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Cultural continuity through change in a rural heritage town: Practice-generative cultural resilience in Youbu, China

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Abstract

Heritage conservation, public representation and tourism can preserve material evidence and increase cultural visibility without establishing whether everyday cultural practices continue to be produced. This study examines how an already existing everyday practice in Youbu Ancient Town, China, continued and changed as conservation, photography-based representation and tourism altered the conditions under which it operated over time. Using a longitudinal qualitative single-case design, the study reconstructs developments from 2009 to 2026 through planning archives, dated documentary and visual materials, repeated field observation, within-case temporal and spatial comparison, and abductive analysis. Morning tea remained a modest but operative everyday practice before its later public and tourism prominence. Conservation maintained an important material setting, while photography contributed to the public legibility of everyday street life. Later visitor participation and demand developed around a practice that was already in operation. As participation expanded, products, modes of presentation, patterns of participation, temporal rhythms and spatial use changed substantially, while food preparation, tea service and street-based social use continued. Tourism-related change was also spatially differentiated, with adjacent areas accommodating a different mix of accommodation and leisure uses. These findings show that material persistence, public visibility and tourism growth are not equivalent to living cultural resilience. The study develops practice-generative cultural resilience (PGCR) as a middle-range explanation for how an already operative cultural practice can reorganise under changing conditions while retaining the relations required for recurrent production and use. For heritage planning, this directs attention to the conditions and later trajectories through which living cultural practices continue, alongside conserved forms and visible outcomes.

1. Introduction

Cultural promotion and tourism development can produce highly visible change in rural heritage settlements. Historic buildings and streets may be conserved, cultural venues and events introduced, local histories circulated through exhibitions, photography and place branding, and increasing visitor flows may bring new uses and economic activity. These outcomes are often taken as signs of heritage vitality, yet they describe different forms of continuity. Conserved fabric records the persistence of material evidence; public narratives and images indicate recognition and circulation; tourism growth shows expanding attention and use. None establishes by itself that the cultural activities associated with a place continue in everyday life. Material settings may survive while former uses disappear, and culturally recognisable images may remain in circulation after the activities they depict have changed. Everyday practices, conversely, may continue while their participants, products or outward forms alter. Material persistence, representational visibility and the continuation of lived cultural activity are therefore related but analytically distinct outcomes in rural heritage change (Ginzarly et al. 2019; Göçer et al. 2024).

Resilience research allows continuity to involve adaptation and reorganisation rather than restoration of an earlier condition (Holling 1973; Carpenter et al. 2001; Walker et al. 2004; Folke 2006). Applied to

culture, this position shifts attention from formal stability towards what remains consequentially continuous as cultural forms, meanings and practices change (Holtorf 2018). Living- and everyday-heritage research similarly locates cultural continuity in recurrent enactment, use and recreation, including ordinary practices that may precede formal heritage recognition (UNESCO 2003; Poulios 2014; Liu and Schofield 2026). Rural cultural-production research further shows how local histories and identities remain active through situated cultural work and social relations (Beel et al. 2017). Practice and use are therefore well established as important dimensions of living cultural continuity, but less is known about how an activity already embedded in everyday life continues when the conditions under which it operates change over time. The persistence of a recognisable cultural form does not reveal whether the activity and relationships that previously sustained it remain active, while visible formal change does not necessarily indicate that those relations have disappeared.

Rural heritage settlements bring these issues together because conservation, public representation and tourism often develop over overlapping time frames. Conservation and planning alter material and institutional settings; photography, exhibitions and place branding change what becomes publicly visible; tourism introduces new users, demand and patterns of spatial and temporal use (Harrison 2013; Ginzarly et al. 2019; Qu and Zollet 2023). These processes rarely occur as isolated episodes. Earlier arrangements may remain in place while new forms of representation and tourism activity accumulate around them. A cross-sectional observation can consequently show that a heritage place is conserved, visible and heavily visited without revealing whether a cultural practice preceded those changes, emerged through them, or continued by adapting to them. Longitudinal evidence is needed to establish what was already operating before later changes became influential and how that practice developed as new conditions accumulated over time.

Youbu Ancient Town in Zhejiang Province, China, allows these relationships to be followed over an extended period. A conservation plan prepared in 2009 provides an early systematic material and spatial record of the historic settlement. Photography-related activity became increasingly organised from around 2013 and subsequently contributed to the wider public visibility of the town and its everyday street life. Morning tea, however, was already present on a modest scale as part of local everyday life before its later prominence in cultural promotion and tourism. Later branding, visitor growth and tourism-oriented business development were accompanied by broader visitor participation, greater demand and changing patterns of spatial and temporal use. Between 2009 and 2026, these processes overlapped rather than forming a simple sequence of replacement. A longitudinal qualitative single-case design is used to reconstruct these overlapping developments and follow morning tea before and through substantial changes in its material, representational and tourism environment.

This study asks: How did an already existing everyday cultural practice in Youbu continue and change as conservation, public representation and tourism altered the conditions under which it operated over time? The analysis examines the character and continuity of morning tea before its wider public and tourism prominence, the changes in its material and social environment associated with conservation, representation and expanding tourism, and subsequent shifts in participation, products, temporal

rhythms and spatial organisation. Drawing on longitudinal documentary, visual and field evidence, the study distinguishes the persistence of material and representational heritage from the continued operation of living cultural activity and follows how later recognition and demand became connected to a practice that was already in use. The analysis develops practice-generative cultural resilience (PGCR) as a middle-range explanation of how an already operative cultural practice can remain culturally productive while reorganising under changing conditions. For heritage planning, it highlights the conditions that allow living practices to continue and the importance of following their trajectories beyond visible conservation and tourism outcomes.

