit Sen used the method of spatial ethnography on Devon Avenue in Chicago, by focusing on three-dimensional timelines: environmental time, historical time, and intermediate time), to deeply describe the rich interactive relationship between users, time and physical settings, and to show the multi-layered connotations behind the material culture [8]. Paul Hardin Kapp discussed the role of spatial ethnography in mining hidden information in the preliminary research work of historical heritage protection and emphasized the significance of this information in the rules and design of historical heritage protection.

2. Methodology

2.1. Materials

Figure 1: The overall appearance of Qingyuan Village
Image source: Photographed by the author

The main research and observation object selected in this paper is the spontaneously formed vernacular architectural space of Qingyuan Village, and the architectural space formed by the government and other external subject organizations is not within the scope of this research. Besides self-built houses, non-residential spaces such as temporary spaces and public spaces are also included since they are all deeply related to the villagers' life.

Qingyuan Village is in the northeast of Fujian Province. It belongs to the mountainous and hilly area. It was not until the middle of the Ming Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty that the area developed rapidly for more than 300 years. The area has high mountains and dense forests, and a complicated water network. Settlements are often distributed in relatively flat valleys in the hills, and will choose as sunny valleys as possible. These valleys are narrow and scattered, and the roads between the valleys are rugged. Therefore, under such geographical and natural conditions, as the population increases, there is no condition for continuous expansion of the village. Therefore, the scale of settlements in this area is relatively small. The settlements' shape is irregular and scattered spatial distribution. Due to the limitation of geography and transportation, the villages are less affected by China's rapid urbanization. Some relatively old self-built houses have survived, and at the same time, they present a relatively general state of change under a macro-historical process, which provides abundant observation samples for research.

The current population of Qingyuan Village is about 3,123, and the main surnames are Zhuo and Wei. The ancestor of the Zhuo family moved here for more than 340 years. The Qingyuan town government is in Qingyuan Village, so the economy and transportation of Qingyuan Village are relatively developed. The decline of the village is not obvious. The resident population is on the rise or relatively stable, and the number of self-built houses is also growing steadily. According to statistics from the government of Qingyuan Township,

there are 580 rural houses in Qingyuan Village. The distribution of the built year is shown in figure 2. Overall, it presents an evolving appearance of vernacular architecture with the coexistence of old and new.
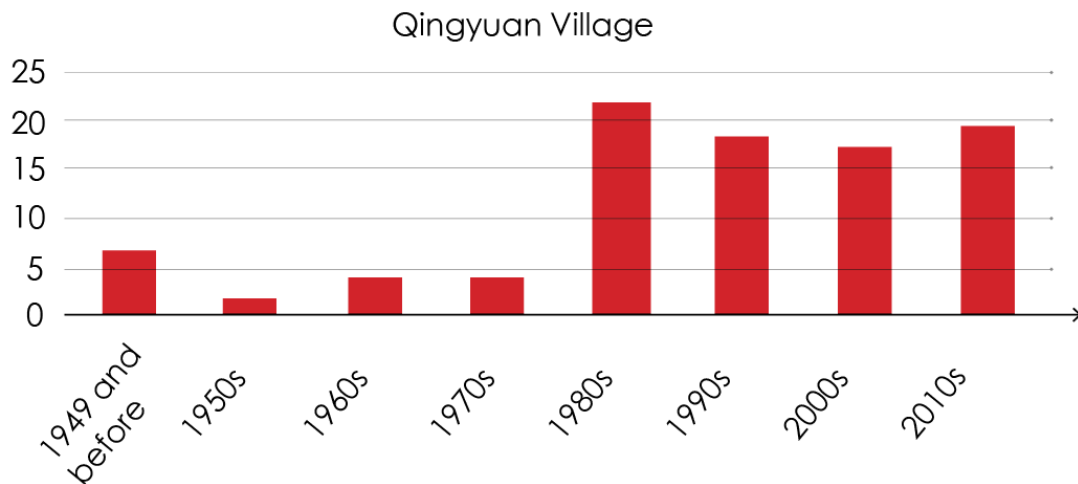

