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Citation

Hsu, L. -A. (2025). *Cultural Heritage in Matsu Island: Struggles under Late Modernity.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4258173

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cultural Heritage in Matsu Island: Struggles under Late Modernity

MA Thesis in Asian Studies: History, Arts and Culture of Asia

Leiden University

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July 2025

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Questions

In Taiwan, the concept of cultural heritage began to receive attention after the economic boom of the 1970s. This was influenced not only by the global heritage preservation movement but also by Taiwan's unique political conditions, which made cultural heritage an important strategy for national identity construction. Matsu, located in the Taiwan Strait, consists of five islands: Nangan, Beigan, Dongyin, Xiju, and Dongju. Historically, Matsu was a Cold War frontline between Taiwan and China, under strict military control for nearly forty years. Because of its remote location and history as a military zone, Matsu was late to engage in cultural heritage preservation compared to the main island of Taiwan. However, after the lifting of martial law in 1992, tourism and cultural heritage preservation were introduced as alternative strategies for economic development. These efforts were intended to address the crisis of population decline and revitalize the region’s economy.

Since the 1990s, the Matsu local government has implemented various tourism development plans. Traditional settlements in Matsu have gradually become focal points for both local governments and community residents. This attention eventually led the Taiwan central government to approve financial support for preservation and restoration projects. Notably, some residents have described the large amount of funding as "suffocating love" (Matsu Weekly Newsletter 2005). The need to use up the excess budget has kept the area under continuous changes and renovations. As a result, Matsu has gradually lost much of its original character and appearance.

This study explores how cultural heritage in Matsu is practiced through governance networks, spatial compositions, and everyday life. It approaches the topic through three interrelated questions:

1. How did the concept of cultural heritage emerge in Matsu?
2. What kinds of regulatory frameworks are involved in cultural heritage governance?
3. How do these regulatory frameworks shape and influence people's restoration

practices?

Through the case of Matsu, this research aims to demonstrate how cultural heritage serves as a way of governance that links history to the future, shaping local development imaginaries and cultural identities. It emphasizes that the meaning of cultural heritage is not fixed but is continuously produced and reinterpreted within shifting social relations.

1.2 Research Background

Matsu is located in the Taiwan Strait and is currently administered by the Republic of China (Taiwan) as part of Lienchiang County. As a peripheral region, the production of history in Matsu has differed from those of the central areas. Shifts in political regimes and external powers have often left Matsu unable to determine its own fate. This historical condition has, in turn, shaped the survival strategies of its residents. As a result, both the formation of Matsu's physical space and the production of its cultural heritage have been deeply influenced by its geographical and political context.

In this section, I adopt a timeline to examine the relationship between Matsu's spatial development and its social transformation, with particular attention to the impacts of military rule and modernization. The period of martial law is used as a key historical marker because it positioned Matsu as a frontline in geopolitical conflicts. This experience not only illustrates how peripheral regions are subjected to external interventions, but also reveals how local communities have negotiated their values and identities within these constraints.

(1) Before the Implementation of Military Law (1800s ~ 1956)

The Matsu Islands are located approximately 15 kilometers from the coast of China and about 200 kilometers from Taiwan's main island. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the islands primarily served as stopover points for fishing and maritime activities, used briefly by fishermen and pirates. It was not until the mid-to-late Qing period (1800s) that settlers from eastern Minn China gradually migrated to Matsu and established permanent communities. These settlers maintained close ties with their ancestral homeland, shaping a local way of life deeply rooted in that connection.

Matsu's terrain is largely hilly and rocky, with limited flat land. Settlements were typically built around coves, following the contours of the hills, with temples often serving as both spiritual and spatial centers. There were no roads connecting the villages, and transportation relied mainly on boats. Human mobility was heavily influenced by natural conditions. These spatial constraints contributed to the residents' strong identification with their places of origin.

Traditional settlements were constructed using locally available materials: granite for exterior walls, Fuzhou fir for timber structures, and roofs covered with red or gray tiles. To adapt to the island's rainy, foggy, and windy climate—and to guard against pirates—houses typically featured small windows on the seaward side. To make maintenance easier, the roof tiles are not fixed in place but are held down with stones. This helps air flow through the building, so people call them "breathing houses". These characters reflect the residents' adaptation to the natural environment and have come to define the distinctive spatial form of Matsu's traditional settlements.

(2) During the Period of Military Governance (1956-1992)

After World War II, the Chinese Civil War broke out. In 1949, the Kuomintang (KMT) was defeated and retreated to Taiwan, while the Chinese Communist Party declared the founding of the People's Republic of China in the same year. The KMT quickly imposed martial law in Taiwan and Penghu, establishing a party-state system and promoting a political agenda centered on "retaking the mainland China". Matsu became a frontline in the anti-communist campaign, and in 1956, along with Kinmen, entered a phase of full military control. Military authorities dominated local governance, education, economy, and infrastructure, with military logic penetrating all aspects of society.

Although martial law was lifted in Taiwan in 1987, the military regime in

Kinmen and Matsu persisted until 1992 due to the deep embedding of military power in local governance. During this time, they introduced new building materials such as reinforced concrete, constructed roads connecting settlements, improved water and electricity systems, and upgraded production facilities to promote modernization. Development was framed as a symbol of progress. Concrete houses built with military assistance began to appear in traditional settlements, standing alongside existing traditional buildings. Hills and coastlines were filled with concrete air-raid shelters and blockhouses, serving both as defense infrastructure and tools for surveillance of the local population.

Under military rule, Matsu residents lost contact with relatives in their ancestral homes, and the traditional fishing economy that once sustained the islands became increasingly unsustainable. Daily livelihood shifted toward serving the needs of the large number of soldiers, and a variety of service-oriented spaces emerged, including grocery stores, food stalls, bathhouses, and nightclubs. As living conditions became more difficult and job opportunities remained limited, large numbers of residents migrated to Taiwan's main island in search of stability and better prospects. Traditional settlements were gradually abandoned, and many fell into disrepair, with collapsed roofs and only stone walls left standing.

(3) After the End of Military Governance (1992~)

In 1992, following local protests and advocacy efforts, the Kinmen and Matsu regions officially ended their wartime administrative status and held their first elections for local government leaders. At the same time, Taiwan was experiencing a rise in grassroots movements and a growing emphasis on local identity—all part of the broader process of democratization. These ideas gradually made their way into Matsu. In response to the economic shock caused by the military's withdrawal, local residents began promoting island tourism as a replacement for the former military-serving economy. Cultural heritage preservation was incorporated into tourism policies and came to be seen as a key element of local autonomy and regeneration.

During the Cold War, land use and space in Matsu were controlled by the military. After the military period ended, land administration systems were introduced and urban planning began. In 1996, the "Scenic Area Urban Plan" was introduced, making tourism the main goal for land use on the islands. Airports were built, and the military started removing landmines and barbed wire along the coast to make the area safer and more attractive for tourists.

