




# Stakeholder Perspectives on the Preservation and Development of Lower Grade Historic Buildings

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## Abstract

Decades of strong economic growth and urbanization have changed many historic villages. With recent rural construction projects, lower grade historic buildings in China villages are faced with increasing challenges, including being rebuilt or demolished in the name of improvement. The stakeholder is an interesting point of entry for the discussion of historic buildings and has been the subject of little research thus far. Through field surveys of historic buildings in three selected villages and qualitative interviews with stakeholders, this research analyzes the reasons behind different attitudes towards lower grade rural historic buildings, provides some suggestions for future preservation and development.

**Keywords** Stakeholder · Lower grade historic buildings · Preservation · Development · China

## Introduction

Architectural heritage protection and utilisation have been global topics of concern since the Venice Charter in 1964 and the scope has expanded from historic monuments to vernacular buildings according to the “chapter on the built vernacular heritage” ratified by the ICOMOS 12th general assembly in 1999. Most vernacular buildings are lower grade historic buildings, or not officially recognised by the authorities as significant (Lee 2016:729–747), and have been neglected in architectural history

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(Upton 1983:262–279). Many of them are scattered or clustered in villages, and have collapsed, become obsolete, or been misused. Their values may not have been fully utilized for a variety of reasons (Othman and Elsaay 2018:1704–1718; Salama 2018:02–10; Tavares et al. 2018:49–56), such as transformations to meet the demands of modern life, natural and man-made disasters, a lack of funds for and weak awareness of protection, and traditional economic development which that neglects rural diversity and versatility (Jenkins 2000:301–314; Mitchell et al. 1997:853–886).

Different countries have different definitions of historic buildings (Turner and Kennell 2018). For example, in China several terminologies describe various perspectives on this issue, such as cultural relics protection units, historic buildings, listed buildings for conservation, candidacy building listings, and so on. The differences between these terms are concerned with various management regulations. In order to avoid confusion, lower grade historic buildings discussed in this article are those that have certain historic, scientific, and artistic value but are listed or will be listed in the lower grade of the protection system.

There are three points of view with respect to historic buildings in the literature: technology, design, and management. Technology includes the relationship between the regional climate and building construction (Bodach et al. 2014:227–242; Du et al. 2016:327–334; Fernandes et al. 2015:324–336; GhaffarianHoseini et al. 2014:157–170; Mazraeh and Pazhouhanfar 2018:11–24; Rajapaksha et al. 2018:4–14), energy retrofit measures (Rajapaksha et al. 2018:4–14; Rohdin et al. 2012:371–382; Siozinyte et al. 2014:291–298) and adaptive reuse to increase the sustainable value of heritage buildings (Bianco et al. 2015:86–91; Othman and Elsaay 2018:1704–1718; Tam et al. 2016:635–642; Tsai 2017:387–394). Design incorporates historical building characteristics and coordination with the surrounding environment (Ju et al. 2012:95–102; Mohammadabadi and Ghoreshi 2011:580–590; Sheridan and McMenamin 2012:46–53), and the method that the new building fit in with the historic building (Rashid and Ara 2015:46–55; Riza and Doratli 2015:234–257; Yuceer and Ipekoglu 2012:419–425). Management includes the mechanisms and policies of heritage conservation (Rajapaksha et al. 2018:4–14), commercial value to the nearby area (Jayantha and Yung 2018), and historic heritage value and related industries such as tourism (Abu Al Haija 2012:83–92; Jayantha and Yung 2018; Tavares et al. 2018:49–56).

In recent decades, stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984) has been applied extensively in many fields such as health management (Forsythe et al. 2016:13–21), mega construction projects (Davis 2014:189–201; Mok et al. 2015:446–457), environmental protection (Guerrero et al. 2013:220–232; Krueger et al. 2012:4–18; Soltani et al. 2015:318–328), business (Deng et al. 2013:87–109; Seuring and Gold 2013:1–6), tourism (Deng et al. 2013:87–109) and more. In the sustainable development of historic buildings, stakeholder research has gradually attracted the attention of scholars, including themes like the role of non-state stakeholders as important entities for historic buildings (Lee 2016:729–747), how to negotiate different stakeholder viewpoints about village historic heritage (Zhang and Wu 2016:228–241), and public opinions on historic buildings (Tam et al. 2016:635–642). All of these provide a good foundation for research, but the above studies have been limited to one or several stakeholders, rather than all, or only concerning building cultural value over building structure. According to stakeholder theory, the destiny of a rural historic building is the end product for all stakeholders.