2. Conceptual foundations: cultural resilience, living practice and continuity through change

2.1 Resilience as continuity through change and reorganisation

Resilience does not necessarily require a return to an earlier condition. Although early formulations often emphasised resistance to disturbance and recovery, ecological and social–ecological resilience broadened the concept towards the capacity to absorb change, adapt and reorganise while consequential functions and relationships remain operative (Holling 1973; Walker et al. 2004; Folke 2006). Persistence can therefore involve substantial internal change. A system may alter its organisation, practices or relationships while retaining the capacities through which it continues to function. More extensive transformation may also occur under changing conditions. Adaptation and transformation represent different responses to change; greater change does not necessarily indicate greater resilience (Folke 2006).

Change alone is not sufficient evidence of resilience. A new configuration may emerge through successful adjustment, but it may also reflect the weakening or replacement of the process previously under analysis. Where functions, relationships or capacities central to that process continue in altered form, reorganisation may be compatible with resilience; where change makes those relations unnecessary or replaces the process through which continuity was previously maintained, the resulting configuration represents a different trajectory. The relevant question is which functions, relationships or capacities remain consequential as the system changes. Similar conditions observed at a single point in time may have resulted from recovery, gradual adaptation, reorganisation or the replacement of an earlier process. A favourable or stable present condition consequently reveals little about resilience unless the trajectory through which it developed is also known (Carpenter et al. 2001).

Resilience is both process-specific and temporal. Carpenter et al. (2001) framed this requirement as “resilience of what, to what?”, directing attention to the system or process being followed and to the changing conditions it encounters. The interpretation also depends on the period over which continuity and change are assessed. This applies to gradual and cumulative change as well as to discrete disturbances, because new conditions may emerge while earlier arrangements remain active.

Longitudinal analysis is needed to distinguish what was already operating from what later changed and to follow which functions, relationships or capacities remained operative through that trajectory. In cultural settings, however, the focal object of continuity is less self-evident because recognisable forms may remain after the processes through which they were produced have changed.

2.2 Cultural resilience: specifying continuity under change

Applying resilience thinking to culture means that continuity cannot be equated with the unchanged survival of inherited forms. Cultural meanings, practices and identities may persist through adaptation, reinterpretation and renewal rather than through exact replication of an earlier condition (Holtorf 2018). Research on rural community heritage similarly shows that cultural continuity is actively maintained through cultural work, participation and social relationships rather than secured by the survival of cultural assets alone (Beel et al. 2017). The central question is what must remain consequentially continuous as cultural forms and conditions change.

This question is difficult because culture is constituted through multiple dimensions that may change at different rates and in different directions. Material forms may persist while their former uses disappear; practical knowledge may remain in use while outward expression changes; institutions and public narratives may continue while the activities with which they were originally associated become less recurrent; and a cultural label may gain visibility even as patterns of participation or cultural functions shift substantially. Material forms, practices, knowledge, meanings, institutions and social relationships cannot therefore be treated as equivalent evidence of cultural continuity. A recognisable cultural form may persist without demonstrating that the process through which it was previously produced remains active, while substantial formal change may occur without necessarily implying the disappearance of that process.

Existing applications of cultural resilience reflect this diversity in analytical objects and criteria. Some studies incorporate culture as one dimension within broader assessments of rural or community resilience, while others focus more directly on community heritage production, participatory biocultural assessment or changes in cultural landscapes (Beel et al. 2017; Lee et al. 2020; Arnaiz-Schmitz et al. 2023; Zhou and Gu 2025). These studies vary substantially in the cultural objects examined and in the evidence used to identify resilience. No single criterion can therefore determine consequential continuity across cultural settings.

For a living cultural process, the analytical problem differs from assessing a resilience score, a landscape condition or a single recognised heritage attribute. Existing approaches do not necessarily follow a particular cultural activity through successive changes in the conditions under which it is enacted. The unresolved issue is whether continuity reflects the reorganisation of an ongoing practice or the persistence of recognisable forms after the activity and relationships that sustained them have been displaced.

2.3 Living and everyday heritage: continuity through practice

Living-heritage scholarship locates cultural continuity in ongoing enactment, use, transmission and recreation rather than in the unchanged survival of cultural content. The 2003 UNESCO Convention emphasises that intangible cultural heritage is continually recreated in relation to changing social and environmental conditions, while living-heritage approaches similarly place practitioners, use and continuing cultural associations within the processes through which heritage remains meaningful (UNESCO 2003; Poulios 2014). Continuity can therefore be maintained through repeated cultural activity even as its forms, meanings and patterns of participation change over time (Liu and Schofield 2026). The focus is on the processes through which culture continues to be enacted and used.

Everyday-heritage research extends this attention to ordinary places and recurrent activities whose cultural significance develops through routine use, social engagement and their relationship with local histories (Ireland et al. 2025). Rural cultural-production research makes a related point by showing how local histories and identities are sustained through situated cultural work and social relationships rather than inherited solely as fixed assets (Beel et al. 2017). Everydayness alone does not make an activity heritage. Culturally meaningful continuity may nevertheless be embedded in recurrent and socially situated activity before formal designation or wider public recognition occurs.

Such practices are relational, socio-material and temporally organised. They depend on people, practical knowledge and social interaction, together with the material settings in which activity is carried out. Knowledge remains culturally consequential through its use in practice, while buildings, streets and other material settings can enable activity and retain evidence of earlier cultural life. These settings are more than passive containers, although their physical persistence is not equivalent to the continuation of the practices they accommodate. Recurrent activity also depends on temporal organisation. Daily, seasonal or event-based rhythms coordinate when particular forms of production, participation and social use take place. Living cultural continuity depends on the relations among recurrent activity, practical knowledge, participation and the settings in which they occur.

Recurrent practice provides observable evidence of living cultural continuity, but recurrence alone does not establish resilience. A practice may continue for a long period under relatively stable conditions without showing how it responds to change. Its products, patterns of participation, meanings and modes of use may also alter substantially while recurrent activity continues. Resilience becomes an empirical question when the conditions under which the practice operates begin to change.

