

Rural Reconstruction through Art: The Sinicized Construction of Earth Art Festivals

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Abstract: Earth Art breaks through the boundaries of traditional art spaces. Taking nature as its medium and locality as its core, it has become an important paradigm linking artistic creation and ecological issues. Along with the advancement of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, the Earth Art Festival, as a new form of practice for art to intervene in rural areas, has developed rapidly in China and achieved localized construction. This paper sorts out the theoretical origin of Earth Art, systematically sorts out its theoretical origin, development context, core characteristics and global practical experience, and focuses on the localized construction path in the Chinese context. Combined with the social context of Chinese rural areas, this paper analyzes the practical logic and value effects of typical cases such as Nanhai in Guangdong and Fuliang in Jiangxi, reveals the unique paths of China's Earth Art Festival in cultural inheritance, community activation, industrial empowerment and other aspects, and provides theoretical reference and practical reference for art to promote rural cultural revitalization and sustainable development in the new era.

Keywords: Earth Art; Earth Art Festival; locality; rural reconstruction through art; rural revitalization

1. Earth Art

Earth Art emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. It emphasizes the use of non-traditional materials, and attaches importance to the local creation process and the expression of concepts[13]. From the spatial dimension, Earth Art adheres to the anti-museum concept. Artists break away from the “white cube” of the art museum system, push their creation directly to the natural site, and place large-scale works in real landscapes. Taking natural materials such as soil, rocks and water as media, artists create works that integrate with the environment through digging, piling, carving and other methods, explore the relationship between human and nature, and reflect the site-specificity of art[12][13].

In addition, Earth Art emphasizes the connection between works and “space” as well as “the audience’s body”[9]. It breaks the audience’s identity as bystanders, allows the audience to directly experience the physical presence of space, time and matter by approaching and walking around the works, thus transforming art from “something to watch” into “an environmental experience that one is immersed in”[13]. From the late 1970s to the 1980s, global environmental issues became increasingly prominent. Earth artists began to reflect on anthropocentrism, and ecological consciousness was gradually integrated into their works[4]. They regarded the earth as a living ecosystem that needs to be respected and restored; artistic creation also shifted from “Art in the Landscape” to “Art as Landscape”. Works are no longer limited to pure aesthetic expression, but also bear the social mission of ecological restoration.

2. Rise, Definition and Characteristics of Earth Art Festivals

When it comes to the site-specific feature of Earth Art Festivals, relevant prototypes emerged long ago. The Aldeburgh Festival in the UK, for instance, is an international music festival developed based on a coastal fishing town. Centered on classical music, it integrates opera, contemporary art, installation art and site-specific creations. Local streets, alleys, churches, beaches and the derelict industrial building Snape Maltings have all been renovated into art spaces. This initiative revived the declining rural communities in Suffolk after the war and boosted regional cultural regeneration.

In the early 21st century, Earth Art took root and evolved in Japan, which spurred the development of Earth Art Festivals[2]. Fram Kitagawa put forward the core concept of “people living within nature”. The concept takes satoyama-style humanized nature with frequent human interaction, as well as agricultural landscapes carrying culture, environment and history, namely social nature, as the carrier of artistic expression[1]. An ideal site-specific work is supposed to echo the satoyama community centered on villages, and highlight the rural philosophy that humans are part of nature[2]. As defined by curator Fram Kitagawa, an Earth Art Festival takes art as a medium to turn rural areas or declining regions into open “art museums”[1]. Artists are invited to stay in local villages and create works together with residents. Artworks are blended into natural landscapes, villages, abandoned buildings and public infrastructure[2][3]. One typical example is Island Kitchen

on Teshima Island of the Setouchi region (2010-2019)[2]. Such projects are regional, periodic and community-driven comprehensive cultural initiatives that realize ecological restoration, cultural inheritance and community revitalization (Fram Kitagawa, 2005). As a development model of regional revitalization driven by art intervention, it uses rural natural spaces as exhibition venues, combines artistic creation, public education, community building and cultural tourism development, and builds a cultural ecosystem where art, space and society coexist[1].

