

A Study on the Modes of Spatial Production in Commercial Capital's Participation in Rural Governance

Ba Yi

Sanya University, Sanya, Hainan, China

Abstract: Based on a comparative case study of Z Village in Hainan and W Village in Inner Mongolia, this paper explores the underlying mechanisms through which commercial capital influences the effectiveness of rural governance. The study finds that the outcomes of capital intervention are not determined by its economic scale but by the form of spatial production it triggers within the community. The research identifies and elucidates two modes of spatial production: the "Suspension-Fragmentation" mode and the "Embeddedness-Reciprocity" mode. The former manifests as capital dividing community space into commercialized zones centered on realizing exchange value; its operational logic is suspended above the community surface, leading to a weakening of social ties. The latter is characterized by capital embedding itself into local networks and, together with the community, re-producing physical space into a public sphere with both economic and social functions; its operational logic is one of mutual nourishment, thereby catalyzing community social capital. By introducing the analytical perspective of spatial sociology, this study demonstrates that "spatial production" is a core dimension that cannot be overlooked in understanding rural governance. The conclusion points out that guiding capital from "suspension" to "embeddedness" and promoting the return of rural space from a "commodity of capital" to a "homeland of community" are crucial for achieving sustainable rural development.

Keywords: Rural Governance; Production of Space; Social Capital; Commercial Capital

1. Introduction

Rural governance is the cornerstone of national governance and a persistent focus of academic research. With the deepening implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, existing

studies posit that the efficacy of rural governance depends on the positive interaction of multiple actors. Grassroots organizations play a "integrative" and "pivotal" role through political, organizational, and capacity leadership[1]. New types of rural collective economies, village-enterprise cooperation, and digital technology are reshaping social capital through interest linkage and resource integration[2,3]. Among these, commercial capital, as a significant "operational agent" or "market entity," and its mode of interaction with other actors, has become an unavoidable issue in understanding the contemporary logic of rural governance.

The role of commercial capital is viewed dialectically in academia. On one hand, capital is seen as a catalyst for modernization, capable of driving the "reorganization of factors - structural adjustment - functional leap" to achieve the industrial reshaping and governance innovation of rural space [4]. On the other hand, studies also warn of the potential "interest-division order" [5] and "dis-embedding" of governance mechanisms [6] that capital may bring, particularly manifested as the inflation of economic rationality and the dilemma of collective action caused by the excessive expansion of market mechanisms.

While existing research has extensively focused on the outcomes of interest distribution following capital's entry, there is a lack of mechanistic explanation for how capital reshapes community boundaries through daily, spatial practices. Recently, the spatial perspective is becoming a new pathway for understanding rural governance. Studies have begun to focus on tourism-driven spatial restructuring, the governance process of industrial space, and the key role of public space as a "nexus" in promoting social integration [7]. These studies astutely point out that space is not merely a container but also a carrier of social relations. However, they mostly treat "space" as the background or outcome of governance,

failing to systematically regard "spatial production" itself as the core active process and key explanatory variable in capital's participation in governance, and how commercial capital, through specific logics of spatial practice, actively produces social relations, ultimately leading to governance "integration" or "alienation"[8,9].

In summary, building upon existing research, this paper will introduce the theory of spatial production as the core analytical framework. Adopting the comparative case study method from qualitative research, it will conduct a systematic comparison of the contrasting cases of Z Village in Hainan and W Village in Inner Mongolia. The case selection strictly follows the principle of "maximum variation" within a "most similar system"-that is, under the key similar precondition of both villages introducing commercial capital, their governance outcomes present opposing trends, thereby providing an ideal field for theoretical construction. In the research process, to comprehensively capture complex social processes, this study employs multiple data collection methods: in-depth interviews with village officials, residents, shop operators, and project managers were conducted to obtain first-hand data from multiple perspectives; participant observation was used to meticulously record daily activities and public deliberation processes in and around the shops as spaces of social interaction; thus providing a solid empirical foundation for revealing the causal mechanisms among "capital-space-governance."

