



Traditional Festivities and Temple Fairs in Rural Cultural Construction: A Study in Xinjiang County, Shanxi Province

Ji Lingzhu ^{1*}, Ma Qiang ²

^{1,2}Taiyuan Normal University, City of Jinzhong, 030619 Shanxi, P. R. China, China

* Corresponding Author: **Ji Lingzhu**

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Abstract

Traditional festivities (社火 in Chinese), originated from the ancient earth and fire gods worship, have been popular among Chinese rural people during the Spring Festival and influential in rural areas throughout China for thousands of years. Yellow River Basin area is a typical representative. Xinjiang county, situated in the middle reaches of the basin and the only state-level Historical and Cultural City in southern Shanxi, has been well-known for its colorful traditional festivities and temple fairs. From the relevant document study and field investigation in Xinjiang County, the authors found the new content in the festivities and major temple fairs there reveals positive role of the traditional cultural activities from the perspective of revitalizing rural China and the reconstruction of cultural ecology in the countryside.

Keywords: rural revitalization, traditional festivities, temple fair reconstruction of rural cultural ecology

Introduction

In February 2018, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on the Implementation of Rural Revitalization Strategy, which made a comprehensive deployment for the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, and did not simply emphasize the issue of economic growth in the countryside, but regarded culture as the driving force for rural revitalization: it is believed that if rural revitalization comes without cultural reconstruction, it would lack spiritual power support. Therefore, The Opinions clearly points out: “Rural style and civilization are the guarantee for rural revitalization. Therefore, co-development of material and spiritual civilization is needed to improve the spiritual outlook of farmers, cultivate civilized culture, good family tradition and simple folk style in the countryside, and continuously upgrade the level of rural social civilization”^[1]. The rural revitalization strategy proposed by General Secretary Xi Jinping and the revival of Chinese civilization are actually two sides of the same coin. Chinese civilization is based on farming culture, and the countryside is the mother and carrier of Chinese traditional culture, as well as its soul and root. Confidence in traditional culture is the foundation of national policy to revitalize the countryside. Revitalizing the countryside is a comprehensive systematic project, and the great goal of reviving Chinese civilization cannot be realized without the flourishing of the rural area. The implementation of the rural revitalization strategy is conducive to the promotion of the excellent Chinese traditional culture since the roots of Chinese culture are in the countryside^[2], and the basic kernel of Chinese civilization is rural culture formed by native land, countryside scenery, nostalgic feelings, local accents, villagers who are on good terms with each other, and the traditional good virtues, etc. The revitalization of rural culture is also an inherent requirement for the construction of spiritual civilization in socialist modernization. Various policies have been initiated one after another to attract many rural youths working in the city to return to the countryside and build their homeland, but while they are employed or start their own businesses in the local areas, they banter about the monotony and boredom of rural cultural life: “beautiful scenery and unbearable boredom”, etc. Government leaders at all levels and rural cultural workers should seriously consider how to lay out the excellent Chinese traditional culture and art system in the rural revitalization strategy. To better meet the growing demand for cultural consumption in rural areas, satisfy the spiritual needs of the young generation and keep them to build their homeland in the countryside, the system should be based on the rural civilization and at the same time absorbing the excellent achievements of urban civilization and foreign culture.

The long-standing traditional festivities started from ancient Chinese's worship rituals of the earth and fire gods to pray for abundant rainfall and good harvests, and gradually developed into a grand folk gathering to celebrate Spring Festival and worship different kinds of immortals and folk Gods with drum music and other forms of folk performing and visual art. Various Gods and people enjoy their own favorites in the exciting and spectacular carnival. The festivities were approved by the State Council in May 2006 to be included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list, and in 2023, added to the UNESCO list of international intangible cultural heritage.

The festival activities have become more and more entertaining for people and changed into a magnificent massive show of traditional folk performances: dance, acrobatics, music, opera, martial arts, arts and crafts and other forms of folk arts. These activities inherited from traditional temple fairs and festivals are becoming essential carriers of rural cultural ecological reconstruction. Folk performing arts and cultural activities, such as yangko dance, local opera, folk songs, gong and drum performance etc, are very popular during the festival period and for other celebrations (business celebrations, life rituals etc). The villages and towns can also sponsor self-scripted and self-directed entertainments regularly to enrich and diversify cultural life according to the available resources to reshape and reproduce the excellent rural culture. Xinjiang County (ancient Jiangzhou Prefecture), the only national historical and cultural city in southern Shanxi is trying to build an ecosystem for rural cultural revitalization, making the most of the local traditional cultural resources so that the cultural heritage will satisfy the present cultural demands of the people.

1. The inbuilt advantage of traditional festivities in Xinjiang County

Xinjiang County, which has a rich historical and cultural accumulation and a number of intangible heritage projects on the national list, is a model county for inheritance of intangible cultural heritage in Shanxi Province. The well-known "Jiangzhou Drum Music" has spread to many other areas in China, beyond Asia and further to the five continents of the world. In the rural cultural revitalization, the local people in Xinjiang spontaneously revived many traditional cultural activities, and the county government has guided these activities along the course of healthy development. As a result, the historically famous festival activities and temple fairs have been newly grafted and enhanced in the rural cultural construction in the new era.