Rural historic buildings are jeopardized by new rural construction in China. This “new rural construction” is not only a process of material space reallocation in which the government invests in massive funds and villagers participate, but also a process of villager consciousness and the rural community concept, which, in essence, is an “invisible” process of social and cultural reconstruction. The overall aim of this research is to explore the roles that different stakeholders play, the influence that they exert, and the measures that should be taken during the sustainable development of these lower grade historic buildings.

## Methods and Data

In any research project it is more effective to sample a specific case or people rather than study the whole area or population (Marshall and Rossman 1999), so villages, historic buildings, and interviewees were sampled to ensure they were representative in China.

### Field Work

Field work has been adopted extensively in architecture and urban research (Jayantha and Yung 2018; Tavares et al. 2018:49–56), where historic buildings are characterized by building quality, property, and households in residence. It may take two forms: general and typical surveys, in which the former provides an overall impression and the latter is used for in-depth research.

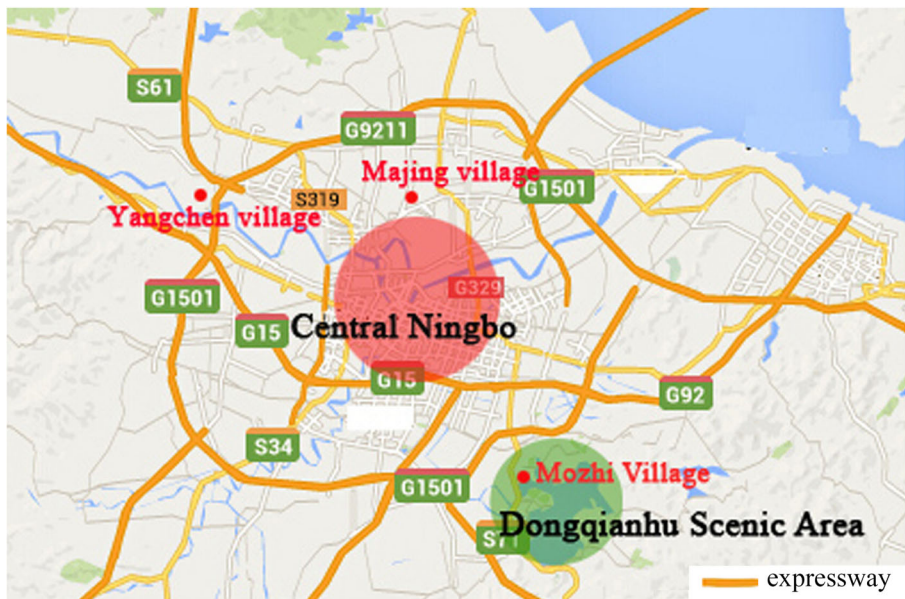
This paper is based on a general survey of traditional rural architecture in Ningbo China, where two principles were used to sample the villages. The first principle is location, whether the village is located near a suburban district, an outer suburban district, or a special district (such as scenic spots). The second principle concerns the function complexity and diversity of rural historic architectural forms. For example, typical forms of the historic buildings to be studied should include courtyards, single rooms, and other forms with both residential and commercial functions.

Mozhi, Majing, and Yangchen villages were selected for study in this research. Mozhi village is in Dongqianhu Scenic Area, Majing village is in the northeastern suburb, and Yangchen village is located in the vicinity of a highway and a city expressway of Ningbo (Fig. 1). In terms of traditional architectural form and function, Majing and Yangchen are characterized by courtyard buildings that used to be residences, while single rooms in Mozhi were used for both business and residence. The studied buildings included historic buildings listed as lower grade and those not currently listed by the government.