2. Conceptual Framework of Spatial Production

To profoundly reveal the inherent mechanisms through which commercial capital influences rural governance, this paper introduces Henri Lefebvre's theory of the "Production of Space" to construct an integrated analytical framework. The core tenet of this theory is that space is not a passive "container" for the evolution of social relations but is itself a product of social relations, while simultaneously being an active, constitutive force[10]. From this theoretical perspective, space possesses multiple ontological attributes: it is both a physical entity and a social construct; it is both objectively perceived and subjectively conceived, and is continuously reconstituted through social practice.

To systematically explain the complex composition of space, Lefebvre proposed the famous tripartite dialectical framework of spatial production, comprising three interrelated dimensions: Spatial Practice (Perceived Space), Representations of Space (Conceived Space), and Representational Spaces (Lived Space).

First, Spatial Practice (Perceived Space) constitutes the material foundation of social spatiality and is closely related to a society's economic base and the processes of labor reproduction. It concretely manifests as observable land-use patterns, spatial organization forms, and trajectories of daily activities under a specific social formation. It is essentially a "second nature" built upon the sediments of historical spatial layers.

Second, Representations of Space (Conceived Space) refer to the abstract spatial order constructed through conceptual operations by dominant systems of knowledge and power. Through institutional norms, legal systems, technical planning, and other governance frameworks, it projects the logic of power and value order derived from specific relations of production onto material space, achieving the systematic regulation of social space.

Third, Representational Spaces (Lived Space) are the embodied spaces directly experienced through images, symbols, and the practices of everyday life. This dimension is the realm where social members establish spatial identity through emotional attachment and meaning-making, and also a potential domain where subordinate groups resist and reconfigure spatial meanings through alternative spatial practices. This dimension reveals that space is not only a vehicle for power and discipline but also a medium for social agents' creative practices[11]. These three dimensions together constitute a dialectical unity of spatial production: Spatial Practice reproduces the material foundation through daily activities; Representations of Space establish a dominant order through systems of knowledge/power; and Representational Spaces nurture the potential for resistance through lived experience. The tensions and interactions among them continuously drive the dynamic evolution and transformation of social space.

Building on Lefebvre's ideas, David Harvey further pointed out that in modern society, the meaning and form of space production are largely determined by groups holding the power

of coding and domination, among which capital is often the most crucial social force[12]. From this theoretical vantage point, this paper argues that the essence of commercial capital's entry into the countryside is precisely the process through which capital, as a potent spatial force, attempts to code, reorganize, and control rural space according to its own logic. Consequently, as shown in Figure 1, this paper analyzes the

practices of commercial capital in the rural field through the three dialectically unified dimensions of "Representations of Space" (Conceived Space), "Spatial Practice" (Perceived Space), and "Representational Spaces" (Lived Space), thereby constructing the two ideal types of "Suspension-Fragmentation" and "Embeddedness-Reciprocity."

