FUNCTIONAL AND SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION OF DONG DOMESTIC FIRE PITS: A CASE STUDY OF CHENGYANG VILLAGES, GUANGXI*

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Abstract

This study aims to: 1) examine the functional system and cultural structure of traditional domestic fire pits in Dong stilt houses; 2) analyze how modernization and tourism development have reshaped their functions, spatial positions, and meanings in Chengyang Villages, Guangxi, China; and 3) propose preservation recommendations for living heritage in ethnic minority communities. A qualitative case-study design was adopted. Fieldwork was conducted in 2024 through literature analysis, architectural mapping of 12 domestic fire pits, semi-structured interviews with 23 participants, and participant observation of daily domestic activities, festival rituals, and tourism-oriented fire-pit banquets. Results show that: 1) the traditional fire pit operated as a central and multipurpose household institution that integrated cooking, heating, food preservation, social learning, and ritual memory; 2) modern facilities have substituted many utilitarian functions, but ritual and emotional meanings persist in family gatherings and festivals; 3) tourism has reconstructed the fire pit as a public stage for cultural

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display, dining experience, and local economic participation; and 4) domestic and tourism fire pits now form a differentiated but connected heritage system. The study contributes an adaptive functional-transformation perspective, meaning that heritage continuity agency depends not only on preserving original physical forms but also on sustaining community, ritual connection, and the flexible relocation of cultural functions.

Keywords: Dong ethnic culture; domestic fire pit; functional transformation; spatial differentiation; tourism development; adaptive heritage transformation

Introduction

Within the stilt architecture of ethnic minorities in Southwest China, the domestic fire pit has long been more than a technical facility for cooking and heating. It is a lived center of household organization, intergenerational learning, ritual practice, and emotional attachment. Studies of Dong residential culture describe the fire pit as a core space in which daily work, family communication, guest reception, oral storytelling, and ritual memory are brought together (Chen, 2020; Gan, 2010; Ren, 2022; Zhao, 2022). In this sense, the fire pit should be understood as a functional complex rather than as an isolated object.

This functional complex is now facing strong pressure from modernization and tourism. Gas stoves, electric heaters, refrigerators, concrete houses, and changing family structures have reduced the practical necessity of open-fire domestic space. At the same time, ethnic tourism has drawn selected cultural elements into scenic restaurants, homestays, and performance stages. National heritage policy in China emphasizes both protection and reasonable use, while also warning against excessive commercialization (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2021; Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2011). The transformation of the

fire pit therefore occurs at the intersection of domestic modernization, cultural preservation, and tourism consumption.

Chengyang Eight Villages in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, offers a representative field site for examining this issue. The area is both a Dong ethnic settlement and an established tourism destination. In private houses, the frequency of domestic fire-pit use has declined; in commercial and performative spaces, fire pits are increasingly reconstructed as cultural symbols and experiential settings. To avoid conceptual confusion, this article focuses on domestic fire pits located in private residences and their imitative counterparts in tourism venues. Communal fire pits in public drum towers are not included because they operate under different ownership arrangements and social functions.

Existing research has often interpreted the weakening of fire-pit use as evidence of traditional loss or cultural crisis (Ma, 2023). Such arguments are important because they identify risks caused by modernization and commercialization. However, they do not fully explain why the fire pit has not simply disappeared. What remains insufficiently studied is the micro-process through which its former composite functions are dismantled, transferred to modern facilities, retained in ritual occasions, and reconstructed for tourism performance. This study addresses that gap by asking how the Dong domestic fire pit changes from a household center into a differentiated heritage system, and how this transformation can be guided toward cultural continuity and community benefit.

The article is organized as follows. The next section states the research objectives and defines the key analytical terms. The literature review then discusses Dong domestic fire pits, functionalism and living heritage, tourism performance, and the research gap. The methodology section explains the case-study design, field methods, ethical procedures, and qualitative analysis. The

results present four patterns of transformation, followed by a discussion of theoretical contribution and recommendations for preservation practice.