In response, local leaders in Matsu promoted settlement preservation and community development. Four villages—Jinsha, Qinbi, Fuzheng, and Dapu—were designated as preservation areas and placed under building regulations. In 2001, the county government launched a subsidy program to guide restoration work, setting standards for design and materials.

1.3 Methodology

To better understand the relationship between space and society within Matsu's cultural heritage network, this study adopts a multi-method approach, including non-participant observation, data analysis, and digital ethnography.

First, from March to July 2024, I participated in a project commissioned by the Lienchiang County Government. The project focused on documenting cases of traditional building restoration and reuse, and on providing policy recommendations for the subsidy program. During this period, I visited multiple villages across Matsu's five islands, conducting two field trips that each lasted four to five days (May 6–9 and June 4–8). The non-participant observations used in this research are based on my experiences during these visits.

Second, I conducted a data analysis of regulations, urban plans, policy documents, and historical reports related to "settlement preservation" and "traditional building restoration" in Matsu. These materials help trace how the concept of cultural heritage entered public discourse within specific historical and policy contexts, and how it became associated with ideas of future development. I also examine how both local governments and community members have appropriated these discourses in response to local challenges.

Lastly, I analyzed editorials from local publications and conducted digital ethnography on online platforms. During the period of wartime administration, public discourse was tightly controlled by the military. After martial law was lifted, discussions on governance became more active, supported by increasing media freedom and democratization. In the digital era, platforms like the “Matsu Information Network” BBS became important spaces for expressing public opinion and shaping collective imagination.

These texts and media form what Benedict Anderson describes as an “imagined community” (Anderson 2016; Lin 2016). Taken together, official policies, local publications, and online platforms reveal how the people of Matsu construct narratives of cultural heritage.

During the writing process, ChatGPT (version: GPT-4) was used to assist with initial English translation and improving sentence flow. All content was subsequently reviewed, modified, and finalized.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first two chapters provide the introduction and literature review, while the remaining three present the research findings. A brief overview of each chapter is as follows:

Chapter Two is the literature review. It begins by discussing how cultural heritage is intertwined with modernity—emphasizing that heritage not only points to the past but also projects visions of the future. This chapter establishes the theoretical framework of the thesis, understanding cultural heritage as a dynamic network of discourse, policy, space, and practice. It then focuses on the concepts of "cultural governance," exploring how people use "culture" to mediate political and economic challenges. This includes both top-down governance strategies and bottom-up appropriations and reinterpretations by local residents.

Chapter Three presents the research findings, beginning with a focus on the material dimension. It traces the transformation of Matsu’s landscape—settlements, roads, and scenery—and how these changes have taken shape through the interplay of historical context, power dynamics, and individual choices. The introduction of modern elements such as concrete construction materials and greening projects by the government significantly altered the spatial character of the islands. During this period, strict social control and the collapse of traditional fisheries led to widespread outmigration. Many settlements were gradually abandoned, and Matsu increasingly came to be seen as a "backward" peripheral region. Within this context, the preservation and reuse of cultural heritage were repackaged and promoted as strategies for regional transformation and development.

Chapter Four analyzes cultural heritage policies following the end of military rule, demonstrating how the restoration of traditional buildings became associated with a progressive vision of the future. Within the broader context of international heritage trends and tourism development, cultural heritage became a strategic discourse used by local governments to secure financial resources. The 1996 implementation of the “Scenic Area Urban Plan” established a tourism-oriented land-use framework. Supported by central government funding, local authorities launched settlement preservation and traditional building restoration subsidies. However, this process also introduced concerns over overdevelopment driven by capitalist and neoliberal logics.

While Chapters Three and Four emphasize macro-level policies and ideological frameworks, **Chapter Five** shifts to the micro-level, examining how people actually carry out the restoration of traditional buildings. Traditionally, these buildings were constructed without formal designers. However, current heritage restoration policies require cultural intermediaries to prepare design plans and apply for subsidies, marking a sharp contrast with former building practices. Residents' choices in restoration are not solely guided by policy but also reflect contemporary needs. This chapter explores how people decide what and how to restore, showing that these everyday decisions involve political and economic considerations. Thus, the practice of cultural heritage should not be evaluated solely through the lens of “authenticity” but should be understood as a meaningful form of contemporary social practice.

2. Literature review

As a contemporary and evolving field of study, cultural heritage brings together diverse perspectives from multiple disciplines, reflecting the varying values and imaginations projected onto it by different actors. Within this academic turn, it becomes clear that the concept of cultural heritage is not entirely distinct from discourses of urban development. On the contrary, it remains closely tied to the field of planning, engaging with the relationship between space and society, and responding to shifts in both material conditions and ideological frameworks.

This review begins by anchoring the discussion of cultural heritage in its spatial materiality. Even intangible forms of heritage require a physical context in which they can be embodied and experienced. People project identity, attachment, and imagination onto space, and over time, such cumulative practices give rise to what we call "culture." As historical layers accumulate, different cultural and political forces contest, exclude, and merge within these spaces—shaped continuously through human action and interaction. Drawing from scholarship on the relationship between space and society, this literature review extends the discussion into the field of cultural heritage, with particular attention to the intersection of discourse, imagination, everyday practice, and spatial transformation.

I structure this review in two parts. The first part begins with definitions and the historical development of cultural heritage, aiming to clarify how it has come to embody future-oriented meanings in contemporary contexts. It further explores how changing ideologies and technological conditions have shaped the formation and implementation of heritage concepts across time. This section also examines current debates at both global and local levels, with special attention to how developing countries position themselves in relation to cultural heritage and its preservation.

In the second part, I examine how "cultural heritage" becomes a discourse for mobilizing resources through the concept of "cultural governance." This involves understanding how heritage is shaped by institutional frameworks, administrative procedures, and techniques of analysis. Cultural heritage can also be seen as a network of relationships that plays a mediating role between political and economic interests within neoliberal and capitalist societies. The knowledge systems and institutional structures surrounding heritage not only shape our perceptions, but also intervene in the choices we make in the present. As different stakeholders contest the meaning of cultural heritage, material space becomes not only a site of practical engagement, but also a field where political tensions are made visible.

2.1 Cultural heritage and late modernity

Although people communicate and negotiate through the term cultural heritage, its meaning is not fixed. Instead, it is continuously revised, layered, and expanded through ongoing practices and the involvement of different actors (Elena Mengoni and Matsuda 2016; Chiang et al. 2017). It carries multiple and overlapping imaginaries. This dynamic quality is also present in the material spaces that cultural heritage refers to(D. C. Harvey 2015). Even the same space may hold conflicting emotions and meanings. These differences and shifts directly shape how people use and understand that space. Despite this fluidity, scholars continue to define the concept in order to make it more analytically useful.