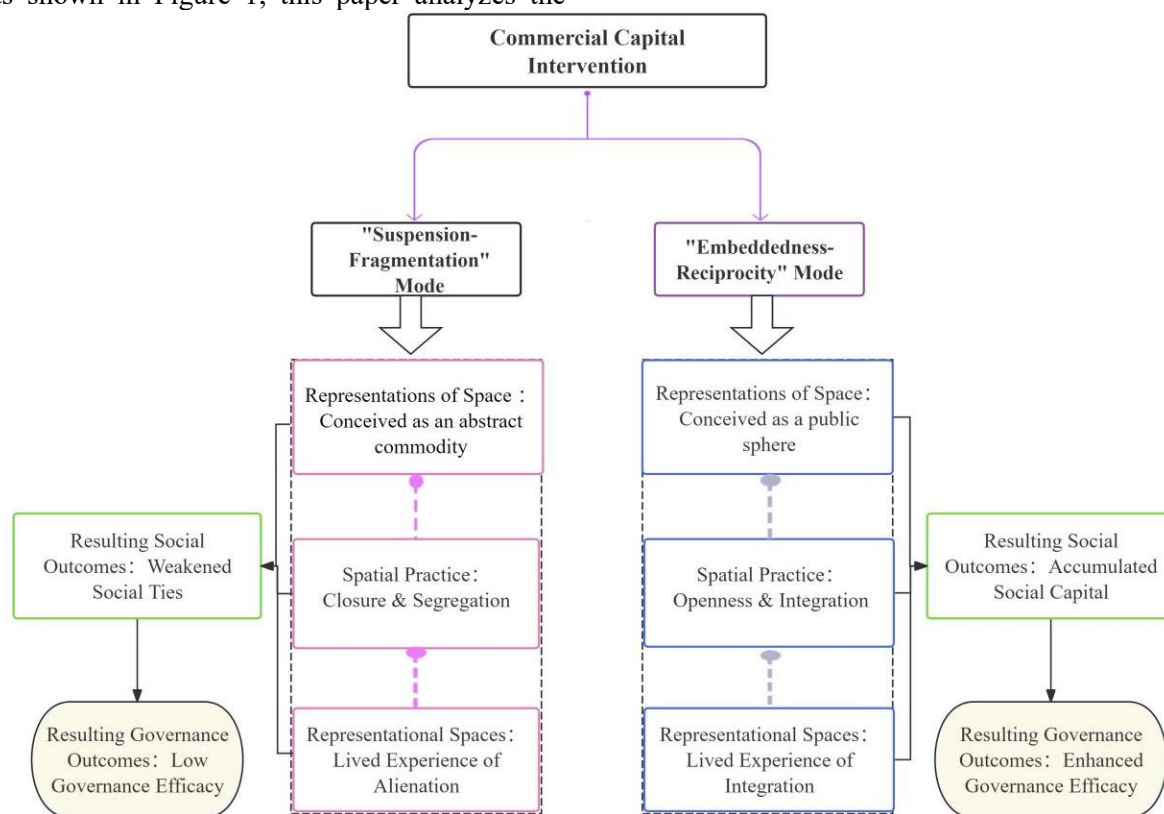


Figure 1. Two Modes of Spatial Production and Their Governance Outcomes

3. The "Suspension-Fragmentation" Mode of Spatial Production

Lefebvre argued that the form of modern space is abstract space[13]. The term "abstract" here signifies the stripping away of space's sociality, rendering it a homogenized, fragmented, and hierarchical state that serves capital circulation. This type of space is not neutral or naturally formed; rather, it is deliberately created and maintained by power and capital. Its core imperative is to suppress local differences and historical traces, promoting a singular, easily controlled and exchanged spatial imagination—a social space where differences and distinctions are continually dissolved through the commodification of space. In this mode, capital operates as an external force whose logic is disconnected from the local community. The commodification of space leads to the

"fragmentation" of community social ties and the erosion of publicness in governance. In Z Village, the intervention of commercial capital, materialized through the incense hall, exemplifies a typical "Suspension-Fragmentation" mode of spatial production. The following sections systematically dissect this process using the tripartite dimensions of spatial production theory.

(1) Representations of Space (Conceived Space)
At the conceptual level, this manifests as the planning logic of power and capital. In this mode, space is primarily conceived by capital and power actors as an abstract commodity capable of generating capital appreciation. Its value is determined by its exchange value, such as profit, rent, and tourism revenue. Planning blueprints and project designs aim to clearly demarcate and slice rural space into functionally

singular consumption units-like boutique homestay areas and specialty product shops-based on land, landscape, and buildings. Their design serves efficient business management and tourist experiences, not the daily lives of villagers. The conceived space held by the capital investors for Z Village is a typical "suspended" logic, detached from the local context. They abstracted Z Village's "primordial" natural environment and "convenient transportation" location into a blank canvas ready for capitalization through symbols. Their core conception, targeting urban elites burdened by "high levels of stress," was to transform this rural space into a refined commercial stage embodying an idealized "Traditional Chinese Incense Culture," aiming to provide external consumers with a place for "returning to nature" and "physical and mental healing."