Objectives

In this study, functional differentiation refers to the separation of formerly integrated practical, social, ritual, and economic functions into different carriers. Spatial transformation refers to the relocation of fire-pit meanings from private domestic rooms to tourism venues, performance spaces, and occasional ritual settings. Community agency means the ability of villagers to participate in deciding how heritage is used and interpreted, while ritual continuity refers to the preservation of ancestral, festive, and family-based meanings even when daily technologies change.

1. To examine the functional system and intrinsic structure of traditional domestic fire pits in Dong stilt houses.

2. To analyze the functional differentiation and spatial transformation of domestic fire pits under modernization and tourism development.

3. To develop preservation recommendations that support community agency, ritual continuity, and responsible tourism use.

Literature Review

1. Dong domestic fire pits as functional domestic space

Dong residential space is closely related to social organization and everyday knowledge transmission. The fire pit has historically served as a practical and symbolic center where cooking, heating, food preservation, family gathering, guest reception, and informal education overlap (Gan, 2010; Ren, 2022). Architectural anthropology further suggests that household spatial order often reflects social hierarchy and ritual value. In Dong stilt houses, the location of the

fire pit and the seating order around it help reproduce respect for elders, kinship roles, and collective memory (Chen, 2020; Zhao, 2022).

This literature shows that the fire pit cannot be adequately understood through material form alone. Its significance lies in the relationship between object, space, practice, and meaning. A domestic fire pit is therefore both a spatial device and a cultural institution: it organizes bodily movement, family interaction, ritual memory, and everyday skills. Recent local studies have begun to describe how indoor environmental culture and fire-pit construction systems are connected to contemporary design and cultural transmission, but many still treat the fire pit as a cultural symbol rather than as a changing functional system (Chen, 2020; Ren, 2022).

2. Functionalism and living heritage

Functionalism provides a useful foundation for analyzing the transformation of material culture. Malinowski (1944) argued that cultural institutions respond to basic and derivative human needs, while Radcliffe-Brown (1952) emphasized the role of social institutions in maintaining structural continuity. From this perspective, the decline of material forms does not necessarily mean the disappearance of their social functions. The key question is whether these functions are replaced, transferred, or reconstructed.

This view aligns with contemporary approaches to living heritage conservation. The UNESCO Convention (2003) emphasizes the conservation of intangible cultural heritage through community participation and transmission, rather than simply the static preservation of objects. Zhang (2019) also offers a similar critique of the “museumification” of heritage, arguing that the vitality of heritage depends on its connection to a vibrant social context. Taking the Dong ethnic group's fire pit as an example, this means that conservation strategies should not merely focus on whether residents still use open flames for cooking. It should explore which functions still hold cultural significance, which functions

have been replaced for safety and convenience, and how community members can retain their right to interpret the meaning of the fire pit.

3. Tourism performance and staged authenticity

Tourism studies have long shown that cultural spaces are often reorganized for visitors. MacCannell (1973) described staged authenticity as the arrangement of social space to satisfy tourist expectations of the "real." Urry (2002) further explained that the tourist gaze selects, frames, and aestheticizes local culture. Goffman's (1959) front-stage/back-stage distinction is also relevant because tourism can transform previously domestic or back-stage practices into visible performances. More recent heritage-tourism scholarship has continued to emphasize that tourism may generate both economic opportunities and risks of simplification when community control is weak (Timothy, 2021).

For Dong fire pits, tourism performance is ambivalent. On the one hand, tourism can simplify complex domestic and ritual meanings and turn household culture into consumable spectacle. On the other hand, tourism may create income, visibility, and motivation for local communities to retain selected cultural practices. Recent research on the Zuomei · Sanjiang performance also suggests that staged cultural activities can produce both authenticity debates and economic opportunities (She, 2024). The analytical task is therefore not to judge tourism fire pits as either authentic or false, but to examine how their relationship with domestic memory is socially organized.