Figure 2: Statistics of housing construction years in Qingyuan Village
Source: Date from Qingyuan town government and drawn by the author

2.2. Research procedure

Space ethnography is the core content of this study, and as a method, it has also been applied to the study of vernacular architecture in Qingyuan Village. Based on the analysis of the overall form of the settlement and the research of regional textual materials, 42 primary observation samples of rural buildings were selected through field visits. The selection of samples has the following principles: covering representatives of different construction age groups and covering all structural types. Priority is given to selecting cases with historical buildings or special features. This part of the observation mainly includes two parts: architectural images and simple interviews. Among the 42 primary observation samples, we further select 8 samples for detailed spatial ethnographic. The spatial ethnography at this stage will include two parts. The first part is the architectural plan and main facade. Surveying and mapping, surveying and mapping is to increase the records of furniture layout and "traces of life" based on general architectural plan drawing; the second part is the interview with the main users of vernacular buildings. The interviews are divided into: basic information of users (age, occupation, Family situation, etc.); the current use of each space and the typical range of activities of the users in the house in a day: the main changes and changes in the structure and use of the space since it was built. The first part and the second part are not completed in isolation, but proceed simultaneously.

3. The spatial changes of vernacular architecture in multiple time dimensions

Space itself is a fluid and multidimensional concept. As Doreen Massey suggests, space is not a static and neutral entity but is intricately linked with time, constantly changing even when unoccupied [9]. Recognizing this characteristic of space, and introducing time as an observational dimension to classify spatial objects is a beneficial endeavor. It helps to focus on the key influencing factors in their transformations, ensuring a deeper understanding when conducting ethnographic of spaces.

For vernacular architectural spaces, they can be categorized into three types based on the temporal span of their changes: historical time, everyday life time, and immediate time. The following discussion on ethnographic observation of vernacular architectural spaces will be based on this classification framework.

3.1. Historic time

The dimension of historical time examines the evolution of vernacular architectural space at the settlement level and the macro-level societal historical changes. Communities establish meaningful relationships with the unique natural and architectural environments, a process that transforms "space" into a "place."

Within the dimension of historical time, the visual aspect of spatial ethnography focuses on the overall evolution of settlements and the typical physical characteristics of vernacular architecture from different eras. The textual aspect, on the other hand, concentrates on the historical development process of the village. By combining these two aspects, typical features of spatial evolution within the historical dimension and the underlying social, economic, and cultural factors are elucidated.

After the 1970s, based on the existing spatial features of vernacular architecture in Qingyuan Village and the stages of social development, vernacular architecture samples can be categorized into four temporal groups: the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2010s to the present.

1970s   1980s   1990s   2000s   2010s

Figure 3: The appearance and characteristics of buildings in different ages in Qingyuan Town
Source: drawn by the author

In pre-industrial China, rural areas were relatively closed and experienced slow development, and the structure and form of vernacular architecture remained relatively stable, including in Qingyuan Village. The typical house form in Qingyuan Village features a wood structure, rammed earth wall, and stone foundation with a "one bright room, two dark room" three-room courtyard-style layout. The open central hall and the enclosed side rooms constitute the main building, which serves as the core space. Courtyard and Patio and are arranged in the front and back. The main entrance is usually located directly opposite the main building along one side of courtyard, or at the front side of the main building, and stairs are typically positioned in the front and back of the main building. For traditional type houses, the spatial hierarchy is clear and the layout is quite symmetrical.

In the early 1970s, Qingyuan Village, as a remote mountain village, had not yet widely adopted the industrialized construction methods. Therefore, the traditional construction mode and houses was kept. In 1978, China began its reform and opening-up policy, and the most significant change for rural areas was the implementation of the household responsibility

system, which significantly increased villagers' income. Villagers began to emulate urban housing by using new building materials and construction methods. Red bricks became popular and replaced rammed earth walls as the external supporting structure. Later, the wood structural system was replaced by brick structures for load-bearing, but concrete materials and construction techniques were still not widely adopted. Therefore, components such as floors, roofs, and stairs continued to use wood structures.