Both the historic buildings themselves and their inhabitants were studied. Building age, quality, number of storeys, form, and area were collected, along with the ages and incomes of inhabitants.

### Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted with different stakeholders in historic buildings to understand the ways in which the buildings developed. The stakeholder is a



**Fig. 1** The location of Maging, Yangchen, and Mozhi villages in Ningbo, China

relatively new perspective in the historic building context, so this research adopted an interpretative approach to analyze their different attitudes about the sustainability of rural lower grade buildings and develop new knowledge in this area. This method aimed to explore and understand current phenomena and trends (Turner and Kennell 2018), exploring the interviewees' attitudes from the management point of view, whereas the majority of previous studies on historic building sustainability has concentrated only on technology and design.

According to Mitchell's stakeholder scoring (Mitchell et al. 1997:853–886), a stakeholder must have at least legitimacy, influence, and urgency with respect to the property. The village collectives, the governments, private capitals, and the property owners make up the stakeholders in historic building protection and development.

Four themes were used to guide the interview question design: different stakeholder understandings of rural lower grade historic buildings; the relationship between historic building protection and urban development; the contemporary challenges associated with working in historic buildings; and the specific role that different stakeholders play in utilization and management. These themes were used to structure the presentation of the qualitative data in the findings section, below. Data was collected through 28 in-depth, qualitative interviews.

### Analytical Framework

In this research, construction (of the historical buildings themselves) and usage (the people who live in them) status of existing lower-grade historical buildings was investigated, while stakeholder attitudes towards them were studied and analyzed. Building conditions and usage investigation was carried out through field research

and a questionnaire, and stakeholder attitudes and intentions were collected through qualitative interviews. Based on these investigations and analysis, the measures that make the rural lower-grade historic buildings sustainable have been recommended. The analytical framework is as follows (Fig. 2).

## Results

### The Protection and Development Status of Historic Buildings in Three Villages

In this study, 16 houses were investigated, including five buildings in Majing (Fig. 3a), three houses in Yangchen (Fig. 3b), and eight houses in Mozhi (Fig. 3c). All of them were one to two storey, half-timber or wooden houses, and were built in the late Ming, early Qing periods, or during the late Qing dynasty. Apart from an ancestral hall in Majing and a shop in Mozhi, all the other buildings were residential buildings.

The historic buildings were courtyard buildings with large occupied areas ranging from 900 to 3000 m<sup>2</sup> in Majing and Yangchen. Most of them were of poor quality except for an ancestral temple in Majing that has been aided by maintenance and repair donations from the village collective and villagers. It is often used as a festival location for the villagers. In Yang Chen, the buildings where the property owner and tenant(s) lived together were of relatively good quality, but other buildings were poorer quality and some had partially collapsed (Fig. 4). The buildings in Mozhi were single rooms with a small area of about 30–120 m<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the one rented as a convenience store, the others were used by the property owner as accommodations and were of relatively better quality than the courtyard buildings in Majing and Yangchen.