4. Research gap and analytical framework

Existing research provides valuable descriptions of Dong family culture, heritage policies, and tourism commodification, but pays less attention to the micro-processes of the deconstruction and redistribution of the original multifunctional fire pits to different spatial carriers. Comparative case studies highlight the importance of this research gap. In Fujian Tulou, heritage recognition and tourism have transformed collective residential buildings into a cultural

landscape, where residential, sacrificial, display, and commercial functions are increasingly separated (Zheng & Zhou, 2012). In Xijiang Miao villages, tourism has altered residents' cultural attachments by changing the spatial and economic conditions of daily life (Cai et al., 2017).

The Dong fire pit case adds a more intimate, family-level perspective to these broader studies of heritage spaces. Unlike the tourism landscape at the Tulou or village scale, the fire pit is both a small household item and a social center. Therefore, the transformation of the fire pit can reveal how modernization and tourism operate within the family before becoming a village-level cultural display. Thus, this study adopts a functional transformation framework to examine three interrelated processes: functional substitution, spatial differentiation, and meaning reconstruction. This study does not explore whether fire pits retain their "original flavor" under fixed forms, but rather how their practical, social, and ritual functions continue or change in family and tourism environments.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case-study design, which is appropriate for examining a contemporary cultural transformation within a specific social setting (Yin, 2018). Chengyang Eight Villages in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi, was selected because it combines relatively visible Dong residential traditions with mature ethnic tourism development. This setting allowed the study to observe domestic fire pits, tourism fire pits, and the interaction between them within one local heritage system.

Fieldwork was conducted in 2024 through three complementary methods. First, architectural mapping documented the spatial structure, position, and surrounding domestic arrangements of 12 domestic fire pits. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 participants, including eight elders

over 60 years old, seven middle-aged villagers, five young villagers, and three village cadres. Interviews generally lasted 30 to 60 minutes and focused on usage frequency, changes in household routines, ritual meanings, tourism participation, and attitudes toward preservation. Third, participant observation recorded daily cooking, family gathering, ancestor worship during festivals, and tourism-oriented fire-pit banquets.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the study required informants who had direct knowledge of household fire-pit use, family rituals, tourism operation, or village management. The age and role distribution enabled the study to compare intergenerational memories, current household practices, and local management perspectives. Data collection continued until repeated patterns appeared in accounts of practical substitution, ritual persistence, tourism reconstruction, and community benefit, indicating thematic saturation within the limits of a single case study.

Data were analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Field notes, interview summaries, and spatial records were first organized by source type. They were then coded according to five initial categories: practical function, spatial organization, social interaction, ritual meaning, and economic role. Through repeated comparison, these categories were synthesized into three analytical themes: functional substitution, spatial differentiation, and meaning reconstruction. This process followed an interpretive qualitative logic in which empirical evidence and theoretical concepts were refined together (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The trustworthiness of the study was strengthened through methodological triangulation, comparison among age groups, and checking the plausibility of interpretations with local community representatives. Architectural mapping provided material evidence, interviews provided experiential accounts, and observation provided situational evidence of actual practices. Following

qualitative trustworthiness principles, the analysis emphasized credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability rather than statistical generalization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the fieldwork. Participants were informed of the research participation, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to decline questions or withdraw from the study. Personal names were not used in the analysis; participants are represented by anonymized codes such as E for elders, M for middle-aged villagers, Y for young villagers, and C for village cadres. Because the original field material consisted mainly of interview notes and anonymized summaries, the results present representative paraphrased accounts rather than identifiable purpose verbatim statements.

The study also has limitations. It focuses on one village cluster and therefore cannot represent all Dong communities or all ethnic minority heritage contexts. mapping of 12 fire pits captures important spatial patterns but does not constitute a complete architectural survey. Language and translation may also affect the interpretation of local expressions. These limitations are acknowledged in the discussion and provide directions for future comparative research.