Xinjiang County, known as "Jiangzhou Prefecture" in ancient times, is located at the southwest edge of Linfen Basin in the southwest of Shanxi Province, with the Fen and Hui rivers passing through the territory, and the E'mei Mountains to the south and the Lvliang Mountains to the north. It is the only "National Historical and Cultural City" in the southern part of the province due to a rich historical and cultural heritage. The salt ponds in the south of Shanxi have a production history of 3,000 to 4,000 years and are one of the oldest salt-producing regions in China. Salt is the oldest commodity that bred the earliest merchants in China, and certainly the earliest Jin merchants. Ancient Jiangzhou happened to be in this geographically advantageous location. Thanks to its location and the transportation advantages of the water and land docks, ancient Jiangzhou experienced three high peaks of development during the Qin and Han dynasties, the Sui and Tang dynasties and the Ming and Qing dynasties. From the Western Han Dynasty to the Tang and Song Dynasties to the middle of the Qing Dynasty, Jiangzhou was a distribution

center for processing and exchanging products from different places including Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan, Gansu, Beijing and Tianjin, as well as processing mountain and foreign goods shipped from southeastern Shanxi and the other southeastern provinces. It was known as the "the City of Seventy-two industries". The strong economic base spawned the development of local culture, art, architecture and education, which were gradually absorbed into the folk customs and daily life of Jiangzhou people^[3].

The festivities, with a long history in Xinjiang, are called "Renao" (热闹 lively atmosphere full of entertainments) or "honghuo renao" (红火热闹) by the locals, meaning grand gathering with a variety of activities and actions with many participants and watched by a lot of viewers. Due to the developed economy and frequent trading and commercial exchanges, people in Xinjiang had led a life of affluent materials, developed culture and flourishing religious activities, and temple buildings of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Catholicism abounded in the territory with temple fairs everywhere in the county towns and the villages in all the four seasons. The seventy-two industries also built their own temples and held temple fairs regularly. The Local people call the temple fair "ancient fair". Whenever there is an ancient fair in a village, there are crowds of people and heavy traffic with pedalers gathering and business booming. Local operas, folk performing arts and traditional festivities are held. According to the incomplete statistics of Xinjiang County Cultural Promotion Association, there are ninety-eight ancient temple fairs in the county every year, and there are five temple fairs in the county with overlapping dates. At every temple fair, there must be incense-burning worship and folk art performances: drum-opera, land-boating dance, folk songs accompanied by wind and percussion music, stilt-walkings, drum-beating on horse-drawn carts, lion dancing, and other local cultural and artistic programs. The Guangxu version of "Zhi Li Jiangzhou County Records" (《直隶絳州志》) also has the following recording of the traditional festivities in Jiangzhou: "The annual sacrificial rituals for the god of earth are held twice in winter and summer respectively for harvest-praying and thanksgiving. And there are many ritual associations which host traditional festivities. They often invited local opera troupes to perform, and business people made good use of these opportunities to do their businesses, bringing many conveniences to the local people."

The descriptions of the frequency of festivities and the performance of drum music in the County Records fully demonstrate the historical prosperity of the folk activities in Jiangzhou^[4]. Archeological discoveries confirmed the long history of Festive celebrations in Xinjiang. The brick sculptures of traditional festivities unearthed in the Jin Dynasty tombs in BeiYuema and NanFanzhuang villages in Xinjiang County vividly reflect the prosperity of folk activities in the Song and Jin dynasties, and also prove the present-day festive celebrations in Xinjiang County are successors of those more than a thousand years ago. On November 20, 1995, a Jin Dynasty tomb was unearthed in Bei Sucun village with over ten brick carvings of music and dancing scenes: Sheng (a Chinese ancient reed pipe wind instrument), waist-drums dancers, reed pipe players, lute, flute and hichiriki players etc, with various auspicious animals and flowers painted as the background. The vivid carvings seem to show us that the tomb owner was appreciating a wonderfully harmonious and pleasant visual and auditory feast, which provides further evidence that the level of festival performance in Xinjiang County at that time

had reached a high level. Since no temple buildings or worshiped idols were found among the brick carvings, local cultural workers and archaeologists are very sure that they are brick carvings of festive performances^[5]. According to Wenxi County Records compiled in 1919: “The community on duty will host the traditional festivities at the annually fixed dates, on which various kinds of folk arts are on show for competition, such as gong and drum music playing, ox-drawn flower-carts and drum-carts, man-carried mini-

pavilions and high stilt walkers dressed up in Chinese legendary stories scenes or characters^[6]. Historically, Wenxi County was under the jurisdiction of Jiangzhou Prefecture. At that time, there were drum bands and festive celebration in all the villages of Jiangzhou. In ancient Jiangzhou and even in the present Xinjiang County, the festival and the temple fair celebration during the Spring Festival were often combined into one.