2.4 Changing conditions of living cultural practice: conservation, representation and tourism

Living cultural practices operate within changing material, institutional, social and economic conditions. In heritage settings, conservation and planning, public representation and tourism alter different aspects

of this environment. Their cultural significance depends on how existing practice continues, adjusts or is displaced as these conditions change.

Conservation and planning primarily reshape the material and institutional conditions within which cultural activity takes place. The protection and repair of historic buildings, regulation of streets and public spaces, and allocation of functions can retain historical evidence while influencing the settings available for subsequent use (Ginzarly et al. 2019). Planning also translates complex cultural environments into forms that can be documented and managed, including inventories, designated sites, categories, functions, zones and regulatory controls. Such instruments make some cultural dimensions more operationally legible than others. Conserved buildings and streets may therefore provide important conditions for later cultural activity, but their persistence does not determine which practices will subsequently occupy those settings or how they will develop.

Public representation alters the visibility and circulation of cultural activity. Photography, exhibitions, festivals, heritage interpretation and place branding select and circulate particular people, activities and settings within broader cultural narratives (Smith 2006; Luo and Coomans 2026). These forms of representation can extend the social reach of activities previously embedded in ordinary local life and connect them with wider audiences and institutions. Public recognition shows what has become visible and interpretable to wider audiences, but it does not establish whether the represented activity continues in everyday use.

Tourism alters the user base and operating environment of cultural practice by introducing new users, demand, commercial activity and different patterns of spatial and temporal use (Qu and Zollet 2023; Göçer et al. 2024). Existing practices may consequently expand, adjust their products and services, accommodate different rhythms of participation, or lose some of their previous functions. These trajectories cannot be inferred from visitor growth alone. The issue is how a practice already in operation changes as new users and demand enter the setting in which it is produced and used.

These processes often overlap rather than occur as separate stages. Conserved settings may remain in use while public representation expands and tourism changes the scale, user base and spatial organisation of cultural activity. Their significance for cultural resilience depends on whether an already operative practice continues, changes or becomes displaced as these conditions accumulate over time.

3. Research design and methods

3.1 Research design and case selection

A theory-elaborating longitudinal qualitative single-case design was used to examine how an existing everyday cultural practice continued and changed as the conditions surrounding it developed over time. A longitudinal case design allows activities and relationships already in place to be distinguished from changes that emerge later (Pettigrew 1990; Yin 2018). Youbu Ancient Town constitutes the case setting, while morning-tea practice is the focal cultural process followed through time. Conservation and

planning, photography-based public representation and tourism development are examined as changing conditions surrounding that practice.

Youbu was selected because it allowed an established everyday practice to be traced before and through later heritage and tourism development within the same settlement. The 2009 conservation plan provides an early systematic record of the historic town's material and spatial condition. Photography-related activities became increasingly organised from around 2013 and subsequently acquired a continuing institutional and representational presence. Morning tea predated this wider public recognition and remained part of everyday street life before its later tourism prominence. Branding, visitor growth and tourism-oriented businesses developed later and were accompanied by changes in users, demand and patterns of spatial use. These processes overlapped for much of the period rather than occurring as separate phases, allowing the changing position of morning tea within the same settlement to be traced over time.

The principal analytical period extends from 2009 to 20 May 2026. The 2009 planning process and associated historical and spatial survey provide the earliest consistent baseline. Earlier material is used where necessary to establish the historical context of the settlement and longstanding local practices, but the longitudinal reconstruction itself begins in 2009. Spatial analysis is limited to the historic settlement represented in the planning archive rather than the wider administrative territory of Youbu Town. It covers the core morning-tea street, photography-related venues and cultural spaces, and adjacent areas where accommodation and leisure uses subsequently became more prominent. Individual buildings and businesses are included where dated evidence allows material or functional change to be followed. Figure 1 shows the location of Youbu and the main areas included in the analysis.

Temporal and spatial comparison were used within this case. The temporal comparison follows morning tea from its earlier local operation through later changes in public recognition, visitor use and tourism demand. The spatial comparison focuses on the core morning-tea street and adjacent tourism-oriented areas, which share the wider heritage-tourism context but differ in their earlier patterns of use.

3.2 Evidence base and longitudinal reconstruction

The longitudinal reconstruction combines the 2009 conservation-planning archive, dated documentary and visual records of later cultural and tourism-related developments, and repeated field documentation from 2024 to 20 May 2026. The planning archive provides the earliest systematic material and spatial reference used in the study. Subsequent documentary sources extend the chronology across later institutional, representational and tourism developments, while repeated field observation provides more detailed evidence of recent practice and spatial use. Evidence is therefore denser for the later part of the study period, whereas earlier phases are reconstructed primarily from dated archival, institutional and visual records.

The 2009 conservation-planning text and its accompanying drawings were examined as an integrated documentary archive (Bowen 2009). They record the historic settlement structure, buildings, streets and

lanes, waterways, bridges and other sites considered during planning, together with building characteristics, existing uses and historical and cultural references. The archive establishes what was documented, classified and proposed in 2009; later material and functional conditions were traced through subsequent dated evidence. Government and institutional records, project and venue documentation, photography- and event-related materials, published media, promotional materials and available visitor statistics were used to reconstruct later developments. Institutional and event records were used to trace the timing and continued occurrence of organised cultural activities. Photography, media and promotional materials documented changes in public representation, while public records and visitor statistics provided evidence of the timing and scale of tourism expansion.