Results

1. Traditional fire pits as an integrated functional system

The traditional Dong domestic fire pit integrated practical, spatial, and socio-cultural functions. Practically, it supported cooking, heating, meat, grain drying, and the maintenance of a warm living environment. The suspended wooden rack above the fire, locally understood as part of the heating and drying system, used rising heat and smoke for long-term food preservation. This practical integration made the fire pit an efficient household technology in wooden stilt houses.

Spatially, the fire pit occupied a central or semi-central position on the living level of the stilt house. Its location structured household movement and seating hierarchy. Interview summaries from elders repeatedly indicated that seating around the fire pit was not random: older family members sat closer to the respected side, while younger members tended the fire, prepared tea, or listened to family stories. One elder account emphasized that children learned "where to sit, whom to serve first, and when to speak" by observing fire-pit interactions. This evidence shows that the fire-pit interactions. pit functioned as a central and multipurpose household institution rather than a single-use cooking device.

Socially, the fire pit supported storytelling, song transmission, craft demonstration, guest reception, and ritual practices. Observation notes recorded that even when cooking had moved to gas stoves, older villagers still referred to the fire-pit area as the place where "the family becomes complete" during festivals and returning-home occasions. The traditional fire pit therefore linked material warmth with social warmth, creating a physical setting where practical activities and family hierarchy were reproduced together.

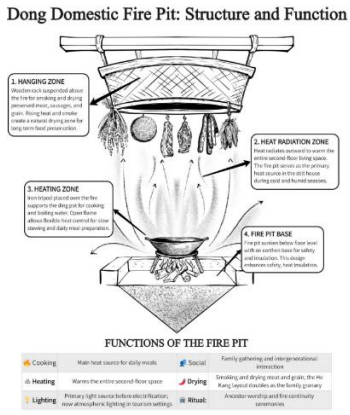


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the Dong domestic fire pit showing the hanging zone, heat-radiation zone, heating zone, and fire-pit base as an integrated household system.

Source: Drawn by the author based on field mapping.

2. Functional Substitution under Modernization

Modern facilities have newly replaced many practical functions once concentrated in the hearth. Gas stoves offer faster and cleaner cooking; electric heaters provide safer warmth; refrigerators replace smoke-based preservation; and mechanical dryers handle grains more efficiently. In built concrete houses, the hearth is often completely removed. Some wooden guesthouses still retain tripods or hanging frames, but these are rarely used for open fires; they have become decorative symbols of Dong identity.

This does not mean that all heart functions disappear at the same rate. Practical functions decline first because modern technologies are more efficient and produce less smoke. Ritual and emotional functions persist longer, especially during the Lunar New Year, ancestor worship, family reunions, weddings, and visits from family members who have migrated for work. A middle-aged participant explained in the interview summary that the gas stove is “cleaner and faster,” but the family still prefers to gather near the old fire-pit area during festival meals because it “feels like returning home.” This distinction indicates that modernization leads to functional substitution rather than immediate cultural extinction.

Figure 2 illustrates this process. The household kitchen is organized around a gas stove, metal cookware, water supply, and storage containers. The open fire no longer dominates cooking, but the wooden house structure and the remembered hearth area continue to frame domestic identity. The image therefore shows not simply replacement, but a layered space in which modern convenience and older household memory coexist.



Figure 2. Modern cooking arrangement in a Dong household in Sanjiang County; the gas stove substitutes the daily cooking function of the traditional fire pit while the wooden domestic setting preserves spatial memory.

Source: Photo by the author

3. Spatial differentiation and tourism reconstruction

The separation of kitchen and living space in modern housing weakens the fire pit's position as the center. Families increasingly gather around sofas, televisions, mobile phones, electric heaters, or dining tables. Some villagers still describe the emotional habit of gathering together, but the material medium has changed. The integrated former space has therefore been divided into specialized domestic rooms and occasional ritual spaces.