"The primary reasons for choosing this location are, first, its good geographical position and convenient transportation; second, the village retains a relatively pristine, primordial ecology; and most importantly, the natural environment here is particularly suited for presenting Traditional Chinese Incense Culture. Hainan has historically been an important spice-producing region. We hope to showcase a 'return to nature' lifestyle here. Our clients are mainly from big cities; what they seek is a temporary 'escape' and a 'spiritual massage'." [Source: Interview conducted by the author at the Z Village Incense Hall, October 8, 2025.]

(2) Spatial Practice (Perceived Space)

This concretely manifests as the exclusive segregation of physical space. This conception is realized through specific spatial practices. It is characterized by the clear division of physical space through material elements like walls, fences, and dedicated pathways, forming "profit enclaves" isolated from the community's living spaces. The function of space is strictly limited to commercial transactions, excluding non-consumptive social activities. Capital becomes physically "suspended" above the fabric of the community. This "atomized survival strategy" is not merely a passive choice but an active strategy of spatial exclusion, aimed at minimizing transaction costs with local social networks. The result is the severing of potential pathways for generating social capital between the capital and the community.

"This kind of niche cultural industry isn't yet

within the scope of key government support. The village committee also doesn't interfere much with our operations; we just focus on our own business and comply with laws and regulations. Occasionally, city leaders come for research visits and offer some suggestions. There are basically no collective activities in the village now, and we have little interaction with the other villagers." [Source: Interview conducted by the author at the Z Village Incense Hall, October 8, 2025.]

(3) Representational Spaces (Lived Space)

This dimension reveals the alienation of social relations and the weakening of community. For local residents, their lived experience within this space is one of alienation and exclusion. This space is the "space of the Other"; their relationship to it is primarily that of passive "service providers" or "consumers." Because the profits are privatized and not fed back into the community, the spatial practices of capital not only draw physical boundaries but also produce an invisible boundary in the socio-psychological realm. This exacerbates internal interest differentiation within the community, erodes social capital such as trust and reciprocity, and ultimately leads to the weakening of village community bonds and "social alienation" in governance. The village presents a hollowed-out scene where "there are more dogs than people." As "new villagers," the business operators are perceived by the villagers as polite yet distant "bystanders" in their lived experience. The conceived space and spatial practice constructed by capital stand in sharp contradiction to the villagers' everyday lifeworld. A silent coexistence, akin to "well water not intruding into river water," has formed between them, failing to strengthen social ties despite the entry of capital.

"Initially, OCT [Overseas Chinese Town] developed a 'Beautiful Village' project here. There were many tourist activities; the bookstore, the dance troupe, and activities at the Banyan Tree Square were very lively. But after OCT withdrew, there's basically no government impetus now, and things are lukewarm. Usually, there are very few tourists; it only gets busier during the Chinese New Year period." [Source: Interview conducted by the author at a villager's home in Z Village, April 19, 2025.]

4. The "Embeddedness-Reciprocity" Mode of Spatial Production

The core of the "Embeddedness-Reciprocity" mode of spatial production lies in the proactive embedding of external capital or endogenous vitality into local social networks and cultural structures. Its logic of spatial production integrates with community development goals, ultimately "reciprocating" and activating community social capital through the practice of spatial communalization. In the case of W Village, facing strong pressures from modernization and external policies, the "Embeddedness-Reciprocity" model constructed by the local herders is rooted in a profound system of local knowledge. Its spatial production is by no means a passive response but actively transforms external challenges into opportunities to strengthen internal cohesion and cultural regenerative capacity.