In Kitagawa's view, art acts as an important carrier to interpret rural communities, reshape village images and raise rural appeal, and serves as a counterforce against the homogenization of urban areas. He stated that high-quality site-specific art in rural spaces can revitalize rural spaces and collective memories, and strike an emotional chord among visitors[1]. Meanwhile, the aesthetic value of the festivals caters to both local residents and global art audiences, bringing about two-way interaction between outsiders and local communities. Natives can re-recognize the value of their own culture and life from external perspectives, while visitors can reflect on urban development and various problems brought by globalization by observing rural areas[2].

Traditional Earth Art mainly features individual artists creating independent conceptual works in wilderness areas. By contrast, Earth Art Festivals have evolved into regional governance practices and large-scale international contemporary art events centered on community co-creation[2]. They aim to revitalize local economy, strengthen social cohesion and rebuild cultural identity through art, tourism and community participation.

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale is held every three years. Guided by the core idea that humans are part of nature, it makes full use of idle local spaces for artistic creation and integrates closely with satoyama culture. The event attracts around 460,000 visitors each session, bringing in an annual revenue of over 60 million RMB. It effectively draws people back to rural areas, and boosts the coordinated recovery of cultural tourism and agriculture[1]. Idle spaces are revitalized for exhibitions across the whole region. Art creation is deeply combined with rural farming traditions and natural ecology, forming a sustainable revitalization model of "art plus rural areas".

The Setouchi Triennale of Japan, launched in 2010, also runs on a three-year cycle. Artworks are closely integrated with island scenery, fishing village life and historical architecture[2]. Great importance is also attached to local community participation. Iconic works including Yellow Pumpkin and the Chichu Art Museum were born here. The festival has revitalized the island economy and grown into a top cultural tourism IP in Japan, driving the development of homestays, catering, cultural and creative industries, and supporting the inheritance and sustainable development of island culture[1].

Desert X in the United States was founded in 2017 and is held biennially. Its activities span the Coachella Valley in the US and AlUla Desert in Saudi Arabia. Adhering to the idea of site-specific creation, it operates as a wall-less museum with the sky and land as its exhibition hall. Artworks are closely linked with desert landforms and indigenous history. The events focus on exploring the relationship between nature, indigenous tribes and deserts via art, while spreading ecological ideas. Representative works such as Miracle and large-scale desert installation groups have been completed here, forming a "desert art museum". The festival draws large numbers of tourists and offers an innovative approach to revitalizing ecologically fragile desert regions[14].

3. Early Development of the Sinicization of Earth Art

Starting from the mid-1980s, the reform and opening-up brought about an ideological emancipation movement. A large number of Western modern art works poured into China, and the New Wave Art Movement emerged in the domestic art circle. It was during this period that Earth Art took initial shape, and performance art was also introduced into the country[11]. Chinese scholars have pointed out that as a concept originating from the West, Earth Art has undergone localized transformation after entering the contemporary social and cultural context of China, with structural changes in both its connotation and denotation[11].

In its early practices in China, Earth Art was mainly interpreted from a conceptual perspective. It broke free from the restrictions of canvases and art gallery spaces. Artists took the Loess Plateau, mountains, rivers and wilderness as cultural symbols to pursue cultural root-seeking and spiritual freedom, bearing distinct features of performance and conceptual art[11]. Many artists stepped out of the white cube and created a series of outdoor works that combined human bodies with nature. They laid emphasis on the connections between the on-site setting, surroundings, human bodies and natural spaces[9]. For example, Great Earthquake · Wrapping the Great Wall (1988) created by Wen Pulin and other artists adopted the Great Wall as the venue to carry out comprehensive art activities including wrapping and performance. Another work Figure Wrapped in Red Cloth, Rocks, Sea and Firmament (1987) by Lin Chun was completed on a southern beach[11]. The work combined human bodies, red cloth and natural landforms, integrating the on-site characteristics of Western Earth Art and the traits of performance art[13].