In the 1980s, the official dissolution of the people's communes in 1982 marked the complete dismantling of the collective economy. Rural economy experienced rapid development, and the life of villagers improved. The generation born during the population growth peak of the 1960s began to settle down and establish their careers in this decade, resulting in a significant increase in housing demand. This period became relatively active in rural construction. The introduction of new construction materials and technologies allowed for vertical growth of buildings, with the number of floors increasing from 2 to 3,4, or more. New spatial forms such as flat roofs, elevated platforms, and rooftop terraces emerged. Due to land limitations, the courtyard no more existed. However, the building floor plan still followed the three-room layout, with a middle hall and two rooms on either side. The entrance faced the central hall, and the staircase was located either on both sides of the entrance or at the rear of the central hall. Some buildings with larger depths would have a partition in the central hall, like the back hall in traditional house layout, serving as a dining room or other functions. Each floor of the building had a similar layout. The central hall in this period is like a "large corridor" leading to other rooms, with a weaker sense of ceremonial space compared to the central hall of traditional layout houses. At this stage, buildings prioritized practicality, and decorative elements in brick and wood structures were minimal. The exterior facades faithfully reflected the construction materials used. Prefabricated hollow brickwork was used in spaces like staircases and central halls for ventilation, lighting, and decoration. Brick walls are easier to create openings in compared to rammed earth walls, resulting in a significantly larger window area on the building facade compared to traditional houses. Internal ventilation and lighting were greatly improved compared to before.

After the 1990s, land availability became increasingly scarce, and the size of available residential land for construction gradually decreased. However, rural economic levels continued to improve, leading to the unauthorized occupation of arable land and a rise in the phenomenon of competing in house construction. Although the national approval system for residential land improved, its implementation fell short of expectations. Villagers still found ways to maximize their interests. For example, increasing the number of floors became an important method for villagers to expand the usable area. Due to the lack of professional design, the layout of buildings became arbitrary, with a construction approach focused on determining the position of the staircase and stacking floors one by one. As the building plots significantly reduced in size, the traditional three-room layout was no longer viable, and the spatial arrangement and functionality of buildings transformed. The logic of symmetric and unfolding layouts shifted to a vertical stacking arrangement. The ground floor of the building can be seen as a semi-public area where homeowners rarely lock the doors. It serves multiple functions, like the courtyards in traditional houses, including processing agricultural products, storing miscellaneous items, and receiving guests. Some families may also have their kitchens on the ground floor, and homeowners located along the street might use all or part of the space as a shop. A shoe-changing area is typically placed at the staircase between the ground floor and the second floor. The second floor is usually used as a living room and bedrooms, while the third floor and above are primarily dedicated to bedrooms. Overall, the ground floor and the upper floors have distinct spatial attributes. The former is more

outward-facing, noisy, dusty, and cluttered, while the latter is more inward-focused, quiet, tidy, and cozy.

In the 2000s, the housing model that emerged in the 1990s continued, but there was an incorporation of some popular urban design elements in facade design and details. For example, the use of rounded corners and the application of small ceramic tile decorations on the exterior façade and the blue glass floor-to-ceiling windows. During this period, the level of concrete construction further improved, and cast-in-place floor slabs and stairs completely replaced wooden ones, becoming widely utilized. Indoor bathrooms also became more common.