Repeated field observation provided detailed evidence of the recent operation and changing use of cultural practice and space. Materials retained from 2024 to May 2026 include dated photographs, observation notes and records of shop activity, preparation and service, street use and operating conditions. Observation focused on food preparation and tea service, eating and tea drinking, social use of the street, use of shopfronts and adjoining street space, changes in products and presentation, and differences between the core morning-tea street and adjacent tourism-oriented areas. Visits included ordinary weekdays, weekends and holiday periods and covered different parts of the day, allowing temporal patterns of practice and spatial use to be compared. Historical and publicly circulated photographs were examined as records of representation, while field photographs documented directly observed recent activities and spatial conditions. Informal conversations during field visits were used selectively to clarify specific operating histories, business backgrounds and patterns of use and were not treated as a formal interview dataset.

Dated materials were organised chronologically following a process-oriented approach to temporal analysis (Langley 1999). Records referring to the same development were compared where more than one dated source was available. Planning arrangements, photography-related institutions, everyday cultural activity and tourism development often remained active at the same time, so periods of overlap were retained rather than divided into discrete intervention stages.

3.3 Longitudinal process analysis and abductive interpretation

The analysis combined longitudinal process reconstruction with abductive reasoning. Concepts from resilience, cultural resilience and living-heritage research were used as sensitising concepts to focus attention on continuity and change, recurrent cultural activity and the conditions under which practice took place. They directed analytical attention without fixing categories or conclusions in advance.

Dated evidence was first used to establish the cultural activities and patterns of use that preceded wider public recognition and tourism growth. The chronology then traced changes associated with conservation and planning, organised photography and public representation, branding and tourism development, including the periods in which these processes overlapped. The chronology established whether morning tea was already present before it became more publicly visible or tourism-oriented.

Temporal ordering was used to identify sequence and overlap, while causal interpretation was made only where the available evidence supported more than chronological association.

Continuity and change within morning-tea practice were examined through observable aspects of its operation. These included food preparation and tea service, participation and social use, products and modes of presentation, temporal rhythms and spatial organisation. Changes in these aspects were compared across the longitudinal record without treating formal stability as the criterion of continuity. The core morning-tea street was also compared with adjacent tourism-oriented areas. Both were subject to the wider development of heritage tourism in Youbu, but their earlier patterns of use differed, allowing subsequent functional, temporal and spatial changes to be examined within the same settlement.

Patterns in the longitudinal evidence were interpreted abductively in relation to existing accounts of resilience, cultural continuity and living heritage (Dubois and Gadde 2002). Where material persistence, public visibility or formal continuity did not adequately explain the observed trajectory, the interpretation was revised through repeated comparison between the empirical record and relevant literature. PGCR was formulated from this abductive comparison to explain how an already operative cultural practice could remain active while undergoing reorganisation under changing conditions.

3.4 Evidence boundaries and analytical scope

The 2009–2026 trajectory was reconstructed retrospectively from evidence of uneven temporal density. Earlier phases were reconstructed mainly from dated archival, institutional and visual records, whereas the 2024–2026 period was documented more densely through repeated field observation. Temporal claims were limited to sequences, continuities and changes supported by the available evidence. Interpretations were kept within the evidential range of each source, and actor motivations or social relationships were considered only where directly supported. One author’s prior professional familiarity with Youbu assisted in identifying relevant sites and contextual materials but was not used as evidence.

The single-case design supports analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Yin 2018). The case examines how an already operative cultural practice changes as public recognition, tourism demand and conditions of use develop over time. The wider relevance of these relationships requires comparison with heritage settings that differ in their cultural practices, prior patterns of use and development conditions.

4. Findings

4.1 Material preservation and the spatialisation of local culture

The 2009 conservation-planning process provides the earliest systematic material and spatial baseline for this study. The archive documented the historic settlement at the scale of individual buildings, streets and lanes, waterways, bridges and other historic spaces. Building records distinguished age, structure,

physical condition, use and property status, while more detailed surveys recorded constructional forms, spatial arrangements and architectural features. Buildings from the Qing and Republican periods, the mid-twentieth century and more recent decades were differentiated rather than subsumed within an undifferentiated historic townscape. These records informed conservation classification, repair requirements, protection boundaries, development control and design guidance, providing a detailed account of the physical environment documented at the beginning of the study period.

The archive also recorded local cultural activities and references. Existing commercial and service functions were identified along Zhongshan Street, while historical narratives, religious references, craft and folk traditions and other intangible cultural content appeared within the wider planning scheme. Histories and legends associated with bridges were connected to particular sites; Baoziting was associated with local wedding culture; Buddhist references were linked to a temple site; and commercial, craft and folk traditions were incorporated into proposed functions, thematic spaces, display areas and visitor routes. Local culture was thus present within the planning record, but much of it entered the plan through spatially identifiable sites, functions, themes and routes.

Material and living cultural elements differed in depth and form of their documentation. Buildings and historic spaces could be located individually, dated, classified, assessed and linked to specific conservation or design measures. Existing businesses, uses and property conditions were also mapped, while intangible cultural references were associated with particular sites and anticipated functions. The archive provided less systematic information on who participated in recurrent cultural activities, how frequently those activities occurred, and how their operation changed over time. Later visual comparison showed that the exterior of at least one building documented as mid-twentieth-century in 2009 had been remodelled, and appeared more closely aligned with the older surrounding streetscape, making its documented chronological distinction less visually legible. Subsequent conservation and environmental works retained and modified many of the buildings, streets, waterways and public spaces recorded in 2009. These retained and modified spaces formed the physical setting in which photography-related activity, morning-tea use and later tourism development subsequently occurred.

4.2 Morning tea before its public expansion

Morning tea in Youbu predates its later cultural and tourism promotion. Earlier accounts associate eating, tea drinking, trading and social interaction with the town’s commercial and river-based street life along the old streets. By around 2015, however, morning tea was modest in scale and concentrated among a relatively narrow group of regular users. Records from this period document four small tea and breakfast businesses associated with the morning street economy: one mainly serving tea, two primarily serving breakfast, and one providing both breakfast and tea. The same records indicate that regular customers were predominantly local residents over the age of 50, while younger residents were rarely observed. Despite its limited scale, morning tea remained a regular part of the everyday morning use of the street.