Figure 1. Great Earthquake · Wrapping the Great Wall



Figure 2. Wrapped in Red Cloth, Rocks, Sea and Firmament

4. Sinicization of Earth Art Festivals

In recent years, China has undergone rapid urbanization, and rural vitalization has become a key policy agenda. The urban-rural gap remains substantial, and rural landscapes are transforming[3]. The rise of large-scale Earth Art Festivals has turned rural scenery into temporary exhibition spaces and cultural destinations, demonstrating how contemporary art can revitalize rural areas and boost local incomes[3]. In September 2025, seven departments including the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China jointly issued the Work Plan for “Enriching Rural Areas with Art and Culture” (2025–2027), aiming to leverage art and culture to advance comprehensive rural vitalization. Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, the plan upholds public welfare, co-construction and shared benefits, focusing on creating rural-themed artworks, providing accessible cultural services, enhancing aesthetic education in rural schools, preserving rural culture, and nurturing local cultural talents.

China boasts abundant natural and cultural resources and a vast market. Using artistic design to address social issues such as the urban-rural divide, human-nature coexistence, rural development, and aging populations holds significant research and practical value. A Chinese Earth Art Festival refers to a large-scale public art event that takes villages and nature as its spatial carrier, local culture as its core, and artistic creation as its method. It relies on rural natural environments for art creation and event planning, integrates cultural tourism development, rural construction, and community building, and ultimately achieves the goal of “revitalizing villages through art and empowering vitalization through culture” [3]. Dong Lihui and Ge Ge (2026) further note that Chinese Earth Art Festivals represent a 21st-century shift of Earth Art toward com-

munity engagement, localization, and governance — evolving from “artworks” to “art projects” and from “nature critique” to “social co-creation.”[4] In form and logic, China’s Earth Art Festivals are closer to a synthesis of site-specific art, public art, and socially engaged art, rather than Western traditional Earth Art, which emphasizes wilderness, minimalism, and natural intervention[4]. Rooted in local spaces, rural cultural contexts, and intangible cultural heritage resources, they combine the spatial attributes of environmental art, the social nature of public art, and the daily life characteristics of folk art[3][8]. By leveraging art to transform cultural capital and revitalize urban-rural spaces, they represent a practice of art-based rural construction public art that integrates Western artistic forms with China’s rural social realities[3][4].

4.1 Nanhai Earth Art Festival in Guangdong

The Nanhai Earth Art Festival is held in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. It takes the vast water-linked land as exhibition spaces and adopts the curatorial concept of “The Original Bay Area”, exploring the 40,000-year cultural heritage of Nanhai and the spirit of the Greater Bay Area. Artists create works with local materials, enabling art pieces to blend seamlessly with Lingnan water towns, mulberry-dike fish ponds and industrial heritage. The festival covers diverse landscapes including industrial relics, ecological scenic areas and ancient villages with a thousand years of history[3]. Grand Stage and Sky Merging with Water are its representative works, as presented in Figure 3. Grand Stage transforms the facade of a modern parking building into a giant colored curtain for Cantonese opera. Using the traditional patchwork of colored cloth, it incorporates local symbols such as Lingnan folk houses, wok-ear walls, dragon boats and lion dances. Its geometric composition interprets the idea that “life itself is a stage”. This work closely unites modern architectural space with local cultural roots and water town surroundings, turning functional public space into an open art venue. Located on Pingsha Island, Sky Merging with Water is a circular installation enclosed by hollowed weathering steel with a shallow pool at its center. Dense holes across the rusted metal wall let sunlight stream through and cast shifting light and shadows. The pool acts like a mirror, reflecting the sky, plants and steel structures, bringing water, sky, architecture and nature into full harmony. A walkway runs through the center, giving visitors the feeling of floating on the water as they move, while light and shadow keep changing with the passage of time[9]. Benefiting from its core location in the Greater Bay Area and convenient transportation, this festival ranks among the most accessible, locally rooted and sustainable Earth Art Festivals across China. It also drives regional development and urban-rural integration via cultural and tourism industries.