After 2010, the industrialized construction mode became widespread in rural areas. The application of concrete frame structures became more mature, with diverse facade designs and materials. Interior decoration and finishing became more sophisticated, and spatial layouts became increasingly rational. The floor plans of urban high-rise apartments began to be applied in rural low-rise houses, and there was also a trend of seeking professional designers for house design. The combination of staircases and urban apartment floor plans became the primary choice for many households. Some European-style decorations also became popular. At the same time, with the strengthening of grassroots government power, strict control measures were implemented for self-built houses in rural areas. There were strict regulations regarding the height and area of self-built houses. Meanwhile, the value of traditional-style houses started to be recognized, and some residents who had moved away from the villages began to renovate their vacant old houses. Some villagers chose to rebuild using traditional wood structures.

Several key factors have strongly reshaped rural architecture since the 1970s, including political system changes, relevant policies, laws and regulations, industrialization, urbanization, and population growth. In the macro-scale transformations, contemporary Chinese rural villagers have been passive recipients of external forces. While self-built houses have always been based on individual actions, the architectural space is more often a product of pragmatic compromises or struggles. The culture of contemporary Chinese rural areas exhibits a disregard for tradition and a blind pursuit of modernization and industrialization. This is directly reflected in the mixed and low-quality modernity evident in the architectural space.
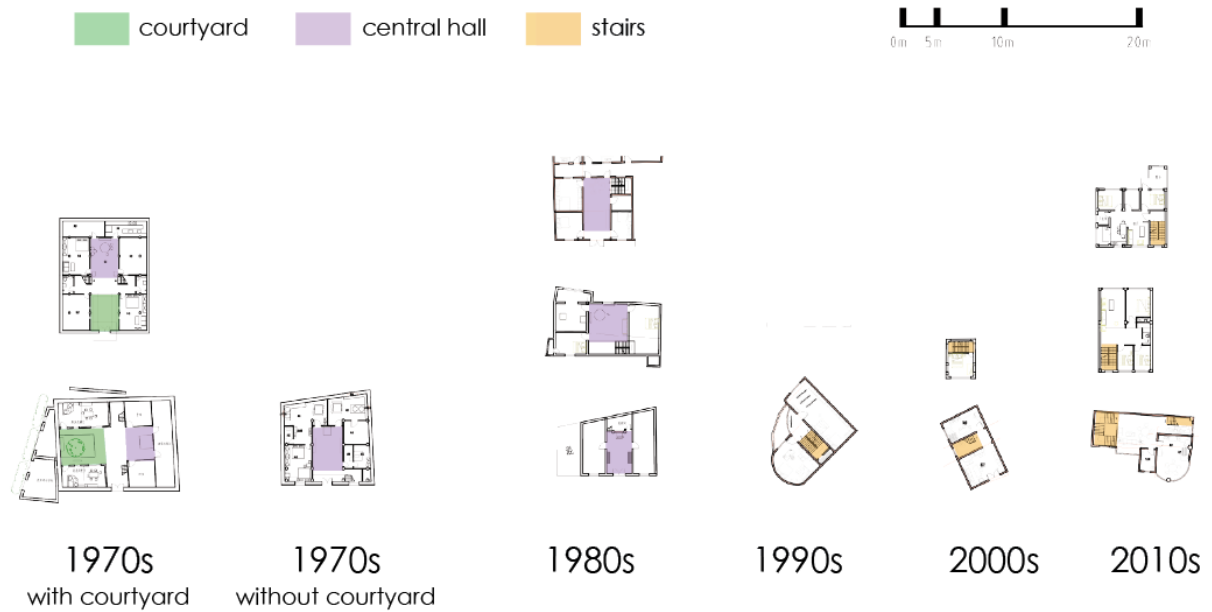
Figure 4: Evolution of Housing Layout Patterns
Image source: Drawn by the author

3.2. Everyday life time

Buildings are always evolving and have a history of interaction with their human and non-human occupants. In this section, we will focus on the internal space of a house and examine how individual behavior shapes and transforms living space through the lens of a family's history. Our approach will be more narrative and microscopic, with an emphasis on the dimension of everyday lifetime.