Brick carvings of festival performance in Jin Dynasty (1115-1234AD) unearthed in villages in Xinjiang County(courtesy of 360 pictures)

Fig 1

After liberation (1949), for various reasons, traditional festivities in Xinjiang County, were once very depressed, and people were encouraged to spend a “revolutionary” and “transforming old tradition” Spring Festival. After the reform- and opening to the outside world policy in 1978, festival celebrations which had once been nearly silent began to recover. In 1983, the county government of Xinjiang County organized a large-scale festive show in the county town, and the performers from each village attended with their own special shows. Until now many locals still linger lovingly over the spectacular occasion: drum carts, drum music show with the drummers in traditional costumes of different characters, multi-skill drum beating, stilt walking, land boat dancing, flower basket dance, and yangko dance ... In the early 1990s, the government of Xinjiang County organized several drum music playing competitions, which promoted the revival and prosperity of traditional culture. Now it has become more and more standardized, performing mainly during the Chinese New Year period. Each village organizes its own festivities on the first day of the Chinese Lunar New Year, and the township or the county government will host celebrations attended by the village folk artists during the Lantern Festival (January the 15th in Chinese Lunar Calendar). The locals are proud of the splendid festive celebrations. In our field investigation, one village elderly, although over the age of 85, still has a good memory of what she had watched on the annual celebrations: we had all the performances that others had, and we also had what they didn't. Then she listed the impressive ones: the stilt walkers of Louzhuang village played the roles of the Eight Taoist

Immortals; the stilts of Longquan village were as high as four meters; there were different kinds of stilt walking show: drama character stilt walking, stilt jumping, five-man stilt walking with each one of their legs tied together etc, and various kinds of drum music shows: Emperor Lishimin's Rain-praying Journey of Sanquan village, multi-skill drum beating of Gujiao village, and beautifully decorated drum carts drawn by strong men, horses, ox or tractors. In Xicun village, there was a popular ballad “The villagers of Xicun are so competitive that their drum cart is drawn by 12 ox. When the first ox has already arrived at Taishan temple, the last one is still in the village.” The villages at the foot of Mashou Mountain had the tradition of man-drawn drum cart competition on the Chinese New Year Eve. The tough guys in the villages relayed to draw the cart, and the competition may last until the evening the next day. There was a pair of couplets hanging on the cart of one village, “Like a fierce tiger roaring down the mountain, surpassing a dragon jumping out of the water.” Another unforgettable folk art show, which Xinjiang people have prided themselves on was the Taige (acrobatic lift, Chinese folk dance integrating fairy tales with historical stories and local drama, and combining the decorating functions of painting, paper sculpture and colour paper binding etc.) Before the festivities, each village tried to keep a secret of their own Taige (the story, the design, the decoration and the dancers etc) , and find more about others' Taiges to make theirs the best. The competition in Taige-making wisdom has brought about more and more varieties and higher and higher the levels in workmanship.



Two Taiges on show in Xinjiang County (courtesy of 360 pictures)



Fig 2

2. Current situation of festive and temple festivals in Xinjiang county

The author conducted a field survey of festive and temple fairs in Xinjiang County in 2019, 2023 and 2024 during winter and summer vacations (Due to the pandemic situation, the Spring festival activities were cancelled three years in a row in 2020, 2021, and 2022). From the Chinese lunar New Year to Lantern Festival, I investigated the festive celebrations in Di Zhuang Village and the county-wide celebrations on the Lantern Festival in Xinjiang County, and Jiyi Temple Fair in Yangwang Town on the second day of the second lunar month and the Fujun Temple Fair in Nanguan Village on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, and consulted the documents of other festive celebrations and temple festivals in Xinjiang County.

A. The 2019 spring festive celebrations of di Zhuang village in Xinjiang county consist of three parts.

1. On the first day of the Lunar New Year, the village committee organized village residents to have celebrations: gong and drum music performance, New Year message from the village leaders, entertainments prepared by the villagers, etc.
2. The “Clowning and ridiculing Qin Hui” activity at the Lantern Festival was organized by the residents’ group funded by families with newborn babies in 2018 (According to the village elders, the origin of this folk activity is supposed to be related to the history of the national hero Yue Fei in Song Dynasty who was brutalized by the traitor Qin Hui; The three cultural elders interviewed in the village did not give an exact explanation and it is nearly impossible to trace its origin.). The process of the event includes: taking “Qin Hui, the clown” to the activity spot (with gong and drum music, and firecrackers are used to greet the new grandfather and grandmother at the newborn baby’s home, and they are made up as clowns with decorations of different kinds, and funny clothes, hats and facial make-up, then brought to the place where the ceremony is held). When all the families with newborn babies come, the celebrations (entertainments from the villagers or invited professional actors and actresses)will start, later the newborn babies’ families treat the neighbors with wine, sweets, and snacks. The cost of the performance is shared by the families of the newborn babies.
3. Those villagers who are thirty-six years old in the year (nominal age, calculated according to the traditional method

of reckoning) have celebrations for themselves as well as for all the villagers: worshipping the Jade Emperor (at the former site of the Jade Emperor Temple in this village) on the Lunar New Year day; on the third evening of the Lunar January they present wonderful artistic performances to the villagers. (These peers jointly fund to invite some professional actors); on the fourth day of the Lunar New Year at noon, the thirty-six year old peers gather for lunch. The costs are shared by these peers or some of them with deep pockets.

The following is a brief chronicle of the 2019 Spring Festival village celebrations organized by Di Zhuang Village Committee(狄庄村).