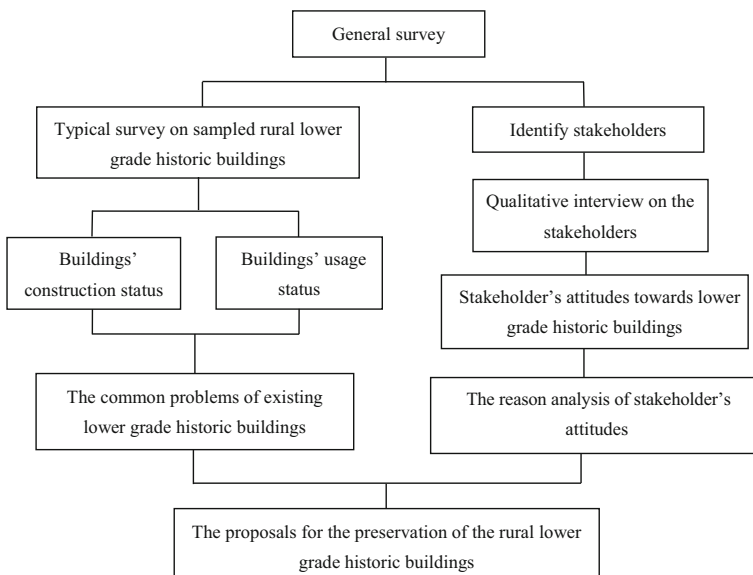
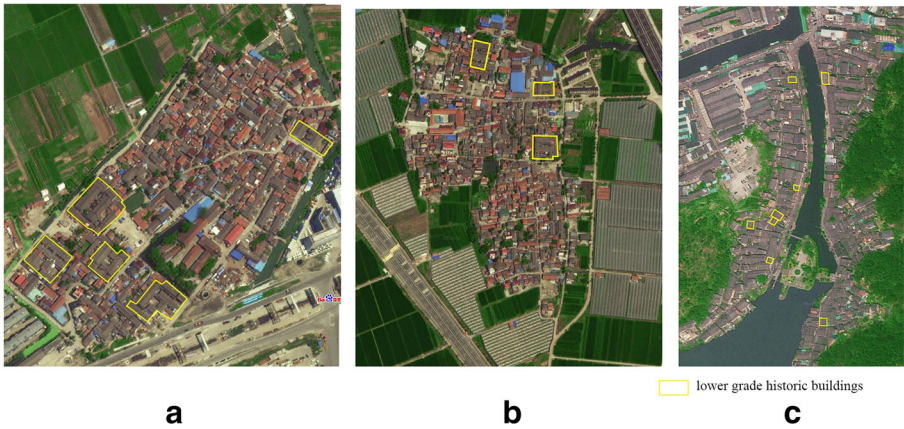


Fig. 2 Analytical framework





**Fig. 3** The Distribution of Historic Buildings in three villages (a) Majing, (b) Yangchen, (c) Mozhi

These historic buildings housed both property owners and their tenants, such as a historic building in Yangchen, or several tenants without property owners. The population size in every historic buildings of this research ranged from five to twenty four.

In general, field research in Mozhi, Majing, and Yangchen showed that the courtyard style buildings were mainly rented with many households living together. The construction quality varied but most of buildings were of medium quality or worse, with



**Fig. 4** Status quo of some lower grade historic buildings

many partially collapsed courtyards. The buildings where owners resided by themselves or with tenants were better quality than those occupied by tenants in the near suburbs, outer suburbs, or special districts.

### **Basic Residence Characteristic (Owners and Tenants)**

A common feature of rural historic building occupants was that they are mostly elderly people with lower incomes. Of those actually occupying the properties, including owners and renters, more than 60% of the property owners were more than 60 years old. Incomes of nearly 50% of the rental households were between 588 and 2024 yuan RMB (588 yuan/month is the minimum living standard of urban residents in Ningbo, 2024 yuan/month is the per-capita disposable income of rural population, and 3680 yuan/month is the per-capita disposable income of city dwellers (2016 data). The monthly incomes of nearly 40% of renters and 30% of property owners were less than 588 yuan. Lower rent (or income) was one of the important reasons cited by tenants (or the owner) for living there.

### **Interview Results: Attitudes Toward Stakeholders and Factors of Influence**

#### **Stakeholder Theory and Rural Historic Building Stakeholders**

Stakeholder theory originated from management research in western countries such as Britain and the USA in the 1960s. According to Freeman (Freeman 1984), stakeholders refer to any group or individual that can affect the achievement of organizational goals or be affected by that achievement. Freeman's definition includes all parties concerned, such as shareholders, creditors, employees, customers, suppliers, distributors, relevant government departments, social organizations, communities, and even the public, which greatly expands the notion of the stakeholder. Mitchell developed stakeholder theory (Mitchell et al. 1997:853–886), pointing out that a stakeholder must meet at least one of the following three conditions: (1) influence, namely whether a group has the ability and means to affect enterprise decision-making; (2) legitimacy (i.e., whether a group is entitled either legally or morally to disposal of and claims within the enterprise); and (3) urgency (i.e., whether the requirements of the group can be immediately attended to by management).