However, the significance of this case extends far beyond demonstrating a successful localization strategy. It profoundly reveals the dialectical relationship of mutual causation between spatial production and social sustainability. As Lefebvre emphasized, space is not merely a container for social relations but a key arena for their reproduction. The practice in W Village demonstrates that when an "Embeddedness-Reciprocity" mode of spatial production is sustained, it provides the pastoral community with a crucial "structured coherence"-a relatively stable and mutually supportive configuration between the economic production system, forms of social organization, and cultural identity. This spatiality, based on local knowledge, social networks, and cultural rituals, constitutes an endogenous foundation for resisting external shocks and achieving socially sustainable development[14].

(1) Representations of Space (Conceived Space)

The conception of space transcends pure economic rationality, and its deep operational mechanism can be explained from the theoretical perspective of social territoriality. [15] defined 'territoriality' as a flexible system of mental perceptions and social conducts aimed at negotiating individual and group access to subsistence and cultural resources. As distinguished by [16], the integration logic embodied here is not "territorial sociability" (classifying social membership through ownership of defined space) but precisely "social territoriality," which emphasizes social membership itself as the key qualification for acquiring access to spatial resources.

Within this theoretical framework, the case of W Village finds profound interpretation. The herders' conceived space is deeply embedded in a local knowledge system concerning livelihood, ethics, and cosmology. Here, the pasture is far more than a mere factor of production; it is a "lived homeland" and "cultural root" carrying family memories, historical narratives, and cultural spirit. Whether local community leaders or external capital operators, only by respecting and identifying with this social-relation-based principle of territoriality can their spatial conceptions and commercial aspirations gain "admission" from the community. Their spatial planning, therefore, aims to create a hybrid arena carrying both economic and social functions, allowing the value of space to achieve balance and mutual nourishment between its use value (as a homeland for community life) and its exchange value (as a resource for commercial development).

"We are not the masters of the grassland, but its children. The pasture nurtured our ancestors and will nurture our descendants; we cannot treat it as property to be sold off casually. City people look at the pasture's price; we look at the pasture's life." [Source: Interview conducted by the author at Herder N's home in W Village, July 20, 2025.]

In the Oboo worship ritual in W Village, through bodily practices like circumambulating clockwise and offering libations of milk wine, herders transform the abstract grassland geography into a cultural space with a center, boundaries, and a sacred order. The periodic reproduction of this ritual landscape consolidates the community's collective memory and symbolizes natural space as a spiritual existence requiring reverence and gratitude. It emphasizes knowledge and emotion generated through sustained, practical engagement with the environment.

(2) Spatial Practice (Perceived Space)

Open integration of composite functions. Corresponding spatial practices exhibit characteristics of openness and inclusiveness. The design of physical space encourages lingering and interaction. For instance, the provision of public seating and chat areas inside and outside shops creates compound functions: they are simultaneously marketplaces, information hubs, social squares, and informal meeting halls. Through its spatial practices, capital organically "embeds" itself into the daily

flows and life rhythms of the villagers.

Facing external policy shocks like grazing bans and relocation, the practices of W Village herders at the level of perceived space demonstrate strong adaptability and agency, with the core logic being to "embed" and "reciprocate" the local social network.

"Before the government inspection team arrives, Herder A, who is subject to the grazing ban, will drive part of his flock overnight to the pasture of Herder B, who is under the grass-livestock balance policy. Herder B will then maintain a unified story externally. After all, the government people don't know whose sheep are whose. We all know which families are struggling; we help out if we can. Government policies are rigid, but human relations on the grassland are flexible." [Source: Collective interview conducted by the author at a restaurant in W Village, July 21, 2025.]