The concept of cultural heritage can be traced back to the post-World War II period. At the time, people sought to preserve buildings and landscapes that were damaged by war or threatened by social change (Harrison 2013c). Heritage was understood as a tangible entity—something clearly defined and officially recognized. Since the 1970s, with the rise of UNESCO and international cultural policies, the number of heritage items has grown rapidly. Its scope has also expanded significantly. In addition to physical spaces, intangible heritage—such as customs, language, skills, and oral history—has become part of the discussion(Harrison 2013b). This expansion has brought non-institutional cultural practices into view. It has offered people a way to assert identity and demand visibility (Cesari and Herzfeld 2015). However, conventional classifications often separate humans from objects. They fail to acknowledge that heritage is actually a dynamic network, deeply intertwined with social contexts, technological conditions, and historical processes (Harrison 2013d).

Every stage of the heritage process—designation, planning, restoration, and management—reveals that heritage is not only about the past. Rather, it carries imagined futures shaped by different ideological forces (Harrison 2013a). These imagined futures motivate people to act in particular ways. Such ideologies are closely linked to the values of postwar modern societies.

In an era of global competition and capitalist expansion, people experience growing anxiety. On the one hand, there is fear of being left behind. On the other, there is concern over the disappearance of tradition and cultural loss. Behind this anxiety lies a modern belief in progress and a linear view of time. This belief, rooted in Enlightenment thought, imagines that human reason and planning can shape the future and control uncertainty (Foucault 2010:1-40). From this system of belief comes a set of tools (Harrison 2013d): rules for classification, procedures for planning, and standards for conservation and repair.

Contemporary society, shaped by digital technologies and new forms of mobility, increasingly reflects the features of late modernity. Under the conditions of time-space compression, our perceptions of space and time have shifted (D. Harvey 2006). Things emerge and disappear quickly. Information circulates at high speed, but is often short-lived. This fluidity blurs the boundaries between the global and the local. It also destabilizes the divisions between space and culture (Cresswell 2004:43-49).

In this context, international organizations promote heritage models rooted in Western frameworks. Developing countries are drawn into these systems. They use these standards of “progress” to define their own cultural value and legitimacy (Yen 2005). At the same time, heritage has become a valuable asset in the global market. (Bendix 2018). As a result, increasing resources are directed toward the production and packaging of heritage, with the hope of generating future capital.

2.2 Cultural governance and heritage practice

In this section, I use the concept of cultural governance to examine how cultural heritage is constructed and practiced as a discourse, and why it should be understood analytically as a dynamic network. The notion of governance builds on Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, which departs from traditional top-down rule. Instead, governmentality refers to a set of power techniques that combine knowledge, procedures, analysis, calculation, and strategy to guide individuals to self-regulate and restrain themselves indirectly (Foucault 1991:102-103). From this perspective, governmentality concerns how power operates through networks of relations and how it penetrates and presents in everyday life.

Foucault’s early work on governmentality focused on political economy, liberalism, and neoliberalism, arguing that markets—often seen as autonomous—are in fact key objects of governance (Foucault 2008:51-74). Under the guise of maintaining free market order, the state intervenes to achieve governance aims, such as population management and productivity enhancement. In this context, knowledge systems such as public health, statistical tools, and spatial planning become essential instruments for governing society. In his later work, Foucault shifted attention from knowledge structure to the formation of subjectivity, emphasizing how individuals are shaped as particular subjects within the system of governance—how they come to recognize themselves, relate to others, and internalize normative frameworks (Foucault 2010b). In this sense, forms of knowledge, normative frameworks of behavior, and subjectivation comprise an empirical approach to the analysis of governance (Foucault 2010b:3).

In contemporary research on space and social analysis, governmentality has been extended to include a broader range of mobilizable resources—natural landscapes, infrastructure, and more. Culture, too, has become a tool of governance in this expanded frame (Bang 2004; Wang 2011). Culture not only anchor identity but is used by governing actors to shape political goals and social order. It becomes a medium of power in practice. Under such logic, culture is constructed as a discursive resource that can be mobilized for governance. It enables people to organize meanings, direct action, and legitimize governance by invoking “culture” as a way to manage political and economic crises (Wang 2010:5). Cultural governance, then, is understood as a field where political and economic tensions are negotiated (Wang 2010:10).

When applied to heritage, the idea of cultural governance suggests that heritage is not merely a technical effort to preserve the past but a discursive field where multiple agendas—ethnic identity, tourism development, local economy, and residents’ livelihoods—are coordinated and contested. Heritage is not fixed; its meaning shifts across contexts. As heritage discourse travels from global to local, from national policy to personal everyday practice, its significance becomes more complex and fluid. This echoes Foucault’s reflections on the formation of subjectivity

(Wang 2010:16). Thus, cultural heritage governance should not be seen solely as a state mechanism. We must also consider how people interpret the idea of heritage and how these understandings shape their actions and decisions.

Additionally, scholars have emphasized the need to incorporate “space” into the analysis of cultural governance. When culture serves as a medium of governance, its implementation often takes material form. People's words and actions shape space, just as space influences perception and behavior (Harrison 2013a:227-228). For this reason, the physical appearance of space and the meanings it carries become contested fields. Both authorities and resistors actively mobilize resources and discourse to legitimize their actions (Huang 2016; Lazzaretti 2021). In other words, materiality is a key dimension of governance, and space becomes a site where social tensions and conflicts are made visible (Wang 2011).

Today, cultural heritage is no longer seen as a static list of things to be preserved. It is understood as an ongoing process—produced, practiced, and reinterpreted within shifting social relations. Based on the above discussion, the governance of cultural heritage and settlement preservation in Matsu can be seen as a dynamic network of actors and systems. This includes the knowledge forms, institutional frameworks, and subject-making processes that shape how heritage is defined and practiced. Through this analytical lens, we can better understand the multiple meanings and logics embedded in heritage governance and how heritage is mobilized, negotiated, and reimagined across different contexts.

3. Cultural Landscape as the Intersection of History, Power, and Individual Choices

After arriving at the airport on Nangan Island, Matsu, travelers follow winding mountain roads toward the village. Along the way, they are surrounded by dense forests, which feel similar to the low-elevation woodlands of Taiwan. As they go downhill, they reach Jieshou Village , a valley settlement that serves as Matsu's administrative center and most populated area. However, the airport, roads, tall buildings, and even the forest are not part of Matsu's original landscape. These features were built over the past fifty years, shaped by social changes and different stages of development.

Matsu's landscape is more than just physical change—it also reflects history and political power. Landscape, as something material, also carries memories and serves as a tool for governance. Through it, we can see how national development ideas and local life experiences have shifted over time. This chapter focuses on the material aspects of Matsu's changing landscape—its buildings, roads, and natural surroundings—and looks at how these elements were shaped by history, power, and individual choices.