Sample 06, located at No. 16 Qingwei Road, is chosen as a representative for spatial ethnographic observation. This sample stands out for two reasons. Firstly, it is a traditional-style house constructed in the mid-1970s, representing the pre-industrial era. Secondly, the main family members have continuously lived in this residence for over 50 years, with periodic renovations performed by the owner.

The plan of No. 16, Qingwei Road is an irregular quadrangle. Its outer wall is made of rammed earth, approximately half a meter thick. The tile-faced double slope roof extends slightly beyond the earth walls and rests on a two-story wooden frame. The house is situated at the end of a road, and next to a hill.

The brothers' father and grandfather were skilled carpenters in traditional house building, but unfortunately, this craftsmanship was not passed down to the current generation due to the declining market of traditional wood houses. The elder brother aspired to work in the city but was unable to secure suitable employment due to physical illness, leading him to return home and engage in agriculture. The younger brother is working in the city and only his wife and child are at home. Overall, their economic situation is not very good.

The economic limitations since its inception have forced this house to become a master of space efficiency. First, the homeowner cleverly used the height difference of the space under the sloping roof to build multiple rooms with different elevations which is abnormal in a

similar type of house. So basically, there are 4 different levels in this two-story building. (see Figure 5). The halls in the first floor and second floor have higher heights since the hall plays an important role in both function and etiquette. The rest of the small rooms have a lower height which allows three of them can stack under the roof vertically. Second, the plan is irregular and exactly aligns with the site shape. Third, the owner only builds one staircase (traditionally there would be 2 symmetrical stairs) further demonstrating this house's space efficiency. The builders undoubtedly prioritized maximizing available space and improving the quality of enclosed spaces while maintaining relative dignity for public spaces during its design and construction.

The first main change happened when the father passed away and the two brothers started their own families. So, the big family breaks up into two small families. Sociologists in China view this practice of separation as a symbolic division of family property and the flow of family wealth between generations. As the only property this poor family has, the house was equally divided. The halls are shared. The right part belongs to the elder brother, and the left part belongs to the younger brother. The kitchen is divided into two small kitchens with independent entrance and a stove by a 2-meter-high wall. Independent kitchen stove stands for an independent family. This practice of separating stoves is common in this area, and in some big family houses, the number of kitchens can be more. For instance, Sample 10, a large mansion, has been continuously divided for over a century, resulting in over ten independent kitchens. From this perspective, although No. 16 Qingwei Road may appear to be a single-family residence from the outside, its identity has evolved in people's minds due to the intergenerational flow of family wealth. Separating stoves has become a core symbol of this change.

The second main change happened around the two brothers both get married and their wives moved in. The two small families start to run their lives even more independently. And their respective rooms become more and more different. In rural China, people used to use dry toilets located outside the house. However, with the improvement of people's living standards, people start to build restrooms with flushing toilets inside the traditional houses. The two family located restrooms quite differently. The elder brother simply converted part of the outermost room into a restroom, and the rest kept the same. While the younger brother's toilet is in the innermost room and the bedroom door is also moved, necessitating passing through the kitchen to access both. A small hall is formed after entering the kitchen door. (see Figure 6) The younger brother's unique renovation method has enhanced his small family's privacy and created an independent "house" inside the "big house". Consequently, the older brother's family has largely kept the traditional layout, while the younger brother's ground floor space has undergone significant change.

The third change happened around the birth of the younger generation. The homeowner has given the bedroom the most careful design. The bedroom floor is covered with foam mats, which are cheap yet colorful, practical, and easy to install and replace. The daughter's bedroom features a complete set of pink furniture, wallpaper, curtains, desks, and chairs. If you only look at the bedroom, except for some exposed wooden frames, the layout, decoration, furniture, and daily necessities of this room are almost indistinguishable from those of any urban residence. The materials, interior decoration, and apartment-style plan renovation all imply Chinese farmers' yearning for urbanization.