Contrary to many other countries, rural land in China belongs to the village collectives and the country, while only the buildings belong to their owners. The government plays an important role in harmonizing the relationship between urban development and the village, which influences historic building destiny. Private capital provides much-needed funding for historic building protection and development because most owners lack the motive or funds to conserve and maintain their buildings, and the government lacks time and energy for lower grade buildings. Therefore, the local government, the village collective, the building owner, and private capital for investments make up the stakeholders in the protection and development of the village historic buildings.

#### **The Different Stakeholder Attitudes and Opinions**

This research conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 stakeholders, including 18 property owners (some buildings owned by several

owners), three representatives from rural collective organizations, two local government officials (the cultural heritage protection and construction departments) and five social funds holders. The interviews were loosely based on an interview guide and explored issues such as the importance of vernacular buildings, how to utilize them, and any problems. Stakeholder attitudes towards and opinions of the vernacular buildings were obtained through the interviews (Table 1).

Different stakeholders have different opinions about the value of lower grade historic buildings. They also have different levels of willingness to solve problems related to rural protection and development discussed in this article. The villagers, including property owners and the village collectives, assigned them less value than the local government and private capital stakeholders, and most interviewees thought protection was difficult due to capital, policies, and the contradiction between urban development and lower grade historic building protection, especially in the suburban villages.

## **Reasons for Different Attitudes toward Rural Lower Grade Historic Buildings**

### **Different Stakeholder Values Toward Lower Grade Historic Buildings**

Identifying value of historical buildings is the basis for subsequent protection and utilization, but different stakeholders had different opinions about the lower grade historic buildings. In general, the villagers and rural collectives thought they had little value. Villager opinions were limited by their knowledge levels, while if a house is a historic building, it is necessary to preserve or maintain it as a historic building and not dismantle or rebuild according to villager wishes. According to the Property Law of People's Republic of China, it is difficult to obtain government funds for maintenance and repairs to private buildings repair due to private-ownership.

Different government departments acknowledged the historic value and difficulty of protection, and some private capital representatives assigned some value, but others did not. The meaning of lower grade historic buildings was also more significant than high level historic buildings. Stakeholder value assignments for a historical building were largely related to the honor, benefits, or difficulties that a historical building was associated with, rather than the cultural significance of the building itself.

### **The Conflict Between Economic Development and Historic Building Preservation**

The relationship between economic development and historical and cultural protection is a topic of much discussion. A village depends on and defers to its government in public affairs and the differences between urban and rural areas. More suburban villages have been incorporated into cities due to urbanization, and lower grade historic buildings and other houses have been demolished. In remote villages, historical and cultural protection is often sacrificed for economic development, such as industry, although this exogenous economic development model is not sustainable (Barke and Newton 1997:319–341) despite short-term benefits. Conflict between economic



**Table 1** Stakeholder attitudes and opinions

Stakeholder	Number of people	The value of rural lower grade historic buildings	The willingness and the possibility of protection and development	Problems
Property owners	18	Middle value Little value	Willing to protect but consider it impossible	No money themselves; think no one is willing to invest due to lower quality
Local government	1	Quite high value	Willing to protect but with difficulty	Lack of capital; gaps between existing systems, such as property and transaction systems
	1	Quite high value	Willing to protect but with difficulty	The conflict between suburb lower grade historic building preservation and city sprawl; No strong regulations to protect buildings
Village collectives	3 (1 from each villages)	Little value	Willing to reuse but it is the villagers' decision, has very little to do with the village collective	Impossible due to location; no capital; lower quality or quantity
Private capital	5	Middle value	4 argue for building protection and 1 does not care	No strong regulations to insure village and investor benefits

development and historic buildings protection is therefore common in suburban and remote villages.