Tourism creates a different spatial trajectory. Restaurants and homestays in the scenic area construct large fire pits for banquets, tea drinking, singing, and performance. In this context, the fire pit moves from private household space to a public cultural stage. The performance Zuomei · Sanjiang similarly places the

fire pit in a theatrical setting, using lighting, sound, song, and audience interaction to translate Dong domestic culture into a tourism product (She, 2024).

Villagers' attitudes toward this reconstruction are complex. Elder participants tended to emphasize that a staged fire pit is incomplete because it lacks ancestral memory, household hierarchy, and everyday discipline. Younger and middle-aged participants more often recognized tourism as a source of employment, income, and external recognition. One coded summary from a village cadre described the tourism fire pit as "not the old family fire, but a way for outsiders to understand us." These accounts reveal an intergenerational tension between cultural depth and economic opportunity.



Figure 3. Tourism-oriented fire-pit banquet in Chengyang Eight Villages; the enlarged setting, performance interaction, and visitor participation show how a domestic symbol is reconstructed as a public cultural display.

Source: Photo by the author

4. Complementarity between domestic and tourism fire pits

The fieldwork indicates that two forms of fire pit now coexist. Domestic fire pits retain ritual, emotional, and identity functions, while tourism fire pits create visibility, income, and public cultural communication. Their relationship is not simply a conflict between authenticity and commodification. Tourism fire pits

draw symbolic legitimacy from domestic memory, while domestic fire pits may benefit from tourism revenue and renewed cultural pride.

This complementarity is uneven and requires management. Where villagers participate in narration, performance design, and revenue distribution, tourism fire pits can support community agency. Where commercial operators treat the fire pit only as decoration, cultural meaning is weakened. The key difference is therefore not between "domestic authenticity" and "tourism falseness," but between community-led transformation and externally controlled display.

Table 1. Functional comparison between domestic fire pits and tourism fire pits

Dimension	Domestic Fire Pit	Tourism Fire Pit
Spatial attribute	Private residences in wooden stilt houses or modern homes	Commercial restaurants, homestays, and performance stages
Core function	Ancestor worship, family reunion, emotional bonding	Cultural display, dining experience, tourist participation
User group	Family members and returning relatives	External tourists and visitors
Frequency of use	Lower frequency; concentrated during festivals and reunions	Higher frequency during peak tourism seasons
Economic role	Limited direct income	Employment, business income, and cultural visibility
Mode of control	Household autonomy	Enterprises, village collectives, or joint operation

Source: Author's fieldwork and analysis

Table 1 shows that the most important difference is not the physical existence of a fire pit but the social logic that organizes its use. In domestic contexts, the fire pit is controlled by household memory and kinship order. In tourism contexts, it is managed through schedules, service design, and visitor expectations. Heritage transformation in Chengyang therefore involves a shift from household autonomy to mixed community-commercial control. This shift can support preservation only when villagers retain the right to explain, adapt, and benefit from the cultural meanings attached to the fire pit.

Discussion

The findings challenge the linear narrative that modernization inevitably leads to the demise of tradition. While the Dong family fire pit has lost many of its daily practical functions, its social and symbolic functions have not disappeared. They have been redistributed. Some functions have been replaced by modern appliances, some have been concentrated in festivals and family gatherings, and others have expanded outward through tourism. This pattern is better understood as functional differentiation than as simple decline.

Functionalism helps explain why the fire pit continues to matter after its original utilitarian necessity has weakened. If a cultural form responds to human needs, as Malinowski (1944) argued, then a change in technical needs does not eliminate social and symbolic needs. The Chengyang case shows that heating, cooking, and preservation may be substituted by modern technologies, while family memory, ritual respect, and identity recognition continue to require culturally meaningful spaces. The fire pit survives because some of its functions are reactivated in new contexts rather than because its old form remains unchanged.