The first section looks at the military period and how military planning and materials changed Matsu's space. It shows how military modernity brought in concrete buildings and new infrastructure, changing the shape of the islands. The second section explores how military rule affected daily life. Under strict control and the collapse of the fishing industry, many people left the islands. As a result, Matsu was seen as a remote and underdeveloped area, and many villages became empty or abandoned. The third section looks at how, after the end of military rule, cultural heritage was reimagined as a way to support local revitalization and imagine a new future for Matsu.

Following Foucault's framework of governmentality (Foucault 2010b:3), this section focuses on how certain forms of knowledge have shaped the way people understand heritage and renovate space. By looking at changes of material worlds, I show how ideology has influenced Matsu's landscape. Military rule played a key role in reshaping the island's appearance. At the same time, because of long-term military control, Matsu did not go through the same kind of urban development that erased historical traces in Taiwan’s main island. Instead, many parts of the landscape still keep memories of the past. These traces allow people to understand how Matsu has changed over time and also provide a foundation for the next chapter’s discussion on cultural heritage as a form of governance.

3.1 Coverage: Concrete, Roads, and Trees

Before becoming a strategically significant military zone, the Matsu Islands had long served as a temporary stopover for fishermen and pirates. Many areas still preserved their natural landscapes, untouched by human intervention. However, with the arrival of military logic, land and greening were gradually brought under measurement and control, and the islands were spatially reorganized according to defense needs. The original natural scenery was replaced by various military and infrastructural installations, including roads, blockhouses, planted greenery, landmines, and barbed wire. During this period, landscape transformation was heavily directed by state power, aiming to construct the islands into a firmly integrated military network.

Since the media was state-controlled at the time, spatial development and governance narratives can largely be traced and analyzed through government-issued newspapers, audio-visual records, and official publications. These spatial transformations also remain deeply embedded in the memories of both local residents and the conscripted soldiers stationed there, becoming important sources for later accounts of local memory. By reviewing these historical materials, I aim to examine how the ideology of military modernity fundamentally affected Matsu’s cultural landscape.

> “As you step onto this island, from afar you can see vast stretches of green hills, neatly arranged villages, and well-connected modern roads. Although the slopes are steep, the roads are smooth and well-paved.”— (Taiwan Film Culture Company 1971)

In A Glimpse of Matsu, a film produced in 1967 by the Taiwan Film Culture Company, the state's Cold War-era investment in infrastructure across Matsu is clearly illustrated. The film's narration and visuals highlight the "green hills," "tidy villages," "new cars," and "smooth roads" as symbolic representations of development t(Taiwan Film Culture Company 1967; 1971). These depictions of the material world were framed as signs of freedom, progress, and modernization—serving as instruments of national ideology. Both military personnel and civilians were mobilized for construction labor, jointly shaping the spirit of "the military and civilians as one, sharing the same fate on the island", all in service of the larger anti-communist and nation-reclaiming goals.

> "Greening Matsu is the fact, not a slogan. From barren hill to green woods. It is not a miracle, but the fruit fertilized by the sweat and blood of both military and civilian personnel over the years. Look, green trees cover everywhere."
>
> —(Matsu Administrative Committee 1969)

During this period, one of the most significant changes in Matsu's landscape was the emergence of forested areas. Historically, as an offshore island, Matsu's hills were largely barren, with limited vegetation coverage. In response to military needs for concealment, the armed forces began promoting afforestation efforts from the early stages of their occupation. Soldiers and local residents were encouraged to plant trees, and the military not only introduced suitable tree species and cultivation techniques but also implemented incentive and penalty systems through local governance to advance the greening of the islands (Matsu Daily Newspaper 1964).

In promotional films produced by the Taiwan Film Company, lush green scenery was repeatedly emphasized and framed as concrete evidence of the state's developmental achievements under national governance. At the same time, certain types of "military plants," such as sisal and agave, were widely planted during this period to serve defensive purposes along the coastline. These plants remain a visible part of Matsu's tourism landscape today. The act of "greening" thus served not only military objectives but also stood in contrast to the earlier imagery of barren, dusty landscapes, repackaged as a symbol of progress and modern living.

Another important factor that transformed the island's landscape was the introduction and widespread use of concrete. During the military administration, there was a strong demand for large-scale infrastructure. At the same time, cross-strait transportation was interrupted, making traditional materials hard to obtain. As a result, stone and timber—once common in traditional architecture—were quickly replaced by concrete as the dominant building material. Under government policy, residents were encouraged to construct concrete houses, many of which were designed and built with the assistance of military personnel. These buildings often shared standardized spatial layouts and structural features.

In addition to residential homes, concrete was extensively used in the construction of roads, blockhouses, military camps, public housing, and various public buildings, including schools, administrative offices, nursing homes, and orphanages. Bags of cement were shipped to Matsu's harbors and manually transported by soldiers to construction sites across the islands. The use of concrete not only represented the adoption of a new building technology but also symbolized the deeper integration of state governance into everyday life and the built environment. It fundamentally reshaped the spatial structures of Matsu and remains a key material trace through which we can observe and interpret the island's architectural history and local transformations.

3.2 Legacy: Leaving the Island

During the wartime administration, Matsu's population grew from 10,984 in 1956 to around 17,000 by 1971. However, in the following two decades, the number dropped sharply to about 5,500. During the same period, the military presence in Matsu reached approximately 23,000 soldiers—far exceeding the number of civilians. At its peak, nearly 40,000 people were living on the islands.

The arrival of the military not only reshaped the physical landscape of Matsu but also transformed its social and economic networks. These changes were not driven solely by military power on the islands but were also part of broader geopolitical and economic dynamics. This section explores why, during these 36 years, many Matsu residents chose to leave the islands—and how those historical contexts continue to affect decisions about traditional settlement restoration today.

In the first decade of military presence, the army invested in improving infrastructure and medical services. As a result, the population increased significantly during the early phase of wartime governance. At the same time, however, life in Matsu was heavily restricted. People lived under strict regulations, including curfews, blackouts, travel permits, telecommunications control, financial restrictions, and limits on the use of electrical appliances(Chen 2020).

Fishermen were restricted in their working hours and prohibited from selling their catch to China. For many who relied on fishing for their livelihoods, these restrictions made it difficult to survive. Moreover, before 1979, Matsu was subjected to bi-daily propaganda artillery shelling by CPC, exposing residents to constant danger.

Faced with life-threatening risks and a lack of job opportunities, people began to consider relocating to Taiwan's main island.