This practice operates like what James C. Scott termed the "weapons of the weak." Superficially, it circumvents formal rules, but at a deeper level, it relies upon and significantly strengthens social capital within the community, such as trust, norms of reciprocity, and reputation mechanisms. This is not a disruption of order but a form of "social self-help" by the community to sustain livelihoods in the face of external rigid institutions, an "adaptation" of local knowledge to macro-policies at the micro-level, thereby reproducing a "perceived space" based on trust.

Ms. N's establishment of a "Mongolian-style Milk Tea Cafe" in the city not only generated economic returns but also transformed dietary culture into cultural capital, recreating a familiar social node and cultural identity space for dispersed herders in the urban context. Her brother's "Herder Family Tourism" operation directly transforms traditional pastoral living space into an experiential consumption space. This process is not mere commodification but a creative transformation of cultural resources into economic advantages, allowing traditional culture to gain new ground for survival in the process of modernization, forming a cultural reciprocity to the community. These entrepreneurial practices represent a successful conversion of what Pierre Bourdieu termed "cultural capital" into "economic capital." The key is that this transformation process is a "deft embedding," meaning the commercial activities deeply rely on and, in turn, activate traditional social networks, local knowledge, and cultural

symbols. It is a "symbiosis-regeneration" type of commodification, granting traditional culture new vitality within the market economy and reciprocating community cohesion.

(3) Representational Spaces (Lived Space)

The regeneration of publicness and the catalyzing of social capital originate primarily from the crucial role played by lived space as an ideological medium. This unique set of symbols and cultural codes emotionally connects the herders to the space they inhabit. As scholars like [17] and [18] pointed out, cultural systems can be seen as adaptive mechanisms through which communities interpret and achieve a dynamic balance with their physical and social environments. In W Village, it is through rich daily practices that local residents collectively reproduce the lived space into a "our space" and a vibrant "public sphere." Here, people naturally engage in information exchange, emotional connection, and discussion of public issues; sustained social interaction powerfully strengthens the bonding social capital among villagers.

Despite the impacts of modernization, W Village, within the lived space experienced by the herders, still demonstrates strong social resilience. This is concentratedly reflected in the complex wedding rituals preserved during seasons like the Spring Festival-from "toasting and offering cigarettes" to "serving the sheep back," and through to all-night singing, dancing, and games. This constitutes a powerful cultural field, continuously producing and reinforcing the community's ethical norms, social exchanges, and collective emotions. Simultaneously, successful entrepreneurial herders circulate their economic gains within kinship networks, reciprocating the sustainable development of the entire family or even the clan. Here, a virtuous cycle forms between the production of space and the maintenance of community. The operation of various forms of capital is deeply embedded in local networks, and the ultimate outcome of this spatial production is the catalyzing of a vibrant, self-repairing, and self-developing "rural governance community."

5. Analysis and Discussion

Through a comparative case study of Z Village in Hainan and W Village in Inner Mongolia, this research reveals the key mediating mechanism through which commercial capital influences rural governance efficacy-the mode of spatial

production. The findings move beyond the binary debate of "whether capital should enter the countryside" to pinpoint that the core issue lies in the logic by which capital dominates the restructuring of rural space. The following sections provide an in-depth interpretation of the research findings from three aspects, engaging in dialogue with existing theories.

(1) Spatial Production: A Key Theoretical Lens Connecting Capital and Governance

Existing studies on capital's entry into the countryside often approach the topic from perspectives of "interest distribution" or "actor relationships". While insightful, these perspectives fail to adequately explain why similar capital investments can lead to vastly different governance outcomes. By introducing theories from spatial sociology, this study proposes "spatial production" as the crucial mediating variable that fills this explanatory gap. Our case analysis demonstrates that capital does not operate within a static, pre-existing "container." On the contrary, capital itself is a powerful, constitutive spatial force. In Z Village, capital, through a logic of "Suspension-Fragmentation," produced rural space as isolated, commodified enclaves centered on realizing exchange value. In W Village, capital, through a logic of "Embeddedness-Reciprocity," co-produced space with the community into an open, public sphere integrating both economic and social functions. These two spatial formations, in turn, shaped fundamentally different social relations and governance orders: the former leading to social alienation and community disintegration, the latter catalyzing social integration and community resilience.