The businesses operated through repeated preparation, service and consumption. Operators prepared ingredients before customers arrived, cooked breakfast foods, prepared tea and organised working and service spaces within a concentrated morning period. These activities required practical knowledge of ingredients, preparation, cooking, timing and service, which remained in use through routine operation. Regular customers returned to eat, drink tea and spend time in and around the businesses, providing recurrent demand for this small-scale activity. Food preparation, tea service and social use formed part of ordinary daily business and recurred with the morning trade.

Morning tea also had a distinct temporal and spatial organisation. Preparation began before the main period of customer activity, followed by several hours in which cooking, serving, eating and conversation occurred in close succession. Food preparation was concentrated within and immediately outside the small shops, while eating, waiting and social interaction frequently extended to shopfronts and the adjoining street. Limited interior space was supplemented by the street edge, which became part of the everyday operation of morning tea. This sequence of preparation, service and social use recurred within a recognisable morning rhythm even when the number of businesses and regular customers remained small.

Tea and breakfast businesses operated alongside a limited range of other small-scale productive, retail and service activities in the core street, including traditional barbering, bamboo work, metalworking, pastry making and wooden-toy sales. By the mid-2010s, these activities were modest in range and scale, but together they formed an ordinary commercial and service setting around the morning street. Morning tea remained embedded in this everyday setting before it acquired wider public and tourism prominence.

4.3 Photography and the public legibility of everyday life

Photography-related activity in Youbu became increasingly organised from around 2013. Lang Jingshan’s ancestral connection to the town provided an earlier local reference for photography, while subsequent exhibitions, events and photography-related venues gave the activity a more sustained public presence. By around 2016, photography had become more closely associated with local place development, and organised activities continued through the following years.

The content of these images also changed over time. Earlier photographs frequently emphasised historic streets, architectural façades and visually distinctive residents. Later materials increasingly included people within ordinary activities and spaces: working in small businesses, preparing or eating food, sitting and talking along the street, and using shops and public spaces. Historic buildings and streets remained prominent, but everyday activity became more visible within the representation of the town. People using the historic environment became increasingly prominent alongside the built setting.

Morning life became particularly visible within this broader pattern during the later 2010s. Photographs circulating around 2017–2018, including work by Zhang Baojin, showed tea drinking, breakfast consumption, food preparation and street-side interaction alongside the historic streetscape (Supplementary Table S1). These images provide a clear dated example of morning activity entering

wider photographic circulation. Similar content appeared across subsequent photography and promotional materials, indicating that the increased visibility of morning life developed through sustained photographic attention over several years. Morning tea was already present in local street life before becoming increasingly prominent in these circulated representations.

Photography-related activity continued after morning tea acquired greater prominence in tourism promotion. Events and venues remained active into the 2020s, including photography-related activities documented in 2022. Later photographic and promotional materials continued to depict residents, small businesses, food preparation, tea drinking and the social use of historic streets. Photography-related activity continued alongside the growing public profile of morning tea, and everyday morning life remained visible in representations of Youbu.

4.4 From public recognition to expanded participation and demand

By 2021, morning tea had also become an explicit component of Youbu's tourism framing. A municipal policy issued on 27 May 2021 linked the growing recognition of the morning-tea town with photography and a wider slow-life tourism agenda, alongside catering and other rural tourism activities. In December 2022, this orientation was expressed more directly in the slogan *Zaodian lai Youbu* ("Come to Youbu early"). In Chinese, *zaodian* refers both to breakfast foods and to arriving earlier. The slogan connected the timing of a visit with food preparation, tea drinking, eating and street-side social activity already associated with the morning period. Public promotion increasingly presented small teahouses, visible cooking, traditional foods, street-side seating and the historic street environment as parts of the same visitor experience. Promotion increasingly framed morning tea as part of spending time within the everyday atmosphere of the old street, alongside the consumption of food and tea.

Tourism expanded substantially as this identity became more prominent. During the May Day holiday in 2023, more than 20,000 visitors were reported on 30 April, while approximately 40,000 were expected on 1 May, prompting reservation-based controls and warnings of saturation in the historic core. A later Xinhua report recorded approximately 2.35 million visits to Youbu in 2023 and more than 2.33 million visits by 8 October 2024. These town-level figures cannot be attributed to morning tea alone, but they document the scale of tourism growth during the period in which morning tea had become a prominent visitor-facing cultural reference in Youbu.

Repeated field observations documented direct visitor use of the morning-tea setting during this period. Visitors observed in the core area commonly came to eat breakfast or snacks, drink tea and spend time in the relaxed street atmosphere associated with morning tea. They watched food being prepared, occupied tables and street-side seating, moved between small businesses and remained in the street for conversation and leisure. Some stayed for extended periods over tea and food. Younger visitors were particularly active in photographing the street, recording short videos and producing check-in content for online sharing. The user base was considerably broader than that documented before public expansion,

with visitors from surrounding areas and younger groups increasingly present alongside older local residents.

The temporal distribution of use also broadened. Older and middle-aged local residents generally arrived very early and often remained for considerable periods. Visitors from surrounding areas, particularly middle-aged groups, were commonly present from around 8:00–9:00 a.m., while younger visitors appeared throughout the morning and were especially noticeable from approximately 10:00 a.m. to noon. These groups overlapped rather than occupying fixed time periods. Some visitors arriving close to lunchtime continued to order tea and snacks and remained in the street, and substantial eating, tea drinking and social use continued through midday and into the afternoon. Activity declined more clearly after approximately 4:00 p.m. (see Supplementary Table S1). By the recent observation period, morning-tea use had extended well beyond its earlier concentrated morning pattern while retaining substantial activity during the morning itself.