> "After my father was injured, he was heartbroken by my younger brother's death… He later opened a small grocery store to make a living and also learned photography to run a photo studio. But he always lived in the shadow of the shellings… He led our entire family across the sea to Taiwan—leaving behind the place closest to his heart, which had also brought him lifelong sorrow."—(Matsu Information Network 2017)

In addition to the push of wartime trauma, Taiwan's rapid economic growth in the 1970s also pulled residents away from Matsu. As the manufacturing industry flourished, demand for cheap labor increased. Stable income and higher wages attracted rural populations to urban centers. Matsu residents followed this trend. Some moved to Taiwan alone; others brought their entire families, leaving their traditional stone houses behind to resettle in townhouses. They adapted to new types of neighborhoods and urban lifestyles. Taoyuan, in particular, attracted many migrants from Matsu due to its proximity to military bases, markets, and factories (Matsu Information Network 2017).

Those who remained in Matsu saw their neighbors leave one by one and began to consider leaving as well. For the migrants, their feelings toward their homeland are complex. On one hand, Matsu is filled with childhood memories and emotional attachment. On the other hand, they left in their youth to pursue a broader, more prosperous future—and gradually adapted to new ways of life. These young migrants brought back new clothes, color TVs, and rice cookers (Liu 2016). Along with these appliances came new values. As they returned to increasingly empty villages, the contrast between old and new, tradition and modernity, backwardness and progress quietly settled into the collective unconsciousness. Over time, these imbalances contributed to later political tensions.

> “Earlier, our neighbor Zhu-di’s older brother moved away to work in a factory. Then the first grocery store on our street closed when my classmate Mimei’s family moved out. One by one, the second, third... In Niujiao Village, nine out of ten houses were empty.”— (Liu 2018)

During Taiwan’s democratic movement, Matsu youth who had encountered dissident political thought began to question military rule. When the military attempted to extend wartime governance in Kinmen and Matsu, protests broke out demanding local elections. However, ending wartime rule also meant a further withdrawal of soldiers, raising concerns about the collapse of local military-dependent economies.

In 2012, the Lienchiang County Magistrate, hoping to secure more infrastructure funding, proposed using offshore gambling to stimulate economic development and create jobs. This proposal created deep conflict between older and younger generations (Chen 2024). The pro-gambling administration called for “Giving Matsu a chance” (Yang 2016). But younger Matsu activists argued that relying on casino investment was not the only path forward. At the same time, they tried to empathize with the suffering and sorrow of earlier generations who had been forced to leave the islands under wartime conditions.

These debates over local development show not only a transition from a singular military logic to a more pluralistic democratic value system. They also reveal how public discussions in Matsu continue to bridge past and future timeframes. The island’s history as a military frontline continues to produce uncertainty about survival and belonging.

Thus, when we talk about Matsu’s cultural and heritage policies, we must take into account its historical trauma and unresolved future. These tensions generate a pull between “profit identity” and “island identity” (Chen 2024), and influence how people make choices today. The island’s history of oppression also adds complexity to heritage restoration. Empty villages and collapsing ancestral homes evoke a sense of loss and link material decay to personal memory and life experience. Material spaces cannot be separated from social realities. They are embedded with conflicting feelings, historical memory, and the relationships between individuals and society.

3.3 Renovation and Packaging: Cultural Heritage under Globalization

In the previous section, we examined how thirty-six years of military rule, along with Taiwan’s democratization and economic growth, affected the relationship between Matsu residents and their homeland. Whether they chose to leave or stay, people carried with them visions of the island’s future. However, the modernist ideologies inherited from military governance, coupled with anxieties over geopolitical survival, meant that post-military local policies often centered on economic development and transportation infrastructure. This section discusses how the concept of cultural heritage emerged within this context and how heritage became part of a broader political-economic discourse of governance.

In the 1990s, Taiwan was in the midst of democratization. At the same time that

Matsu ended its wartime administration and implemented local elections, ideas related to localization and community building also began to take root. Local elites introduced the concepts of “settlement preservation” and “community development” to Matsu and began initial practices. At the time, cultural preservation was strongly associated with local feeling. It emphasized oral history and fieldwork as tools for building community identity.

Although these efforts were framed as bottom-up movements, Matsu’s small population and intimate social networks meant that many of these elites also participated in formal politics. meant that many of these elites also participated in formal politics.

For instance, YiHsiung Tsao, often referred to as the “father of settlement preservation,” served as a Lienchiang County councilor from 1994 and later as the Director of the Bureau of Cultural Affairs in 2010. During this period, the idea of cultural heritage gradually merged with the discourse of tourism development and entered the everyday language and imagination of local society.

However, tensions between settlement preservation and urban development also revealed Matsu’s sense of “backwardness” and its desire for “progress” in the post-military era. In an article published in the 1998, Tsao reflected on this moment of transition. He described Matsu as standing at a developmental crossroads—on one hand, eager to modernize and escape marginalization; on the other, concerned about losing collective memory. He wrote:

> “Just over a year after the end of military administration, the people of this island, long repressed under martial rule, finally found a crack to release their emotions. Some used the chance to leave Matsu and cut the umbilical cord. Others were filled with a desire for rapid construction and economic development, blindly following Taiwan’s model.”— (Tsao 1998)

In the transitional period of democratization in Matsu, even as people sought reform and progress, it was difficult to break away from following Taiwan’s urbanization model. As a result, heritage preservation was often seen as slow-moving and impractical.

Within this context, the issue of transportation became a focal point for public dissatisfaction. Matsu officially opened to tourism in 1993, and the Beigan Airport began operations in 1994. However, the airport was originally a military facility and lacked proper safety and landing conditions. Two major plane crashes in 1996 caused severe casualties and made “transportation improvement” the top priority for tourism development (Wu, n.d.). Subsequently, calls to upgrade airport facilities, improve ferry quality, and build inter-island bridges became central demands in local infrastructure agendas (Matsu Daily Newspaper 2009; Matsu Weekly Newsletter 1992).

These aviation accidents indirectly shaped later policy directions. Yang Sui-sheng, who had been a passenger on one of the crashed flights, was elected Lienchiang County Magistrate in 2009. He proposed developing the casino industry as a way to secure funding for transportation improvements (Yang 2016; Chen 2024). Since then, Matsu has repeatedly looked to international models to shape its development vision: in 2001, it opened direct sea routes to Fujian (Mainland Affairs Council 2000); in 2012, it explored the casino industry modeled on Asian examples; and in 2022, it launched the “Matsu Biennial” ten-year plan, inspired by Japan’s Setouchi Triennale (Matsu Daily Newspaper 2023).

Each transformation positioned Matsu within a global framework of governance and sought to align its future with prevailing trends. Cultural heritage, too, was integrated into these strategies. Through repackaging and reuse, it was adapted to attract investment and new imaginaries.

Whether residents were forced to leave during military rule or sought better opportunities after its end, such decisions were shaped by a biopolitical logic of “making live” (Lemm and Vatter 2014:9). Although many supported settlement preservation and cultural policies, livelihood concerns remained at the center of public discourse. As a result, cultural heritage became a tool for managing political and economic crises. While local elites promoted the value of culture, it was often considered “useful” only when it brought tourists or attracted national funding. The meaning of cultural heritage thus was never just about the past. Rather, it was deeply tied to future-oriented visions (Harrison 2013a). In this context, traditional settlement in Matsu is no longer merely a historical fragment. It has become a governance resource—repurposed to meet contemporary needs.