The results also complicate the common criticism that tourism is only cultural distortion. MacCannell's (1973) theory of staged authenticity is still relevant because tourism fire pits are clearly arranged for visitors. Goffman's (1959) front-stage/back-stage distinction also helps explain why domestic practices become visible performances. However, the Chengyang case shows that staged culture can still carry community meaning when villagers participate in interpretation and benefit sharing. The front-stage tourism fire pit and the back-stage family fire pit are not mutually exclusive; they are different components of one adaptive heritage system.

The intergenerational findings are especially important. Elders tend to evaluate the fire pit through ritual depth, hierarchy, and memory of everyday household discipline. Younger and middle-aged villagers often evaluate it through livelihood, tourist communication, and the possibility of keeping Dong culture visible in a changing economy. This does not mean that younger villagers care less about heritage. Rather, they negotiate identity through different conditions of life. For them, tourism income and cultural recognition may become practical reasons to continue selected traditions, even when domestic open-fire use is no longer convenient.

Zhang's (2019) critique of heritage museumization is useful here because the Dong fire pit cannot be protected effectively by freezing it as a static object. A purely object-centered approach may preserve a tripod, a hanging rack, or a reconstructed hearth, but it cannot preserve the family relations, ritual sequences, and community authority that give the fire pit meaning. At the same time, the Chengyang case also complicates Zhang's argument by showing that performance and display are not always museumization. They become problematic when detached from community agency, but they can support living heritage when connected to local interpretation, ritual memory, and benefit sharing.

Comparison with Fujian tulou and Xijiang Miao villages further sharpens the contribution of the Dong case. The tulou case shows how large collective residences become heritage landscapes and tourist destinations (Zheng & Zhou, 2012). The Xijiang Miao case shows how tourism changes residents' cultural attachment at the village scale (Cai et al., 2017). divided, relocated, and reconstructed. It That heritage transformation may begin not at the level of monuments or scenic villages, but inside the everyday domestic spaces where practical life and cultural meaning overlap demonstrate.

New knowledge from the research lies in the functional-transformation framework. Empirically, the study documents how domestic and tourism fire pits coexist in Chengyang. Theoretically, it shows that living heritage can be analyzed through three linked processes: functional substitution, spatial differentiation, and meaning reconstruction. This framework moves beyond the binary interpretation of "traditional decline" versus "tourism distortion" and can be applied to comparable ethnic heritage contexts where domestic objects, ritual practices, and tourism economies interact.

Recommendation

Conservation strategies should differentiate between civilian and tourist-use fire pits. Civilian fire pits should not be forcibly restored to all their pre-modern functions. Instead, policies and community projects should support the preservation of their ritual and emotional functions in activities such as ancestor worship, weddings, Mid-Autumn Festival ceremonies, Spring Festival gatherings, and intergenerational transmission. Safety improvements, smoke control measures, and flexible family-use guidelines can help families preserve meaningful customs without sacrificing modern living standards.

Tourist fire pits should be managed through community-led mechanisms. Villagers should participate in deciding how to tell the story of the fire pit, how

to present rituals, and how to allocate tourism revenue. Operators should avoid displaying fire pits merely as decorations. Explanatory materials should explain their historical civilian functions and contemporary changes, enabling visitors to understand that living heritage is adaptive rather than static.

Local cultural policies should shift from object-centered conservation to function-centered conservation. The goal is not to preserve every fire pit in the same physical form, but to maintain the connection between space, memory, ritual, and community interests. This approach aligns with national heritage protection policies that encourage the protection, transmission, and rational utilization of heritage while preventing over-commercialization (General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, 2021).

Future research should extend this framework to Dong drum towers, covered bridges, and other plateau ethnic heritage spaces in Southwest China and Southeast Asia. Longer-term fieldwork, comparative studies among Dong communities, and more detailed analyses of tourism revenue distribution will further test the applicability of functional and spatial transformation as a perspective for understanding living heritage.

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