In the Spring Festival of 2019, the traditional festivities were held in Di Zhuang Village, Xinjiang County, Shanxi Province. Early in the morning, cheerful gong and drum sounds called the villagers who had just finished eating dumplings to the square in front of the village committee building, which was surrounded by men, women and children in their festival clothing, among whom were some villagers in performance costumes and make-up. The people were happy and cheerful, saying Spring Festival greetings to each other, and some were taking the last chance to rehearse their lines or musical notes. The performance teams of each resident group concentrated in a corner making final preparations. The entertainers included kindergarten children, 80-year-old grandmothers, university students returning to their hometowns for the Lunar New Year, etc.; The performances were a fusion of tradition and modernity in forms of elegant and folk art.

Returning university students sang and danced songs eulogizing the Party’s rural revitalization strategy and brought the new changes of the outside world to the village, while middle-aged women praised the new changes in the village with the “Sanshouban”(三句半 in Chinese, a folk talk show in three lines and a phrase with four performers that was popular in the 1960s and 1970s): the new cement village roads and school building... An eighty-year-old woman played traditional monologue accompanied by the rhythmic clapping of bamboo clappers (a kind of Chinese traditional rap art): the village has centralized heat supply, the construction of flats, and the former Fenhe Beach will soon become a beautiful park... “Jiangzhou Drum Music”, which is

included in the database of the UNESCO as a masterpiece of the world's oral and intangible heritage of humanity, is a worthy protagonist: middle-aged women in Chinese costumes played the waist drums and had yangko dance; six male elders in their 60s and 70s beat the drums, cymbals and gongs. The women drummers, with their formal costumes, same hair style and make-up, beat the drums with the uniform changes of rhythm and neat forward-moving pace; the elementary school students, dressed in Tang Dynasty war costumes, performed the famous piece of drum music "The Prince of Qin Reviewing His Troops" (秦王点兵); the flower-basket carriers and the young wives on donkeys danced to the drum beats, in their specially-prepared costumes and hairstyles. They danced and sang in their own unique ways to praise the great changes that have taken place in the village during the rural revitalization. The actors were all villagers. When it was about the 12th lunar month, the villagers usually got busy preparing for the traditional Chinese New Year home celebrations. However, they were very enthusiastic for the festivities, and they well-rehearsed in the busy schedule, asking old artisans to tutor them, making their own costumes or customizing them. No matter how busy they were, the rehearsal time was fixed. Every group of residents wanted to be the best in the show. The seven or eight-year-old schoolchildren and elderly people with only elementary school education were able to memorize the complicated drum music notes and lines. The celebration lasted for over an hour, and the village council used aerial photography to record their joyful occasion.

B. 2024 Xinjiang county Chinese New Year traditional festivities performance

On February 5, 2023 (Lantern Festival, the 15th day of the first month of the lunar calendar), the Xinjiang County government selected two towns' traditional festive performances to display in the county town to enliven local cultural life and construct rural cultural revitalization, Longxing and Yangwang. Carefully organized by all departments of the county government, the whole event lasted five hours with a good order maintained by the audience, actors, vehicles and the horses participating in the performance. The performances combined modern and traditional features: from the modern dance Beautiful China performed by a team of 100 women from Xiguan village to the traditional Yangko dance accompanied by flower-drum beating, to the gong and drum operas Hua Mulan and Journey to the West, as well as the traditional drum-carts drawn by the newly decorated trucks and tractors. There was a spectacular scene of horse-drawn drum carts, with as many as twenty horses. The squad of five or six stilt-walkers, land-boat dancing and the military drum squad of over a hundred women were also impressive. While entertaining, they were always mindful of the task of presenting the unique culture and advertising the produce of their villages. Zhouzhuang Village in Longxing Town is the hometown of Li Yuxiu, a famous educator in Qing Dynasty and author of the Disciple's Rules (or Standards for the Students) (弟子规). The locals publicized the traditional culture of the Disciple's Rule in big float performance, promoting the county's profound cultural heritage. In addition, Xin'an, Nantou and Beichi villages in Yangwang Town advertised the walnuts, nectarines and medicinal herbs produced in their villages on horse-drawn drum carts and floats, combining cultural performances with productive work.

The author interviewed two viewers

Xiao Li, a university student, who returned home from Dongbei University of Finance and Economics for the winter holidays. He said it was a must for him to watch traditional festivities every year, otherwise he would feel like it wasn't the Lunar New Year. When I asked which type of show he liked, he said he liked them all. For him, during the Chinese New Year, it was more important to stand in the bustling crowd, look at the flowery costumes and listen to the rhythms of the gongs and drums than delicious food although he did not know the origin and history of some of the shows.

The other was Miss Zhang Lin, a member of the Yangwang Drum Corps, who had just finished her performance and was full of excitement. Miss Zhang has a beauty shop in the City of Yuncheng and sells several brands of cosmetics. She had learnt to play drums as an amateur in primary school. This time when she heard that the town was setting up a marching drum team, she voluntarily signed up to participate. She said she had missed a week of business for the training, but was not sorry for the income loss because participating in a group activity gave her a renewed sense of belonging and exhilaration. She also introduced me to the older women in the flower-drum team of her town, many of whom had only learned to play before the Chinese New Year. They used to play mahjong when they finished their chores, but these days they didn't play mahjong anymore and did their house chores faster in order to attend rehearsals.