4. Cultural Heritage Policy Toward the Future

In the previous chapter, I outlined the historical conditions that gave rise to cultural heritage governance in Matsu. I situated the practices discussed in this study within both their specific historical contexts and what Foucault calls the “present reality” (Foucault 2010:14). As we have seen, Matsu’s cultural governance networks are profoundly shaped by the modernity produced under decades of military rule. Following political liberalization and democratization, neoliberal ideologies continued to exert pressure, prompting local society to seek new frameworks for identity and development. Within this context, cultural heritage has become entangled with governance practices, functioning as a strategy for managing political and economic crises.

This chapter takes “normative frameworks” (Foucault 2010b:3) as a starting point to examine the actors involved in Matsu’s cultural heritage governance network as well as the institutions and procedures through which this network operates. By analyzing governance documents and institutional mechanisms, I explore how the concept of cultural heritage is represented as a legitimate language of governance that gives rise to specific models of “proper” restoration.

While previous research often considers the state as the primary unit of analysis, the case of Matsu reveals a more complex structure. In addition to the vertical division between central and local governments, the relationship between local authorities and community elites constitutes a mutually dependent yet negotiated form of governance, which deepens the layers of the governance network.

Furthermore, while most cultural heritage governance focuses on public building, the traditional settlements discussed here are primarily under private ownership. This distinction makes the implementation of heritage policies more complex, especially with regard to the negotiation of restoration, subsidy and use.

In this chapter, I divide the cultural heritage governance mechanism into two parts. Section one focuses on the funding sources behind heritage policies, examining the budget proposal and review system to uncover the institutional logic that shaped related legislation. Section two analyzes the rules of the traditional building restoration subsidy program, detailing how the subsidy process works in practice and how it produces normative effects on local actors.

4.1 Culture vs. Infrastructure: Island Imaginations in the Wave of Democracy

In current international academic discussions, the concept of cultural heritage is closely linked to consumption, tourism, and economic value (Bendix 2018). In the Taiwanese context, cultural heritage has become intertwined with the ideas of "infrastructure" and "development" through processes of political negotiation (Wang 2024), especially against the backdrop of rapid urban expansion. On the one hand, cultural heritage serves as a response to the pressures of urban development, attempting to preserve local history and cultural memory. On the other hand, in order to gain political legitimacy and secure policy resources, it must also be incorporated into the developmental logic of state governance. Within this contradictory tension, cultural heritage often inevitably appropriates the discourses and practices associated with infrastructure and construction.

This section starts by examining the highest level of policy legislation for traditional buildings restoration. I trace the institutional frameworks from which these funds are derived and analyze how development imaginaries have shaped both the governance mechanisms of cultural heritage in Matsu.

Currently, Matsu's main funding sources for settlement preservation projects can be grouped into three major programs.

First is the "Offshore Islands Development Fund" established by the Offshore Islands Development Act, which was passed in 2000. Second is the "Matsu National Scenic Area Development Plan", initiated by the Matsu National Scenic Area Headquarters under the Ministry of Transportation and Communications in 1999. Third are the "Urban-Rural Revitalization Program" initiative, launched in 1999 by the Construction and Planning Agency.

In the earlier years, the Matsu region heavily relied on the Offshore Islands Development Fund. This policy ensured that, after the end of military administration, Matsu would have sufficient funds for development. The fund operates on four-year cycles and sets out a development vision for each term, which serves as the guiding principle for budget allocation and project execution.

The Forward-looking Infrastructure Development Program was presented as a major policy initiative to “revitalize the economy and stimulate overall growth.” It includes plans for railway infrastructure, water environment improvement, and urban-rural construction in response to “future international development trends” (National Development Council 2017). Each of these programs is embedded within a multi-layered institutional structure. For local governments to secure central funding, they must align their proposals with the objectives and visions set out in each sub-program.

For instance, the “Old Buildings Program” , implemented between 2017 and 2020, was budgeted under the following structure:

> Forward-looking Infrastructure Development Program → Urban-Rural Construction → Cultural Living Circle Development Plan → Cultural Preservation → Program for the Preservation and Revitalization of Old Buildings with Heritage Potential—(Ministry of Culture Taiwan, n.d.)

In addition, a review of the Lienchiang County Offshore Islands Development Fund reveals that tourism has consistently remained a core focus in Matsu’s development strategies (Lienchiang County Government, n.d.) (See Appendix A).

In these policy and legal documents, we can observe that “culture” is often framed in terms associated with “construction,” “planning,” “urban-rural development,” and even “hope.” Within this discourse, the restoration of traditional buildings becomes a means for achieving developmental goals, which reflects how cultural heritage preservation carries an inherently future-oriented dimension.

Although the purposes and characteristics of these funding schemes differ, all three programs are financed by the central government rather than from Lienchiang County’s own fiscal revenue. This highlights Matsu’s strong dependence on the central state. Furthermore, all three programs include the word “construction” in their titles, indicating that the use of funding is centered on visible material transformation.

From the perspective of fiscal procedures, local proposals must align with the central government's policy visions to be approved. After the budget is allocated, its execution is also under the central supervision. One critical indicator in this process is the "execution rate", which significantly affects the scale of funding in the following fiscal year. This mechanism has led to a situation in which, especially during the early stages of development, Matsu was under pressure to quickly consume large sums of funding. As a result, many unnecessary concrete structures were built simply to meet spending quotas. This practice has been criticized by local residents as a form of "suffocating love" (Matsu Weekly Newsletter 2005). Excessive subsidies have not only caused substantial change to the island's landscape, but also kept many settlements in constant construction.

4.2 Tourism Industry, Local Development, and Heritage Preservation Policy

Within the structure of central–local governance, cultural policies promoted by local governments often need to respond to the overarching visions set out by higher-level development plans. When such plans prioritize tourism and regional revitalization, cultural heritage policies are gradually incorporated into them and become instruments that serve broader national development goals. In this context, the preservation and reuse of cultural heritage are not only practices rooted in local communities, but also responses to the state's governance imaginaries and its logic of resource allocation.

Currently, restoration subsidies in Matsu are implemented through two main models. The first involves full subsidies coordinated by the local government. In these cases, once restoration is completed, the government acquires a fixed-term legal right to use the building, which is then repurposed as a community space or leased to civil society groups for use as shops or guesthouses. The second model consists of partial subsidies that are initiated by residents. In these cases, the property owner hires a construction team independently, and the restored building remains in private use.