4.5 Practice adaptation and spatially differentiated tourism change

Expanded visitor use was accompanied by visible changes in the products, presentation and service environment of the morning-tea street. Established tea and breakfast foods remained available, while new beverages and food products appeared alongside branded packaging, revised menus, altered shopfronts and more visitor-oriented retail displays. Health-oriented and fruit-based teas were among the newer additions, and some products marketed from the surrounding Lanxi area also entered the commercial setting. Field observations in 2025 and 2026 documented ingredients being prepared, food being steamed and fried, tea being served and customers being received within open-front businesses. Selected examples are shown in Supplementary Figure S1.

The spatial organisation of morning tea also changed as patterns of use expanded. Seating extended between shop interiors, frontages and the adjoining street, allowing eating, tea drinking and social interaction to occupy a wider area than the small interiors alone could accommodate. Temporary shelters and other small adjustments were used under changing weather conditions and different levels of demand. Preparation and service continued within this flexible arrangement of indoor, frontage and street space. The longer period of use coincided with more extensive use of shopfronts and adjoining street space.

The core morning-tea street continued to contain a mixture of tea and breakfast businesses and other small-scale productive, retail and service activities. Open-front food preparation, street-side eating and extended tea drinking remained prominent, while traditional barbering, metalworking, pastry making, handicrafts and other everyday services were still observed during the study period. Field investigation indicated a substantial continuing presence of locally operated businesses in the core street. Continuing food preparation and everyday services were observed alongside retail and presentation directed towards the broader visitor market.

Tourism-related change was more evident in accommodation and leisure uses in adjacent parts of the historic settlement. Guesthouses, cafés, small bars, book cafés and related leisure uses became more prominent outside the main morning-tea concentration, together with a wider range of visitor-oriented products and later-day activity. Photography-related themes also appeared in the reuse of some historic buildings as accommodation and cafés. Field investigation also indicated a greater presence of operators from outside Youbu among accommodation and leisure businesses in these areas. Recent tourism-related change was unevenly distributed across the historic settlement: food preparation, tea drinking and street-side social use remained concentrated in the morning-tea core, while accommodation, leisure and later-day visitor functions were more prominent in adjacent areas.

5. Discussion

5.1 What is resilient in living heritage? From persistence to cultural reproduction

The Youbu case contains several forms of cultural continuity, but they are not equivalent evidence of living cultural resilience. Historic buildings and streets have remained materially present through conservation and later physical intervention. Photography has continued through events, venues, institutional activity and the circulation of images. Morning tea, by contrast, has continued through repeated preparation, service, consumption and social use. Each form of continuity is culturally significant, but each describes a different process. Material survival records the persistence of the built environment, while representational continuity shows that particular cultural meanings and images remain publicly visible. Neither establishes on its own that the cultural activities associated with them continue to be produced and used. For living heritage, the question of “resilience of what?” centres on the recurrent cultural activity through which cultural life is enacted (Carpenter et al. 2001; Poulios 2014; Liu and Schofield 2026).

Cultural reproduction refers here to the recurrent production of culturally meaningful activity through practice, use and the relations that allow that activity to recur. In the case of morning tea, this involves food preparation and tea service, practical knowledge used in everyday work, repeated participation and social interaction, and the material and temporal settings within which these activities take place. Continuity does not require these elements to remain formally unchanged. Products, modes of presentation and patterns of participation and use may alter while the activity itself continues to be produced through recognisable relations of practice and use. Material settings and public representations remain important because they can enable, shape or express this process, but their persistence cannot substitute for evidence that living cultural activity remains active.

Recurrent cultural production establishes continuity, but continuity alone does not demonstrate resilience. A practice may persist for a long period under relatively stable conditions without revealing how it responds when its operating environment changes. Resilience becomes analytically relevant when changes in demand, participation, representation or spatial use alter the conditions under which cultural

activity is produced. The issue is then whether the practical and socio-material relations that sustain recurrent activity remain operative, disappear or are reorganised as those conditions change.

5.2 Morning tea before wider recognition and tourism expansion

Before morning tea acquired wider public visibility and tourism prominence, it already operated as part of everyday life in Youbu. Records from around 2015 identify four small tea and breakfast businesses: one primarily serving tea, two mainly providing breakfast, and one combining both. Their regular customers were predominantly local residents over the age of 50, while younger residents were only occasionally observed. The scale of activity was modest and its social reach relatively narrow, but food preparation, tea service and regular local use continued.

Its continuity depended on repeated production and everyday demand. Operators prepared food and tea as part of ordinary business, keeping practical knowledge in use through routine work. Regular customers returned to eat, drink tea and spend time around the morning street, giving the practice a recurrent social as well as commercial use. These activities followed a recognisable morning rhythm and remained connected to the small businesses and street spaces in which preparation, service and social interaction took place. Morning tea remained an activity repeatedly produced and used in everyday life.

The pre-expansion evidence establishes a practice that was limited in scale but already in operation before later branding, wider visitor demand and tourism-oriented development became influential. This continuity does not by itself establish resilience under the changes that followed. Later public recognition and tourism developed around a cultural practice that already had recurrent production, use and social participation in Youbu.

5.3 From public recognition to productive coupling

Photography expanded the public reach of morning life in Youbu before tourism demand grew substantially. As photographic activity became more organised, everyday morning activity became increasingly visible alongside the historic streetscape. Morning tea was already in operation before this representational expansion, but photography and later place promotion contributed to its wider public presence and closer association with the image of Youbu.

As visitor numbers increased, this wider audience also began to enter the morning-tea setting as users. Visitors purchased food and tea, occupied tables and street space, stayed to observe and socialise, and some photographed or recorded what they encountered. Visitors entered the morning-tea setting as users, while food preparation, service and practical knowledge remained with operators. This additional demand continued to be met through the actual preparation, service and use of morning tea. Productive coupling refers here to expanded participation and demand remaining connected to the actual production and use of an already operative cultural practice. “Productive” refers to continued cultural production, rather than to economic output alone.