C. Fujun Temple Fairs in Nanguan village, Xinjiang County

On July 23, 2023 (the sixth day of the sixth Chinese lunar month), the Sixth Fujun Temple Fair was held in Nanguan village, Xinjiang County, which is a folk temple fair. The temple is dedicated to Cui Fujun, who was born on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month in Sui dynasty (585 AD) and died on the tenth day of the tenth month of 648AD in Tang dynasty. Cui Fujun is one of the deities worshipped by the people since Tang, Song, Jin and Yuan dynasties. He had been granted by successive emperors with titles of "Marquis" to "Duke", "Prince" etc. It can be said that Fujun was revered by the people, ghosts and gods, and worshipped by the kings, ministers and the local folks. There is no record of Cui Fujun's virtues, only inscriptions and anecdotes from different historical periods, which can be summarized as "having a divine administration", "loving the people" and "stabilizing the country against disasters". He had been widely influential in Shanxi, Henan and Hebei Provinces.

Nanguan village is located on the south bank of the Fen River, looking out over Xinjiang County City. In ancient times, Nanguan was the guardian of the southern gate of City of Jiangzhou. It was just here that the famous "The Transportation with thousands of Boats" (泛舟之役 in Chinese, 647 BC, in the Spring and Autumn period in Chinese history), the first recorded inland large scale river transport in China's history, took place. It also left behind the legend of Xue Rengui, the famous general of the Tang dynasty and the moving folk song of "Going to Jiangzhou" ...The rise or decline of the Nanguan wharf was closely related to the development of commerce in ancient Jiangzhou [7]. According to "Records of Jiangzhou" compiled in Kangxi period of Qing dynasty (1661-1722AD), the Dongyue and Fujun temples were originally in the south-eastern Jiangzhou County and were very prosperous [8]. The County Record compiled during the Republic of China period (1911-1949AD) also documented, "The 6th of June is the date for

an important temple fair in the Jiangzhou. Traders from neighbouring counties travelled several hundred kilometers to come here for the fair. The fair lasted until the 20th of June (in Chinese Lunar Calendar). During this period, at three or four o'clock nearly everyday in the afternoon, various folk performing arts were on show in the streets, and people made funny but coarse comments while watching.

Although highlighting the prosperity of trade and commerce, the practice might be destructive to the social morals and traditions" [9]. Although these accounts were written by the feudal guardians to criticize women for making their appearance in public to watch performances, they testified to the bustling scene of traditional festivities at the Fujun Temple from another perspective. However, later Fujun Temple Fair gradually declined, and the temple was pulled down, leaving only the name of "Fujun Lane" still in use. In 2015, Nanguan village rebuilt Fujun Temple on the original site recorded in historical documents, and began to hold a temple fair every year on the sixth day of the six lunar month (the birthday of Cui Fujun), which is mainly a folk activity. Since then, every year on this day, the temple was decorated with lights and couplets of prayers and beautifully colored ornamental gates. A huge incense burner was lit and the smoke from burning paper money filled up the area, while bottles of liquor and food offerings were placed on the large table next to the incense burner. The ritual was managed by a council with a premier, deputy councilors, members and so on. The ceremony began with colored flags and various streamers leading the way, accompanied by gong and drum music. People burn incense, sprinkle liquor and kowtow. Then the host gave a speech, followed by the various kinds of gong, drum and dance performances. The performances were brought by the drum teams and Yangko groups from Nanguan village and neighbouring villages such as Qiaoxi village, Sanjiadian village, Zhongshe village, Qiaodong village and Cuiling village etc. Different teams naturally competed with each other, and tried to present their best. They reproduced the traditional grand scene of gong and drum competition at the temple fair, winning bursts of applause from the audience. After the offering ritual, there was a feast and local opera show to thank Cui Fujun, the deity enshrined in the temple, and entertain the guests and spectators.

The author noticed a special phenomenon: whether it was the drum band, the dance team, the flower drum team or the Yangko dance team, ninety-five percent of the performers were women, mostly middle-aged and elderly women, but there was also a dance team of young girls with a more modern style and wearing more fashionable costumes.

After the fair, I interviewed Mr. Cheng from the Council.

Author: Mr. Cheng, how was the reconstruction of the Fujun Temple funded and who funded the annual temple fair?

Mr. Cheng: The majority of the funds for the reconstruction of the Fujun Temple during 2014 and 2015 were pooled together by a few businessmen, with the remaining portion raised by people in the village. The temple fair is financed by the villagers who are thirty-six years old in the current year. Personnel expenses are mainly for the gong and drum corps from neighbouring villages, the council staff are all volunteers.

Author: Do the people of the village know any deeds of Mr. Cui Fujun, the deity worshipped in the temple?

Mr. Cheng: Yes, I think most of them do. On the stele there is a description of the deeds of Cui Fujun. You can see a couplet there: "The flowing water of the Fen River nourishes generation after generation, and the virtues of Fujun enlightens people for ages and ages."

Author: Is there a tune specially composed and dedicated to Cui Fujun, the deity?

Mr. Cheng: No, the performances are the same as any other temple fairs.

Author: Does the village committee have any requirements for the temple fair?

Mr. Cheng: Basically no, the village committee is very supportive. A young man in the committee, who is exactly 36 years old this year, also comes to the temple fair. There are many villagers selling goods on stalls near the Fujun Temple and business is quite good.

Author: It's a busy time for farming these days, do villagers have time to do the preparations for the temple fair?

Mr. Cheng: Whoever is free will come and offers help. Anyway, the date of the temple fair cannot be changed because the sixth day of the sixth lunar month is Cui Fujun's birthday [10].