### **The Economic Benefits of Lower Grade Historic Building Protection and Development**

Historic buildings depend on more than donations (Turner and Kennell 2018), and sustainable protection requires funds and policies. In Table 1, the government stakeholders argued for policy tools, rather than funds, to protect and develop historic buildings. For owners, the goal was to improve building quality and attract economic interest, and for private capital, the goal was to invest in the historic buildings with the support of regulation and policy. Therefore, economic interests are a common goal theme the government, owners, and private capital. All of them may continue or discontinue preservation of lower grade historical buildings for economic interests, which largely affect the influence and urgency of stakeholders in building preservation and utilization, further affecting the fate of historic buildings.

### **Preservation and Development Measures for Rural Historic Buildings**

Preserving rural lower grade buildings is a complex issue due to the involvement of a variety of stakeholders. The above stakeholder interviews indicated that property owners (the government) had little economic capacity (intent) to maintain and restore buildings, although they had the desire to do so. Some stakeholders who with investment capacity and protection intent could not get authorization and their rights and interests could not be guaranteed. Different value standards, the conflict between urban development and historic building protection, and economics benefit were the main causes behind different opinions about rural lower grade historic buildings. During recent rural construction and urban expansion, many rural lower grade historic buildings have been destroyed or used unsustainably. Rural historic buildings are a significant resource during rural development. Economic interests are usually the most important for all stakeholders, which has been noted in the literature (Donovan and Gkartzios 2014:334–343; Yildirim 2015:121–145) and observed in this study.

All government departments should bear social responsibilities in the protection of historic and cultural heritage, coordinating benefits for all stakeholders in the protection and development of rural lower grade historic architecture. Some factors, such as the power of the news and the civil mobilization in protection efforts, can help convert lower grade historic buildings from being property-led to conservation-led, and local government is the most powerful force among all the stakeholders (Yildirim 2015:121–145). However, despite that, only Villagers should also recognize the value of their heritage, the plans led by the state or private capital could work (Zhang and Wu 2016:228–241).

To preserve rural lower grade historic buildings, it is necessary to encourage the villagers to realize that their houses have benefits for them. The government could promote heritage sustainability and indirect economic interest through less investment, making private capital interests guaranteed by law. Therefore, historic and cultural education should be promoted to improve stakeholder perceptions of historic buildings, and policy and regulation could insure building utilization and guarantee continued interest.

## Developing Historic and Cultural Education

A key component of protection and reasonable use of rural lower grade historic buildings is education. One of the main reasons that vernacular buildings were destroyed was that villagers underestimated or did not know the value of them (see Table 1). Other stakeholders recognized the value of lower grade historic buildings but lack of funds also influenced historic building protection because the benefits were underestimated. Therefore, while only the government, professionals, and potential investors paid attention to historic value, the attitude of the owner was vital and formed the basis on whether they protected a lower level historic building they own.

Developing education from the perspective of culture and history, and creating awareness of the economic benefits, are important for historic building protection. Education should be diversified, including lectures, inviting villagers to visit well-developed villages to improve awareness and so on. All stakeholders would realize that rural historic buildings are not troublesome, but rather provide benefits if they are protected and developed well, and it is possible to combine the historic and cultural education and economic interest, for example, the lower-grade historical buildings can be used as social practice stages for university and college students, or as project sites for public welfare organizations.

## Multi-Level Policy and Regulations for Lower Grade Buildings

In addition to education, regulations and policies must be developed by the government to protect and develop lower grade historic buildings because they are likely to be damaged due to their underestimated value and other reasons. Most of historic buildings were uninhabitable, the most urgent for those that the historic buildings are their only houses is to improve their living conditions, but each villager can own only one homestead and their houses transaction were severely restricted according to Land Administrative Law of People's Republic of China.

These policy and regulations should include an evaluation and transaction system which ensures (1) rural lower grade historic buildings business freely, (2) a circulation principle for lower grade buildings (or parts) based on property rights, (3) advocacy and constraint on commercial use of such buildings, and (4) rewards for the use of rural lower grade historic buildings as public facilities (such as a folk museum). Government departments should conduct a thorough survey of such buildings on the house property, the inhabitants, and construction quality in order to make more applicable measures.