Figure 3. Art Field Nanhai Guangdong

Nanhai Earth Art Festival, the first event set eight art zones across 176 square kilometers in Xiqiao Town. Centering on the theme The Original Bay Area, it interpreted local stories of Nanhai. Artists from 15 countries and regions created 73 artworks. Upon completion, the festival received 1.14 million visits and drove cultural and tourism consumption worth 710 million yuan. The second edition extended its coverage to Xiqiao and Jiujiang Towns. Ten art zones were built along the water network of Sangyuanwei, with the theme upgraded to Water Defines Nanhai. Participants expanded to 30 countries and regions. The event also helped homestays, catering and other local businesses improve service and raise incomes. The third session further expanded to Xiqiao, Jiujiang and Danzao Towns, covering 414.36 square kilometers in total. It added new featured sites such as industrial relics, river islets and time-honored ancient villages, and adopted the theme Towards the Water in line with local urban development strategies. It pioneered the nation's first index evaluating art-driven urban and rural development, and launched the mini-program Nanhai Art Pass.

4.2 Fuliang Earth Art Festival, Jiangxi

Launched in 2021 amid ancient villages in China's inland southwest region, the Fuliang Earth Art Festival takes rural artistic revitalization as its core orientation. It uses Hanxi Village in Fuliang County and surrounding ancient hamlets as exhibition venues, with individual old villages and contiguous tea plantations as major carriers, featuring a compact and refined spatial layout. Centering on the micro revitalization of tea culture and the original texture of ancient villages, the festival mainly relies on tea plantations and stresses the in-depth integration of art, rural life and tea industry. Adhering to the core philosophy of Art in Fuliang, it prioritizes site-specific creation and villager participation. With iconic works such as Lamp on the Land and Mirror of the Sky as key highlights, the festival closely combines local tea culture and the landscapes of ancient villages, as shown in Figure 4. Art interventions revitalize rural spaces, drive the coordinated growth of rural homestays, cultural and creative industries as well as tea tourism, and integrate art exhibitions with rural vitalization.



Figure 4. Fuliang Earth Art Festival, Jiangxi

4.3 Tonglu Earth Art Festival

The Tonglu Earth Art Festival was officially launched on May 31, 2019. As China's first event of its kind, it invited Fram Kitagawa, known as the "Father of Earth Art Festivals", to serve as chief curator[1]. Guided by the core idea of "revitalizing rural areas through art", the festival takes Tonglu's landscapes and ancient villages as exhibition sites. Among local landmarks, the Zhong Family Mansion was built in the Jiaqing reign of the Qing Dynasty. It is the only remaining clan settlement residence in Tonglu and also the largest single Ming and Qing architectural complex in the area[3], as shown in Figure 5. The festival interprets local history, natural surroundings and cultural features via artistic works, taps into indigenous strengths and facilitates interpersonal communication. The Fangshan Earth Art Festival is positioned as a core driver for rural vitalization and an upgraded model of all-for-one tourism. Held every three years, it steadily revitalizes rural vitality. It invites artists from across the globe to create site-specific works, transforming abandoned villages and natural farmlands into large-scale art installations.



Figure 5. Tonglu Earth Art Festival

5. Existing Problems of Earth Art Festivals in China

China's rural areas are currently undergoing rapid urban transformation. Different from the overall population decline seen in Japan, rural China presents a complex landscape featuring two-way migration between urban and rural areas, migrant workers who split their lives between cities and hometowns, rural hollowing out alongside returning entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, rural regions are plagued by broken cultural heritage, weak community cohesion, underdeveloped industrial foundations and inadequate public services. Local residents have strong demands for income growth, improved living environments and cultural enrichment. Noticeable regional disparities also make the overall development far more complicated.

Against this backdrop, practices that adopt art-based rural construction and Earth Art Festivals as major approaches have revealed a host of problems. Most projects simply copy the mature Japanese model and one-sidedly pursue visual spectacle and online popularity. The root cause lies in weak local expression. Such works fail to take root in local history, folk traditions and rural features, and merely transplant urban-style art installations into the countryside or pile up superficial cultural symbols. Consequently, the artworks hardly blend into local surroundings or strike an emotional chord with communities, resulting in poor regional uniqueness. In terms of creation, most projects are led by artists and local governments, while villagers remain passive recipients. Local residents are often treated as onlookers rather than co-creators. Visitors tend to stay for a short time with a single consumption structure.