D. Ancient Temple Fair in Yangwang Town, Xinjiang County, on the second day of the second lunar month This is the largest and most recognized as the original and authentic folk temple fair in Xinjiang County. The Jiyi Temple, dedicated to the three saints of agriculture, Bo Yi, Hou Ji and Da Yu, still contains murals of Chinese farming civilization, which are rarely-seen in China. Directly opposite the temple is a theatre stage. The fair is held on the second day of the second lunar month, the Dragon Head-raising Day. This is the time when spring is in full bloom and every life is starting to revive. There is a common saying that "On the second day of the second month, the Dragon raises its head. Plentiful rainfall will come, and the warehouses will be full of grains." The Yangwang temple fair has been held for thousands of years, forming a unique folk custom in the area., which contributed a lot to the nourishment of the world-famous "Jiangzhou Drum Music". Many of traditional festivities performing items and visual folk art forms have also been added to the lists of provincial, municipal and county level "intangible cultural heritage". Since the temple fair was upgraded to the Xinjiang Yangwang Folk Culture Festival in 2016, it has become even larger in scale. Every year, on the second day of February, the main street of Yangwang town, which is only two kilometers long, is filled with tens of thousands of people. Traditional festivities are hosted in turn by several villages in Yangwang town : Nantou, Beitou, Suyang and Beichi villages, which all put on their grand finale to do the best. On the second day of February, the fair begins with the worship of Bo Yi, Hou Ji and Da Yu, the ancestors of Chinese agricultural civilization, followed by folk performance of about four hours, and a local opera show. There are stilt-walking, lions and dragon lanterns, drum carts, and fireworks. Many people from neighbouring counties come to watch the celebrations, and villagers in the surrounding villages nearly all gather in Yangwang Town for the occasion. This is the carnival of Yangwang people. There is a jingle in Xinjiang County: "I would rather delay the farming work for one day rather than missing February the Second Temple Fair of Yangwang." The enthusiasm and commitment of the performers were so attractive and entertaining that viewers often forget that they are ordinary villagers, but completely high level folk artists.

The fifth annual Yangwang Folk Culture Festival was held on February 21, 2023 (the second day of the second lunar month) in and around the Jiyi Temple. In the courtyard of the Temple, villagers sacrificed to the three agricultural saints with incense-burning, local opera and different types of folk entertainments. An oversized incense burner was set up directly outside the temple gate in the courtyard, with oversized candles and tall incenses burning. On the stage

opposite the main hall a local opera was on by the Xia County Pu Opera Troupe. In the snack street, red lanterns are hanging high, and there are banners everywhere that read “On February the second, the dragon raises its head.” “Welcome to Yangwang for the temple fair.” The two-kilometer long main street of Yangwang Town, just outside the Jiye Temple, is the venue for the Temple Fair. The performances range from traditional theatrical Taige (themed in traditional legendary stories such as Bao Lian Lantern, Heavenly Maiden and The Monkey King etc) to modern women’s marching band shows, all performed by the people of Yangwang town. The front of the horse-drawn drum cart is decorated with a large portrait of General Secretary Xi Jinping and the side of it is decorated with a large paper-cut of Chang’e Running to the Moon, the work of Madame Duan Pengzhe, a local paper cutting expert. On the side of the street, the sugar figure makers are in festive Tang costumes... The two-kilometer long street had become an ocean of happiness with performers and viewers together.

The author visited Yangwang Town once again during summer vacation in 2023, and interviewed Mr. Yang, the gatekeeper of Jiye Temple. The elderly gentleman was still sharp in thought though he was well over the age of eighty. He was very knowledgeable among his peers in the town because he had received good education and been to many places in his early years. He often volunteered to introduce the murals to the guests visiting the temple. What he was most proud of was still the temple fair here. After introducing the murals in the temple, he always remembers to tell the visitors: Don’t forget to come back here on the second day of lunar February to watch our temple fair, since it is so exciting that you will remember it forever ^[11].

3. New changes of traditional festivities and temple fairs from the perspective of revitalizing rural China

The Opinions on Implementing Rural Revitalization Strategy states that the construction of rural culture should be carried out in the following four aspects: ideological and moral construction; inheritance and development of excellent traditional culture in rural areas; building public culture for the masses; and the implementation of actions to change customs and traditions. From the survey conducted in Xinjiang County, we found that traditional festivities and temple fairs have received widespread support from the public. As Professor Duan Youwen, a well-known folklorist in Shanxi Province, pointed out, “Folk culture that the people are familiar with is more likely to help them to form a sense of affinity and identity, which is a good landing point for implementing the rural revitalization strategy” ^[12].

A. Spring festival traditional festivities and temple fairs in Xinjiang County for the rural cultural construction

The Spring Festival cultural activities in Xinjiang County are organized by all levels of governments, with villages and towns before or after the Spring Festival and the county government during the Lantern Festival. First of all, the timing is very suitable, as farmers are in the slack season, seasonal migrant workers are returning to their hometowns for Spring Festival, and high school and university students are on winter vacation, which makes it convenient to organize mass cultural activities. Secondly, because of the diverse composition of the people who participate in and watch traditional festivities, it is very conducive to the cultural activities that are absorbing the achievements of urban civilization and foreign culture while based on the present and traditional rural civilization, developing innovatively and enriching the forms on the basis of inheritance. The Spring

Festival traditional festivities in Dizhuang village and the Lantern Festival traditional festivities in Xinjiang County include many traditional fireworks programs: drums, yangko, land-boats, stilts, etc, as well as modern dances, songs, allegro and sketches. Performers vary from local farmers to university and high school students, professional performers from local arts groups and invited performers from other places.