In recent years, the Chinese government has attempted to carry out some reforms the rural house property rights, such as building the securitized land exchange system in Chongqing since 2008 (Wu et al. 2018:559–569) and launching rural housing property rights (including the rural homesteads) mortgage pilot since 2015. The latter adjusts the non-mortgage regulation of rural collective homestead right in “Property Law” and “Guarantee Law.” It is a significant progress on the implementing the usufructuary right of rural land and making lower grade historic buildings transaction possible. But there are some limitations such as lack of evaluation institutions and regulation of repaying the loan, trade restriction among specific groups and regions, and so on.

## A Benefit Sharing Mechanism for Different Stakeholders

One of the keys to successfully preserving historic buildings is whether stakeholders obtain benefits. The protection and use of buildings is related to the villagers' interests. Fundamentally, historic buildings benefit all society, and it is unreasonable to make the villagers improve their living conditions restrictedly or to make them bear all the cost of house protection. One of the important way to preserve lower grade historic buildings well is that private capital invest to the lower grade historic buildings, both the owners and private capital need an appropriate benefit sharing mechanism to realize their goals.

Therefore, in order to better protect and exploit historic buildings, a benefit sharing mechanism should guarantee the interests of all stakeholders through appropriate guidance and policies, explore legal channels of private capital investment. For example, establishing linkages among stakeholders will be important to all the stakeholders and the historic buildings. Some employment and social security policies may propel the owners to withdraw from the rural homesteads (Chen et al. 2017:524–530). At the same time, some regulations should be made to encourage private capital investment in the lower grade historic buildings.

## Endogenous Development Impetus for the Village

As a recommended model for rural development, endogenous development has mainly been applied to the rural tourism development. Rural resources are the foundation of tourism development, rural historic buildings can help achieve endogenous village development and endogenous development can promote the rural historic buildings' preservation through perfect planning. In the process of preserving and utilizing historic buildings and promoting rural endogenous development, all social groups and individuals should be mobilized to make use of their creative abilities, social capital, human resources development, and collective action and learning. The role of local elites is also important, thus maximizing local potential and regenerating lower grade historic buildings.

## Conclusion

This study focused on rural lower grade historic buildings because higher grade historic buildings have been thoroughly discussed in academic literature. Rural lower grade buildings have received scant attention and are disappearing or being destroyed for a variety of reasons. Our analysis, based on a set of qualitative interviews with a small number of government officials, private capital interests, and property owners showed that their attitudes were vital to the development of the lower grade historic buildings. Collaborative action and governance are very important, as well as technology (Abu Al Haija 2012:83–92; Donovan and Gkartzios 2014:334–343).

The protection and utilization of lower grade rural buildings should be oriented around rural endogenous development and guided through planning to stimulate internal and external power, coordinate the interests of all stakeholders, safeguard stakeholder interests, and establish strategic partnerships between the rural collective

organization, property owners, the government, and social capital. It should establish a fair and reasonable interest distribution mechanism and ultimately make historic buildings play an important role in sustaining rural features (Donovan and Gkartzios 2014:334–343) during rural development.

Local governments are the best-positioned actors capable of ensuring coordination among other stakeholders (Yıldırım 2015:121–145). Fortunately, the local government has realized the importance of rural lower grade historic buildings as some rural homestay projects in China have brought economic benefits and energy to some villages. The government plays a crucial role for historic buildings in urban and suburban areas, and must first balance the benefits and contradictions between different agencies. For ex-urban historic buildings, the government should ensure that historic buildings are a resource and not a burden in the process of development. Difficulties still exist, however, and the benefits from lower grade building conservation are delayed while the apparent contradiction between rapid modernization and building preservation can be puzzling, especially in developing countries. This paper aimed to explore how to carry out endogenous development of lower grade historic buildings and found that the most important factor was promoting common action amongst all stakeholders.

There were some limitations to this study, however, due to the way the cases were selected and the relationship between the village and the city, building function, and form. In all cases the lower grade historic buildings had not been well preserved or developed. Additional cases where lower grade historic buildings had been well developed would enrich this research in the future.

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