De Certeau believed that the individual behaviors that are considered insignificant in daily life and overlooked by power structures could be a way for individuals to express themselves

and obtain power [7]. By observing the sample of No. 16, Qingwei Road, we can see that even as a relatively disadvantaged family (in terms of economic status) they actively live their lives with diverse, creative, and flexible daily practices. This attitude can be seen as a form of resistance to their difficult lives, and it demonstrates the power contained within seemingly mundane daily life.
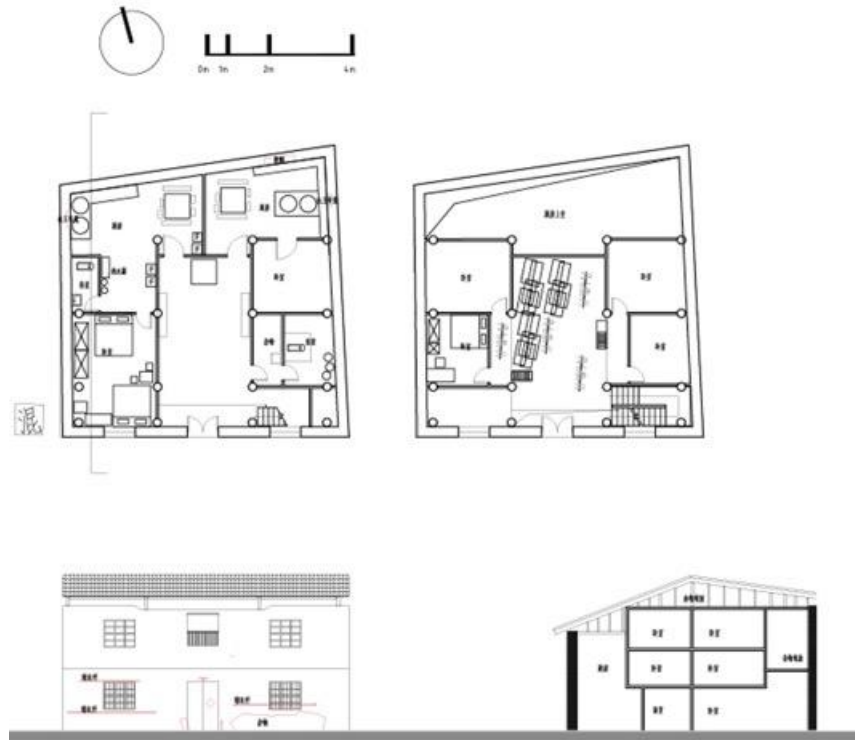

Figure 5: No. 16, Qingwei Road house plan and elevation
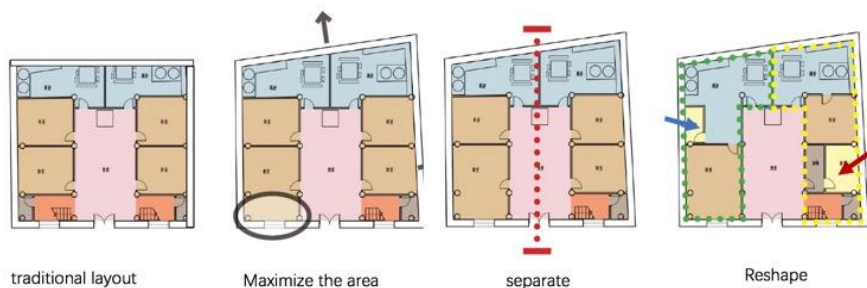Image source: Drawn by the author

Figure 6: The process of Plan changing of No. 16, Qingwei Road house
Image source: Drawn by the author

Figure 7: Indoor space of No. 16, Qingwei Road house
(left: central hall right: daughter's room)
Image source: Photographed by the author

3.3. Immediate time

In the immediate time dimension, the process of space generation or shaping is more fleeting, and the spaces themselves are more temporary. Ordinary architectural components are no longer the maintaining structures of these spaces. Instead, movable objects, sounds, smells, and crowds become the materials from which these spaces are created. In the context of Qingyuan Village, such types of spaces are often associated with specific social activities, such as festive gatherings of a clan, weddings and funerals, housewarming ceremonies, building construction ceremonies, relocation events, and market days. This article takes the market day in Qingyuan Village as an example to observe the temporary spaces.