Thirdly, the performances were on a wide range of subjects. Firstly, singing praises of the Party’s policy to enrich the people and the strategy of rural revitalization, such as the monologue “Talking about the new changes in Di Zhuang” performed by an octogenarian in the village, praising that villagers now have infrastructural facilities: central heating in winter, running tap water supply and flats, etc. Secondly, showcasing the construction achievements of rural revitalization, such as The Disciple’s Rules(《弟子规》) float from Zhouzhuang village, which shows people the Confucious cultural charm of the township focusing on The Disciple’s Rules. In addition, there were also elegant art performances, such as the young coloratura soprano singing and fancy violin playing invited to the 36 years old peer party in Beidong village, the Town of Beizhang. The well-deserved protagonists are the drum performances, with various drum types, such as military drums and flower drums, etc coming together.

Fourthly, the rehearsals and performing competitions have fully mobilized people’s enthusiasm to participate, helping to change the old custom of “women busy preparing festival food to treat friends and relatives, while men gathering together to play mahjong and gamble” around the Spring Festival period in the past. During the survey, the author had a chat with a man surnamed Zhang from Di Zhuang village, who was about 60 years old, known as a keen mahjong player and alcoholic in the village. He says he has been helping to organize and rehearse the Spring Festival festivities for the past two years, forgetting about mahjong for gambling or drinking for fear of delaying the rehearsals. The middle-aged women, on the other hand, are able to free themselves from their endless domestic chores and take an active part in the festivities: playing flower drums, doing the Yangko dance, running land-boats, etc.

B. The current situation of traditional temple fairs in Xinjiang County

In recent years, traditional folklore has returned to the forefront and temple fairs gradually have emerged across Shanxi province, attracting hundreds of thousands of people to attend. Historically, there were many temples in Xinjiang County and temple fairs flourished, so the recovery was relatively rapid than in other areas. There are now more than a hundred temple fairs in the county with fixed dates, the dates coming from the birth, enlightenment or death of the deities being worshipped. There are many kinds of folk gods, including Confucius, Guan Yu, Bo Yi, Houji, Jade Emperor, God of Mount Tai, God of Wealth, City God, God of the Land, etc. The number of people directly or indirectly involved in temple activities in the county is over 150,000. The temple fairs have become a beautiful sight in Xinjiang. In Xinjiang County, with a population of just over 300,000, the number of participants, activities, scope, and spontaneity of the masses in temple fair far exceed those of other cultural activities. Under the strategy of rural revitalization and the new situation of building advanced socialist culture, the phenomenon of temple fair culture renaissance is well worthy of our conscious consideration. From the point of view of historical evolution, temple fair activities are mostly

associated with religious beliefs. The most influential and well-attended temple fair in Yangwang Town, Xinjiang County, is dedicated to Houji, Bo Yi, the originators of farming civilization and the hero of water harness, Dayu, because people have longed for good weather for the crops and a bumper harvest. In ancient agricultural societies, which were extremely backward in terms of science and technology, it was very difficult to acquire the water, fire, earth needed for production and planting and breeding techniques, so people wished to obtain the blessings, wisdom and strength of the sages and philosophers who had contributed to agriculture or had successfully transformed the natural environment through rituals. At the annual temple fair, people pay incense to the gods, watch operas and temple fair performances at the 1,000-year-old Jiyi Temple, praying for fair weather, good harvests and a prosperous country and welcoming the start of a new year of farming.

For thousands of years the Jiyi Temple Fair has maintained enduring popularity, with tens of thousands of participants, and has become a day of revelry. Nowadays, the Xinjiang County Government has grafted and upgraded it into the “Xinjiang County Folk Culture Festival”, making it an exhibition of folk art in southern Shanxi. The Water Goddess

Temple Fair located in the Gushui basin, which can irrigate the farmland of 20 surrounding villages, is another important and popular temple fair in Xinjiang County. The temple was established in Gudui village in the Northern Song Dynasty to worship the goddess of water, Fu Hui, who is believed to have irrigated the fields to benefit the people (legend has it that she was a woman surnamed Hu from Fengguzhuang village at the source of Gushui). The fair is hosted by each village benefiting from Gushui in rotation of one day each year on Ching Ming Festival, April 18, August 24 and November 24, with the Ching Ming Festival being the grandest of all. On the day of the temple fair, apart from praying to the Water Goddess in the temple, traditional festivities, dominated by drum music, of all the villages will be performed in front of the temple. In addition, on the 24th of August and the 24th of November, the temple fairs include a Puzhou opera. to thank the gods of water. The fair covers a wide range of all villages in the Gushui valley.

According to incomplete statistics of Xinjiang County Bureau of Culture and Tourism, the number of recovered temple fairs in different places in Xinjiang area exceeds one hundred. Only in in March of Chinese Lunar Calendar, there are so many temple fairs in the county as shown in the table.