The contrasting trajectory is substitution, in which public visibility and visitor demand persist while the earlier relations of production and use become increasingly unnecessary. Cultural experience may then be supplied mainly through representation or products detached from the practice that previously generated them. The evidence from Youbu during the period examined is more consistent with productive coupling than with substitution. Food continued to be prepared and served in the morning-tea street, tea drinking and social use remained active, and new users entered a setting in which these activities were still being performed rather than only represented. Tourism demand expanded the user base of morning tea while remaining connected to its existing production and everyday use.

5.4 Selective reorganisation and practice-generative cultural resilience

As the public reach and visitor demand surrounding morning tea expanded, the practice changed in several visible respects. Products and modes of presentation diversified, patterns of participation broadened, and use extended beyond its earlier concentration in the morning. At the same time, field observations continued to document food preparation, cooking, tea service, consumption and prolonged street use within the core morning-tea area. Selective reorganisation describes this uneven pattern of change, in which products, presentation and temporal use changed while the relations required for recurrent preparation, service and use remained operative.

Tourism-related change was also spatially differentiated. The core morning-tea street remained concentrated around food preparation, tea drinking and street-based social use, while adjacent areas accommodated a greater share of accommodation, leisure and later-day activity. Changes within the core included new products, presentation and patterns of participation, whereas accommodation and later-day leisure functions were more prominent in adjacent areas. This distribution may have limited the direct overlap between practice-intensive morning-tea use and some accommodation and leisure functions, although the available evidence does not establish that it resulted from deliberate spatial planning.

The 2009 planning archive identified buildings from several historical periods, including the mid-twentieth century. Later remodelling of one such building retained its physical structure, while its exterior appeared more closely aligned with the older architectural character of the surrounding street, making its documented chronological distinction less legible. Morning tea followed a different pattern: its outward expression changed through new products, presentation and patterns of use, while preparation, service, consumption and social use remained active. Formal similarity and cultural continuity followed different trajectories in these cases. For living heritage, the more consequential question is whether the relations required for actual cultural production and use remain operative as outward forms change.

Practice-generative cultural resilience (PGCR) refers here to the capacity of an already operative cultural practice to continue producing culturally meaningful activity as its conditions change, through forms of reorganisation that keep recurrent production and use operative. In Youbu, wider participation and visitor demand developed alongside changes in products, presentation, temporal use and spatial organisation,

while food preparation, service and actual street-based use continued. The term generative refers to the continued production of culturally meaningful activity through change, rather than to novelty or growth in themselves.

The available evidence does not show how tourism income is reinvested in the practice, whether intergenerational transmission has strengthened, or whether younger residents are entering as future operators. PGCR is used here as a middle-range explanation of the observed continuity through reorganisation, rather than as evidence of a completed regenerative cycle.

5.5 Implications for heritage management and planning

Heritage planning commonly begins with the identification of historic buildings, streets, recognised traditions and other cultural attributes. For living heritage, assessment also needs to identify practices that remain in operation and the conditions on which their recurrence depends. The 2009 Youbu planning archive documented the historic settlement in considerable material and spatial detail and incorporated local cultural references, while the recurrent operation of cultural practice was less fully specified in terms of operators, practical knowledge, patterns of everyday use and temporal routines. Heritage assessment can extend this material and cultural inventory by documenting who produces and uses living practices, where and when they occur, and the practical and spatial conditions under which they recur.

Conservation also needs to retain the conditions under which living practices can continue to operate. Buildings and streets provide important material settings, but their cultural role depends partly on whether spaces remain usable for preparation, service, gathering and other recurrent activities. Practical knowledge likewise remains consequential when it continues to have a place in actual work and use. In Youbu, the conserved street environment provides the setting for morning tea, while the continuing practice depends on food preparation, tea service, social use and the temporal organisation of street activity. These considerations extend material conservation beyond the retention of historic fabric to the continuing usability of heritage space and the legibility of historically accumulated differences.

Tourism management requires similar attention to the relationship between new demand and existing practice. Visitor growth or increased cultural visibility provide limited information about whether living cultural continuity is being sustained. Tourism management can assess whether new demand continues to depend on actual production, practical knowledge and use, or can increasingly be met without them. Spatial planning can also recognise that different parts of a historic settlement may accommodate tourism-related change differently. In Youbu, practice-intensive morning-tea use remained concentrated in the core street, while accommodation and leisure functions became more prominent in adjacent areas. Prior patterns of use and current practice intensity can inform the location of new functions, allowing different forms of tourism-related change to be accommodated within the same historic settlement.

The cultural effects of planning and heritage projects extend beyond project completion. Evaluation based on restored fabric, completed facilities, cultural events or visitor numbers cannot establish how living practices subsequently develop. Post-intervention assessment can follow whether culturally meaningful activities remain active, whether practical knowledge continues to be used, how participation changes, and whether new demand remains connected to actual practice. Longitudinal evaluation is particularly important where these relationships continue to change after conservation or tourism projects have been completed. It can show whether the conditions supporting living cultural practice remain operative as patterns of use, demand and spatial function continue to change.

6. Conclusion

The longitudinal evidence from Youbu shows that morning tea remained part of everyday cultural life while the conditions surrounding it changed substantially between 2009 and 2026. The practice was already operating on a modest local scale before its later public and tourism prominence. Conservation retained and modified the historic material setting, photography contributed to the wider public visibility of everyday street life, and later tourism growth was accompanied by broader visitor participation and greater demand. Morning tea changed in its products, presentation, temporal patterns and spatial use, while food preparation, tea service, consumption and street-based social activity continued. Tourism-related change was also unevenly distributed across the historic settlement, with practice-intensive morning-tea use remaining concentrated in the core street and accommodation and leisure functions becoming more prominent in adjacent areas.