As shown in the table, between 2010 and 2019, Matsu allocated approximately NT$57 million from the "Offshore Islands Development Fund" and NT$100 million from the "National Scenic Area Development Plan" to support traditional building restoration (See Appendix B). Although these subsidies are derived from different legal frameworks, their funding logic and project content are largely similar—both prioritize the repair and improvement of the building’s exterior appearance.

Because the settlement preservation program centers on tourism development, funding is typically prioritized for enhancing the visual appearance of buildings that can be “gazed upon” by tourists (Urry 2011). This approach aims to create an aesthetic landscape ideal for photography. This preference reveals a governance logic rooted in visual publicness and is clearly reflected in the legal objectives of the policy:

> "The Lienchiang County Government has formulated this local ordinance to preserve, maintain, and reuse traditional buildings in the county, with the goal of showcasing their historical features and architectural character."— (Lienchiang County Government 2020)

In terms of spatial scope, the subsidy scheme distinguishes between buildings located within designated “settlement preservation zones” and those outside of them, with different subsidy caps. Applicants in preservation zones are eligible for NT$1.8 to 2 million, while those outside may receive NT$720,000 to 800,000. The subsidy mainly covers visually prominent elements such as stone façades, roof tiles, and doors and windows. It does not include interior renovations or upgrades to piping and electrical systems.

Moreover, only buildings that exhibit the traditional “Eastern Minn style” qualify. This excludes structures built during the wartime administration, particularly those featuring reinforced concrete additions. In other words, the current subsidy system defines “tradition” narrowly through the lens of Eastern Minn architecture. It fails to recognize the built legacy of the Cold War period as part of Matsu’s cultural heritage, reflecting a selective interpretation of what constitutes “preservable history.”

According to current regulations:

1.For traditional buildings located within settlement preservation zones,

> subsidies cover restoration of façades, timber structures, and traditional doors and windows, with full subsidies as the upper limit.
>
> 2.For buildings outside these zones, only exterior repairs and window/door restoration are subsidized, with a general cap of 40% of total costs.—
> (Lienchiang County Government 2020)

Notably, current regulations also allow the use of what is referred to as “modernized restoration methods.” This loosening of construction techniques and material requirements reflects the flexibility in practice.

Additionally, the availability of modern materials has shaped how residents approach restoration. Traditional architecture, limited by the size of available timber, typically has smaller interior heights and floor areas compared to modern buildings. In contrast, postwar reinforced concrete construction enabled more spacious, well-lit interiors, aligning more closely with contemporary living standards.

While these factors have helped make restoration more accessible and increased residents’ willingness to participate, they have also led to the preference for cost-efficient. In turn, this has made the continuation of traditional construction methods even more difficult. Overall, tourism-oriented cultural heritage policies tend to prioritize the preservation of appearance. While this helps rapidly create visible cultural landscapes, it may also exclude space for traditional craftspeople to survive. Restoration practices increasingly focus on visual reconstruction and representation, rather than the transmission of building techniques or lived memory.

5. Heritage Restoration Practices

Traditional settlements, as spaces of everyday life, often develop organically in response to the terrain and natural environment. However, as modern planning and management systems have gradually taken root, the way traditional settlements are repaired has also changed. In the past, repairs were carried out by homeowners themselves or with the help of local craftspeople. Today, the process has become more institutionalized, involving architects and construction companies in clearly divided roles. What used to be "architecture without architects" (Rudofsky 1964) has now become modern building projects that require professional design and supervision. These projects also involve other actors, such as intermediary organizations that define policy goals and oversee subsidy programs. As a result, the practice of preserving traditional settlements has become embedded in multiple layers of rules and procedures.

In the previous chapters, I discussed the knowledge systems and regulatory frameworks behind heritage policies in Matsu. This final chapter shifts to a more everyday perspective, using Foucault's notion of subjectivation to examine how people actually engage with restoration policies in practice. I focus on four types of actors involved in heritage work and analyze the ideas they express, based on their social media posts, interviews, and media reports. Through these stories, I examine how heritage repair is carried out in real life and how people's decisions are shaped by the rules that govern the process.

The first story centers on locally elected mayors, and how they negotiate with the central government to turn cultural heritage into a political resource. The second story follows cultural advocates who initially promoted the idea of settlement preservation but later grew critical during its implementation. The third story is from the viewpoint of local government staff, who are caught between state policy goals and the expectations of residents, and who face intense pressure in carrying out their work. The final story focuses on ordinary residents who own traditional buildings. It explores how they understand heritage, assess personal interests, and make decisions about whether and how to restore their homes.

By looking at these stories, I explore how subsidy policies influence people's choices and how everyday decisions reflect broader political and economic pressures. These experiences bring us closer to the lived reality of local communities. They show how residents make choices within the constraints of policy and daily life, and reveal the tensions that exist in Matsu's preservation efforts under late modern conditions.

5.1 County Mayor: Political Achievements

This section focuses on how the county mayor acts as an intermediary of cultural governance. Through the discourse of "settlement preservation," heritage was reframed as a quantifiable development goal, enabling local leaders to secure central funding and turn heritage into a political achievement. This transformation shows how cultural heritage becomes intertwined with local political language and modern development imaginaries, serving as a tool to navigate both political and economic challenges.

Although Taiwan's local elections began in 1950, Matsu remained under military administration for decades. It wasn't until 1993 that Lienchiang County elected its first county mayor. While Matsu was only beginning its democratic transition, Taiwan's main island had already undergone rapid economic development and modernization. This disparity posed a major challenge to the newly elected mayor, who sought to catch up with Taiwan's pace of progress. The top priorities included improving transportation infrastructure and developing alternative industries. At the time, terms such as "modernization" and "falling behind" became dominant in public policy discourse.

In 1994, the newly elected mayor Tsao Chang-shun launched the Matsu Today Quarterly. In one article titled "The Mayor's Reflections on County Governance," he wrote:

> "Matsu has indeed grown and improved, but too slowly. Under the fast-spinning wheel of modernization, I deeply worry that Matsu will be left far

> behind, further and further away from the times... The bottlenecks in cross-strait and inter-island transportation remain unsolved, and the past prosperity of Juguang has long faded!” —(Matsu Today Quarterly 1994)

The memory of hardship during the military period and the lag behind Taiwan’s development led to widespread frustration. Many hoped that elected leaders could reverse this sense of marginalization. Although the mayor recognized that improving transportation links with Taiwan was essential, local fiscal constraints made major projects difficult to pursue. In this context, securing central government funding became a key task. In his inaugural address, Tsao remarked:

> “After taking office, my priority was to help central ministries truly understand Matsu’s difficulties—its lack of funding, the urgent needs of the people, and the shortage of professionals—so they could offer full support to revive Matsu and create another miracle admired by the entire country.” — (Tsao 1993)

This statement highlights the distinctiveness of the local governance pattern in Matsu. Development was not only a matter of local government and its people but also a triangular negotiation involving central authorities. For county mayors, gaining central support was not just a policy tool but a political promise to their voters. “Development” and “transportation improvement” became central campaign and governance themes, with central subsidies framed as a proof of political success. This laid the groundwork for the later fusion of heritage policy with infrastructure development. In this logic, heritage preservation was no longer just about culture, it also became a means to bring in construction resources.