Qingyuan Village serves as a central gathering point for surrounding villages. On the 15th day of each month, small vendors converge on the main street of Qingyuan Village, known as Jiangcuo Street, which is seven meters wide and is lined with several important public buildings, as well as numerous newly-built residential houses mostly constructed after the 1990s. The ground floor of these houses is often used as commercial shops, while the homeowners reside on the upper floors. During the market day(圩日 xu ri), temporary stalls are mainly set up on the sidewalks of Jiangcuo Street, with some stalls occupying the edges of the roadway. Pedestrians move directly in the middle of the road, making it challenging for vehicles to pass through Jiangcuo Street on market days. The market usually starts at 6 am and disperses before noon.

The goods in the market are categorized based on their content, and the historical reasons for this classification are unknown. However, the characteristics of the spaces on both sides of the street to some extent influence the arrangement of the stalls. This is because the street itself is a major commercial street in the town area, with various types of shops distributed on both sides. During market days, in addition to the vendors from surrounding villages and towns, many shop owners on the street also participate in the market. They often occupy the space in front of their shops, displaying their goods outside to increase sales during the market day. Therefore, it is common to see hardware stalls in front of hardware stores and meat stalls in front of butcher shops.

Sound is an important indicator to determine if it is a market day. The bustling sounds of the market can be heard from a distance. With the emergence of new amplifiers, the vendors' voices can be heard louder and for longer durations, adding to the noisy atmosphere of the market day. The sound completely transforms the street, which used to serve mainly as a transportation route, into a marketplace. The function of the street space changes from transit to a place for people to linger. Even if people don't have any purchasing needs, they would still come to the market day to join in the excitement.

The smell also plays a significant role in the spatial distribution of the market. Based on the smell, we can distinguish between clean areas and chaotic areas. Clean areas, even on non-market days, are relatively clean and tidy areas on both sides of the street, such as in front of the town hospital and town government. These areas have relatively clean environmental hygiene. Chaotic areas, on the other hand, are the areas in front of restaurants, groceries, and butcher shops, where there is more environmental clutter and the smell is not very pleasant. Therefore, during market days, products with less smell, such as clothing, daily necessities, and hardware, are mainly located in clean areas. Stall owners in the clothing area even would try to keep the goods off the ground by setting up higher shelves. They would also erect sunshades to enhance the comfort of customers while selecting items. Vegetables, poultry, pork, and other items with distinct smells and relatively "unclean" goods are concentrated in the "chaotic areas." In the arrangement of goods, stalls in the chaotic areas are more casual, directly placing goods in cardboard boxes or foam boxes on the ground, or simply placing the goods on a piece of cloth. After the market day, the chaotic areas would have more debris (such as rotten vegetable leaves and poultry droppings) left behind, while the clean areas can generally return to their usual state without additional cleaning work.

In addition to the typical stalls mentioned above, there are also some atypical stalls. One type is the mini stalls, which sell very small items (such as rat poison or valuable herbs), or the owners themselves are the products, offering personal services such as fortune-telling, mole reading, or tooth extraction. Both do not require much display space. These mini stalls occupy a small area and they are scattered in the gaps between larger stalls.

Although the content and scale of goods sold at the stalls may vary, the construction of the stalls themselves is very simple, even rudimentary. A few plastic stools or plastic boxes, a piece of broken wood board, and a sun umbrella constitute the basic form of a stall. Bricks, bamboo poles, and worn-out cloth can also serve auxiliary purposes. The objects that make up the stalls are not solely intended for the market day; they also serve other functions in temporary activities or the daily lives of villagers, reflecting the habit of reusing items and waste in the rural community. Compared to urban areas, rural communities in China are relatively lacking. Contemporary cheap and low-quality industrial products have mostly flowed into rural areas, forming the current scenery of rural life in China.