Material persistence, public visibility and tourism growth provide different evidence of cultural continuity. For living heritage, resilience concerns whether culturally meaningful activity continues to be produced and used as its operating conditions change. In Youbu, wider participation and demand remained connected to actual preparation, service and use even as the practice underwent substantial reorganisation. Practice-generative cultural resilience (PGCR) describes this capacity of an already operative cultural practice to remain culturally productive through reorganisation under changing conditions.

For heritage management and planning, the case highlights the material, spatial and operational conditions that allow living practices to continue. Conservation outcomes, public recognition and visitor numbers provide only partial evidence if the subsequent trajectory of practice is not followed. Evaluation beyond project completion can examine whether culturally meaningful activities remain active and whether changing patterns of demand and use continue to depend on actual practice. PGCR is a middle-range explanation derived from a single longitudinal case. Its wider relevance requires comparison with living-heritage settings that differ in their practices, prior patterns of use and development conditions.

Declarations

Author Contribution

P.S. contributed to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, visualisation, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. M.T.M.R. contributed to conceptualization, methodology, supervision, and writing—review and editing. N.Z. contributed to conceptualization, methodology, supervision, and writing—review and editing.Y.G. contributed to investigation, data curation, formal analysis, visualisation, funding acquisition, and writing—review and editing.

Data Availability

Public documentary and institutional sources used in this study are cited in the article and Supplementary Information. Supplementary Tables S1–S2 and Supplementary Figure S1 provide the longitudinal evidence structure, the documented use of the conservation-planning archive, and selected non-identifiable field evidence. The full 2009 conservation-planning archive cannot be publicly redistributed because of third-party copyright and ownership restrictions, and potentially identifiable field records are not publicly deposited for privacy reasons. De-identified supporting materials that can be shared without breaching these restrictions are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Figures

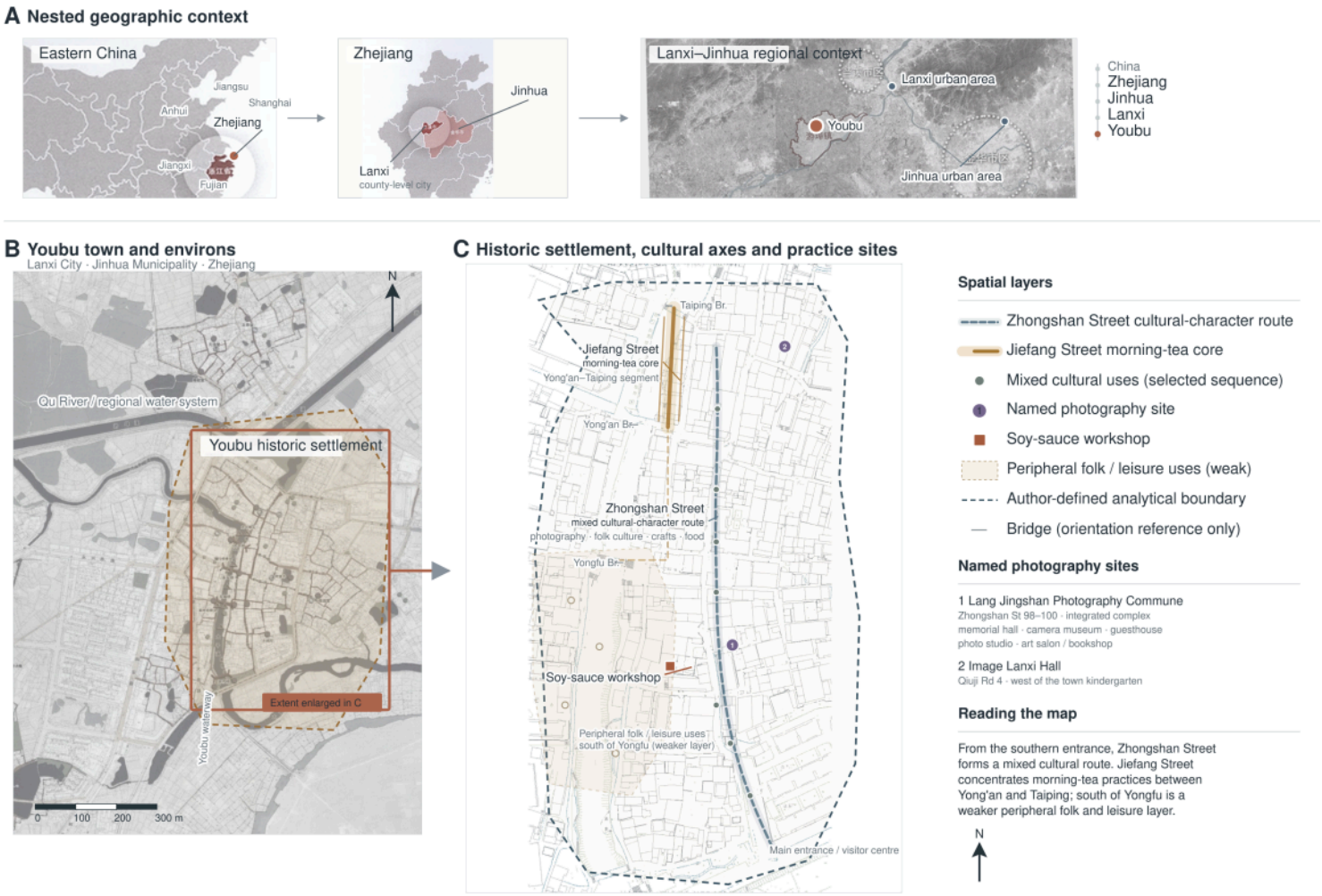


Figure 1

Location and analytical boundary of Youbu Ancient Town.

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