Therefore, this study argues that "space" should be elevated from a background variable to a core explanatory variable in rural governance research. Our contribution lies in constructing the causal chain of "Capital → Spatial Production → Governance Efficacy," providing a more dynamic and powerful analytical framework, thereby deepening the understanding of the complexity of rural governance.

(2) The Changing Geometry of Power: The Contest Over "Whose Space?" in Spatial Production

Lefebvre pointed out that the production of space is always a contest of power. The findings of this study profoundly reveal that different modes of spatial production correspond to

differences in the ownership of the right to produce space, which directly determines whose space the rural space ultimately becomes.

In the "Suspension-Fragmentation" mode (Z Village), the power to produce space was monopolized by external capital and abstract planning authority. The incense hall owner, by virtue of their cultural and economic capital, defined the space's aesthetic tone and functional attributes, while earlier policy planning set the development framework. Local villagers were largely silenced in this process of spatial production, transformed from co-owners of the space into its bystanders and service providers. The space produced by this power structure is essentially a "spatialization of power"; it silently consolidates and reproduces the power inequality between capital and the locality through its physical form and functional design. In contrast, in the "Embeddedness-Reciprocity" mode (W Village), the power to produce space displayed characteristics of being diffuse and shared. Although individual elites like Ms. N played key entrepreneurial roles, their practices were deeply embedded within local social networks and cultural norms. The success of the milk tea cafe and herder family tourism relied on, and in turn reinforced, community identity and participation; informal mutual aid was a form of flexible resistance and adaptation of collective community power to official policy. Here, space is co-produced; it is the result of the "socialization of power." It is not a finished, closed product but an open process constantly redefined and shaped through ongoing daily life and social interaction.

This comparison demonstrates that the effectiveness of rural governance fundamentally depends on whether the agency of community members can be activated and safeguarded in the process of spatial production. When communities are deprived of the right to produce their own space, any sophisticated external intervention is likely to meet a "suspended" fate.

(3) Beyond "Embeddedness": Towards a "Symbiotic" Ethic of Rural Development

Polanyi's concept of "embeddedness" is often invoked to advocate for the reintegration of economic action into social relations. This study agrees with this direction, but the case of W Village further suggests that in the context of contemporary rural development, merely emphasizing "embeddedness" might be insufficient. The successful case exhibits a more

proactive "symbiotic" relationship.

In W Village, capital does not just "embed" itself in local networks without causing disruption; through the "reciprocity" mechanism, it proactively and productively nourishes and is nourished by the local system. Ms. N's milk tea cafe did not undermine Mongolian dietary culture but provided a new platform for its continuation in the city; the herder family tourism did not fossilize traditional culture as a museum specimen but revitalized it through engagement with modern tourism. This model converts cultural capital into economic capital, and then reinvests economic capital into the reproduction of social relations and cultural identity, forming a positive, resilient cycle.

In contrast, the incense hall in Z Village, while physically "embedded" in the natural environment, was "suspended" in terms of social relations. It extracted the "primordial ecological" aesthetic value of the locality but failed to effectively "reciprocate" the generated benefits into the growth of local social capital. This constitutes a "parasitic" rather than a "symbiotic" relationship.

Therefore, the policy implication of this study is that guiding capital into the countryside should not stop at requiring it to "do no harm," but should aim to construct a "symbiotic development ethic." This implies that policy design and project evaluation should not focus solely on economic indicators but must also examine whether they have established an effective cycle of "benefit feedback - social gain" and whether they genuinely respect and enhance the community's agency in spatial production. Only in this way can we promote the return of the countryside from a "commodity of capital" to a "homeland of community," achieving sustainable development in the true sense.

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