Sunshades, sound, smell, stalls, and crowds completely transform Jiangcuo Street in half a day. The linear passageway turns into a gathering space, and the tranquil village suddenly becomes bustling with voices. In rural areas, fixed public spaces like those in cities are missing, and temporary and adaptable spaces play an important role in rural public life.

Figure 8: Qingyuan village market day
Image source: Photographed by the author

4. Conclusion

Through this article, we have addressed several questions regarding rural Chinese society: Who shapes the space? Whose space is it? Who participates in this space? These questions involve different connotations of space, including place, home, and the public domain. The integration of spatial thinking has transformed the static research paradigm of rural architectural space. The fluidity of vernacular architecture has been exposed. This serves as a complement to the structural perspective in rural studies and embraces the complexities of diverse relationships, contributing to the resolution of campaign-style governance in rural Chinese society.

Another major purpose of this article is to explore the spatial ethnographic method itself. Firstly, the article attempts to apply the specific method of spatial ethnography through examples, incorporating architectural thinking due to the author's disciplinary background, emphasizing the visualization of information. In the contemporary era where visual information has become the mainstream source, is it outdated for ethnography in anthropology to rely solely on the notes of explorers? Is it unsuitable for a non-textual era? This article can be seen as an exploration of the dialectical relationship between presentation methods and content, and indeed, for the specific object-vernacular architecture, through such methods, we have revealed more profound implications and overlooked information about the observed subjects.

Another significant purpose of this article is to discuss the methodology of spatial ethnography itself. Through practical examples, the article attempts to apply specific methods of spatial ethnography. Drawing from the author's background in architecture, the article emphasizes a mode of thinking influenced by architectural thinking, particularly through the visual presentation of information. In today's era, where visual representation has become the dominant source of information, is it outdated for anthropological ethnography to rely solely on the notes of explorers? This article can be seen as an attempt to explore the dialectical relationship between presentation methods and content. Through such an approach, we have indeed revealed more layers of meaning and previously overlooked information about the subjects under observation.

Appendix

Samples for detailed spatial ethnography

Number	Year group	address	year	area（㎡）	floor	structure
01	1990s	Dianmen No. 8	2019	400	4	Brick & concrete
02	2010s	Badou Village No.99	2013	300	4	Brick & concrete
03	2000s	Badou Village No.138	2018	190	4	Brick & concrete
04	1990s	Yangdang No.18-2	2004	360	3	Brick & Concrete
05	1980s	Qingwei Road No.15	1986	250	2	Brick & wood
06	1970s	Qingwei Road No.16	1976	325	2	Rammed earth & wood
07	1970s	Xialuxiang No.13	1974	260	2	Rammed earth & wood
08	Before 1949	Yangdang No.10	/	1200	2	Rammed earth & wood

Sheet 1: Samples for detailed spatial ethnographic.

References

[1] Liu D. (1957). An Overview of Chinese Housing. Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press.

[2] Moss M, & She B. (2014). Sociology and Anthropology. Shanghai Translation Publishing House.

[3] Bourdieu P. (2003). The Berber house. In Low, & Lawrence-Zuniga, D, The anthropology of space and place : locating culture. Blackwell Pub.

[4] Sahlins.M, & Zhao B (2002). Culture and Practical Rationality. Shanghai People's Publishing House.

[5] Lévi-Strauss.C, & Zhang Z (2008). The Way of the Masks. Renmin University of China Press.

[6] Ingold. (2000). The perception of the environment : essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill /. Routledge.

[7] Certeau. (1984). The practice of everyday life /. University of California Press.

[8] Sen, A. (2021). Viewpoint: Spatial Ethnography of Devon Avenue, Chicago. Buildings & Landscapes, 28(2), 3-24.

[9] Massey D. B. (2005). For space. SAGE.