Table 1

Time	Name of the temple fair	Venue	Type
March 3	Sanquan temple fair	The town of Sanquan	folk
	Medicine God temple fair	The county town	Medicine industry
March 8	Saint mother's Fair	The county town	folk
	God of money temple fair	Guangcun Village	
	Taishan temple fair	Wuping village	
	Xizhuang Temple fair	Xizhuang village	
March 10	Niangniang temple fair	The town of Gujiao	folk
March 13	Ze Zhang temple fair	The town of Ze Zhang	folk
March 15	God of earth and Dragon God temple fair	The County town	folk
	Taishan temple fair	Zhaocun village	
	Ze Zhang ancient temple	Ze Zhang village	
March 17	Cheguan temple fair	Dongyu village	folk
	Jiushe temple fair	Diantou village	
March 18	Xixing zhuang temple fair	Xixing village	folk
	Wulinghuang god of money	Wuling village	
	Ningning temple fair	Xiangjia village	
	Jade emperor temple	Danie village	
March 21	Three emperors' Fair	The county town	folk
	Xicun temple fair	Xicun village	
March 22	Village temple	South and nother xingzhuang villages	folk
March 25	Dongyue temple fair	The county town	folk
	Taishan temple fair	Town of liuquan	
	Dongyue temple fair	Guangcun village	
	Sanquan temple fair	Town of Sanquan	
	Dongyue temple fair	Town of Beizhuang	
Late March or early April	Yellow emperor temple fair	The county town	Sewing industry
	Holy mother temple fair	Gudui village	folk

C. The development and enhancement of traditional culture

The governments at all levels in Xinjiang County have seized the opportunity of rural revitalization and provided scientific guidance to the cultural activities of rural festivals and ancient temple fairs, which to a certain extent has facilitated the cultivation of the development mechanism of excellent Chinese traditional arts in the countryside. For example, the

famous “Jiangzhou Drum Music”, which is considered to be a living traditional folk art, has embarked on the path of industrial development thanks to the nourishment of this traditional cultural soil.^[13] There are now more than a dozen Jiangzhou drum groups active in interpretation venues around the world and across the country. Countless other drum performing groups are active at festivals and temple fairs, commercial celebrations, weddings and funerals in Xinjiang

County as well as in surrounding counties. The larger temple fairs in Xinjiang County always invite theatre troupes to perform Puzhou opera, as do temple fairs elsewhere in Shanxi, which is the “hometown of opera”. According to folklorist Duan Youwen, a professor of Shanxi University, there are many famous plays in Shanxi, but they are all facing the challenge of a shrinking market and audience. If temple fairs give young people a platform to learn and appreciate opera, it will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the transmission and inheritance of opera culture^[14]. In addition to drumming and opera performances, the traditional festivities and temple fairs also feature a variety of intangible folk arts: shadow puppets, puppets, dough figurines and paper-cutting, all of which are useful additions to village culture. The temple fair brings traditional performing arts back into the public view, while these intangible items enhance the traditional cultural content and maintain its longevity.

4. Conclusion

The reconstruction of village cultural revitalization system needs resources and a suitable ecological space. The traditional festival activities and temple fairs are ready-made resources for the local people since they are very familiar with them. And of course different types of modern culture from the cities and even other countries can be utilized for references. However, a suitable ecological space is needed for the rescue, protection, transformative development of the outstanding Chinese traditional culture, and its scientific reconstruction should be based on the original and natural eco-system of the rural culture, containing traditional festivities and the related folk art activities such as drum music, opera, shadow puppets, acrobatics, etc., which had functioned as the national cultural carriers for thousands of years.

Following this, the value of traditional folk art is reconceptualized, artistic creation teams are cultivated, and a new hardware and software environment for the development of outstanding Chinese traditional art is laid out^[15]. As a museum of folk art activities, traditional festivities and temple fairs in Xinjiang County are the original natural rural cultural carrier and environment as highlighted in the **Opinions**. For traditional festivities, governments at all levels in Xinjiang County try to steer them onto the path of innovative, green and harmonious development^[16]. For temple fairs, Xinjiang County has also integrated them into a folk culture festival. It is worth noting that the Xinjiang County government and the general public should make further efforts to combine the traditional concepts of virtue, faith, loyalty, filial piety, righteousness, goodness and love in the temple fair culture with the core socialist values, and to remove the crude and the false and extract the refined and the true. For example, guiding the people, either villagers who have not received adequate education or young people who do not know much about the historical and cultural background of traditional celebrations of temple fairs, to learn more about Excellent traditional Chinese culture; promoting the use of environmentally friendly materials instead of burning incense and paper money, which pollutes the environment, and the prevention of some people from promoting superstitious ideas and practicing deception at temple fairs; or using the traditional cultural heritage as carriers to spread advanced socialist culture or outstanding culture from other countries etc. In short, emphasis should be placed on promoting the excellent historical and cultural components of the temple fairs, and guiding the public to understand historical and cultural knowledge and improve

their scientific literacy. As an important part of the rural public cultural ecosystem, the holding of temple fairs cultivates a large number of local vernacular cultural talents, attracts people from all walks of life to join the construction of rural culture and improves the rural cultural ecosystem. “To find the soul of the countryside with culture and to promote cultural revitalization of the countryside in a comprehensive manner^[17].”

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