Furthermore, the operation of most Earth Art Festivals relies excessively on government funding, with little participation from social capital. The funding sources are overly single and structurally imbalanced. Most events thrive during the festival period but fade away afterwards due to a lack of long-term strategic planning, professional operation teams and regular maintenance mechanisms. Deficiencies in artwork management, industrial cultivation and sustained community participation hinder the formation of influential and sustainable brands. The shortage of interdisciplinary curators and operational talents further leads to inadequate capabilities in professional execution, public education and publicity services, ultimately restricting the high-quality and sustainable development of domestic Earth Art Festivals[3].

6. Prospect

While art-led rural construction via Earth Art Festivals still suffers from homogeneous creation, weak local characteristics, insufficient community participation, inadequate industrial integration, monotonous operation models and talent shortages, this approach remains highly promising and practically valuable for integrating art into rural vitalization.

The second Nanhai Earth Art Festival in Guangdong focused on empowering industries across the region. It received 1.36 million visits, drove cultural and tourism consumption of over 930 million yuan and drew social investment exceeding 550 million yuan, greatly revitalizing the culture of Lingnan water towns and upgrading rural industries. The Fuliang Earth Art Festival in Jiangxi delves into local tea culture. Its two editions have attracted more than 300,000 visitors in total, created jobs and raised incomes for over 200 villagers, and helped protect ancient villages and encourage young people to return. Supported by long-term planning and professional curation, the Tonglu Earth Art Festival in Zhejiang has introduced more than 60 art and cultural tourism projects, building a benchmark model for art-based rural construction in the Yangtze River Delta.

For long-term development, rural art festivals require systematic optimization in multiple dimensions to foster a development philosophy featuring harmony between humans and land, cultural empowerment and community co-construction. First of all, art festivals should in-depth field research is needed to fully explore local historical heritage, folk traditions and daily life. Blind copying and superficial transplantation of foreign rural art models must be avoided, so as to develop original

art practices with distinct regional cultural identities and spiritual connotations.

Secondly, the community co-creation mechanism needs to be restructured to guarantee the principal role of villagers. A tripartite cooperation system among artists, local governments and villagers should be established to turn local residents from passive audiences into active co-creators. Respecting local lifestyles, collective memories and rural sentiments helps forge close bonds between artistic creation and community relations.

Meanwhile, a diversified operation system shall be built to enhance the sustainability of rural art projects. It is necessary to change the over-reliance on government funding, introduce social capital and diverse participants, and formulate long-term strategic plans, deploy professional operation teams and set up regular maintenance mechanisms. In this way, artwork management, industrial cultivation and community participation can be maintained in the long run.

Finally, more curators and managers with a vision for contemporary art, knowledge of rural culture and practical rural operation capabilities need to be trained. Local guide, maintenance and promotion teams also require improvement to elevate the overall performance of public education, cultural communication and community engagement.

7. Conclusion

Western Earth Art takes nature as its medium, advocates site-specific creation and ecological concepts, and breaks the spatial constraints of art museums. In the early 21st century, Earth Art Festivals evolved through localization in Japan, shifting further toward community co-creation and becoming an important model to revitalize declining regions and rural areas. Earth Art in China started as conceptual practices in the 1980s. Driven by the Rural Revitalization Strategy in recent years, Earth Art Festivals have developed rapidly. They have taken on localized features combining site-specific art, public art and socially engaged art. Different from the Western practice focused on wilderness creation, they lay more stress on exploring local culture, promoting community co-construction and advancing urban-rural integration. Taking typical domestic cases including Nanhai in Guangdong, Fuliang in Jiangxi and Tonglu in Zhejiang as research samples, this paper analyzes their achievements in cultural heritage inheritance, ecological revitalization, industrial driving and community building. It concludes that China's Earth Art Festivals must be rooted in rural resources, balance artistic expression and social demands, and establish sustainable operation mechanisms. Looking ahead, domestic Earth Art Festivals need to further leverage the power of local culture, promote the integration of artistic creation and rural society, and improve the collaborative governance and long-term operation system involving multiple stakeholders. Continuous exploration of localized paths for art to serve rural vitalization will provide theoretical reference and practical experience for art to boost comprehensive rural development and urban-rural integration in the new era.

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