The discourse of "settlement preservation" gradually emerged through these dynamics. From 1993 to 1996, while topics like “local education,” “cultural associations,” and “folk culture” appeared in Matsu Today Quarterly, the term “settlement preservation” had yet to take root. During this period, public attention remained on transport, the military downsizing crisis, and future tourism planning.

It wasn’t until 1996, when tourism-oriented urban planning formally designated settlement preservation zones, and especially after Matsu was recognized as a national scenic area in 1999, that the term gained traction. Through public-private collaboration, “settlement preservation” became a legitimate claim for central resources. From then on, heritage restoration became part of state-led cultural governance, and earlier ideas of community culture and local identity gradually shifted toward alignment with economic development goals.

Following Mayor Tsao, subsequent mayors such as Liu and Chen further emphasized heritage preservation funding as their key achievement. During Liu’s term, the “Qinbi Settlement Preservation and Development Project” received tens of millions of NTD in central subsidies, making Qinbi the first demonstration site for preservation. Around the same time, the Offshore Islands Development Act was passed, establishing the Offshore Islands Development Fund as a major funding source for local infrastructure.

However, after the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won its first presidential election in 2000, national fiscal constraints began to affect local subsidies. In a 2001 article just before local elections, Matsu Daily described how local development relied on connections with central government:

> “Since taking office, Liu has been racing against time. He never missed a chance to connect with central authorities, forging strong relationships to secure resources.” — (Matsu Daily Newspaper 2001)

In 2001, KMT-affiliated Mayor Chen succeeded in making settlement preservation part of the Executive Yuan’s “Ten New Major Infrastructure Projects,” securing NT$500 million over five years. Reports emphasized how this funding depended on coordination among county mayors, legislators, and central officials (Chan 2004).

News reports from this period frequently featured headlines such as "Construction Bureau Submits Proposal," "Central Officials Visit," or "Ministry Approves Plan," reflecting the growing institutionalization of heritage governance. The governance network for heritage in Matsu became deeply entangled with central development goals, with county mayors serving as key mediators. Rather than shaping culture directly, they translated "settlement preservation" and "cultural tourism" into fiscal categories and funding applications. This strategy aligns with Foucault's concept of modern governmentality, that knowledge systems integrate local culture into national governance.

However, this development-oriented discourse didn't only shape the county mayors' strategies, it also influenced the language of grassroots officials and cultural advocates. In the next section, I turn to the cultural advocates themselves, exploring how they shifted from enthusiastic promoters of preservation to critics of its institutional implementation.

5.2 Cultural Advocates: Construction or Destruction?

When discussing the origins of settlement preservation in Matsu, local councilor Tsao is often credited as a key figure. Serving on the Lienchiang County Council from 1994 to 2005, Tsao was one of the early advocates for cultural preservation. In 1995, Living in Taiwan—a book compiled by Han Sheng Magazine that documented grassroots cultural projects and community planning—became a source of inspiration for Matsu intellectuals interested in local culture (Liu 2024). Tsao invited the book's contributors, who were professionals in planning, to Matsu to initiate community-based preservation efforts in collaboration with local intellectuals. This advocacy led to the founding of the Urban-Rural Studio in 1997, a dedicated group that helped introduce ideas of cultural preservation into local communities.

However, although cultural advocates initially promoted bottom-up preservation through public-private collaboration, they soon had to work within central and local government systems. To meet the administrative demands of construction budgeting, restoration projects were required to follow strict timelines. As a result, the pace and nature of preservation started to diverge from the slower, community-based vision that advocates had originally hoped for.

In 2002, Tsao expressed concern over the quality of restoration work in Qinbi and proposed suspending the project temporarily:

> “After three phases of restoration, twenty-three buildings in Qinbi Village have been completed. Tsao expressed concern about the construction quality, saying that if money is being spent, it should result in quality work. He stressed that he is not against restoration, but rather wants to pause construction for a year to preserve Qinbi’s current beauty and ensure long-term sustainability.”—(Matsu Daily Newspaper 2002)

Around the same time, public debates also unfolded online between cultural advocates and homeowners as the NT$500 million national budget was about to be implemented. Principal Wang of Ren-ai Elementary School reposted a government report on the preservation project on the Matsu Information Network and urged careful planning for future sites:

> “The work in Qinbi is done. With Fuzheng and Dapu in Dongju up next, we should take this opportunity to plan carefully and avoid disorder.”—(Wang 2004)

Shortly after, a Xiju resident under the username “Snake Island Correspondent” reposted an editorial titled Construction or Destruction in Matsu? The piece warned that such a large budget could lead to one-time destructive construction.

Councilor Liu also joined the discussion. However, he stated that destruction often accompanies development and arguing that tourism and financial returns should be prioritized:

> “All construction brings some level of destruction... If it succeeds, Matsu will gain international fame; if not, tourist growth will remain slow.”

This online debate revealed divergent understandings of “cultural preservation” and “economic development,” and showed how restoration became a field of competition over development resources. As cultural preservation became a means for securing large budgets, the original advocates began to lose their influence over the narrative, while residents and local politicians increasingly saw it as a tool for regional revitalization.

During the same period, Liu, webmaster of the Matsu Information Network, wrote a post titled “The NT$500 Million Budget for Eastern Minn Architecture May Be a Disaster”, criticizing the rigid budget-execution logic of the state apparatus:

> “What’s dangerous about government machinery is its obsession with ‘full budget execution.’ Under pressure to meet deadlines, everything becomes a box-checking exercise—and the outcomes are predictable.”—(Liu 2004)

Despite repeated calls from cultural advocates to slow down the pace of construction and resist the accelerated logic of capital, they were unable to stop the push for public works. An editorial from Matsu Weekly Newsletter titled “Qinbi, Now Only a Memory” described the situation with frustration:

> “For four years, construction has never stopped. Again and again. In a traditional village that should have been carefully preserved, now stand odd streetlamps, random signage, and even a plaza built to please religious factions. At a recent village meeting, residents still called for more construction, but those from outside could only sigh, remembering what was once there.”—

(Matsu Weekly Newsletter 2005)

From 1995 to 2005, the preservation effort unfolded over a decade. Cultural advocates had originally hoped to promote bottom-up preservation through community consensus and participation. But under the pressure of bureaucratic schedules and construction logic, heritage preservation became institutionalized into a fast-tracked administrative process. The language of cultural heritage was appropriated for tourism development.

As the physical appearance of settlements changed, cultural advocates began to feel conflicted about whether they had contributed to preservation or destruction. Their voices gradually receded from the conversation, while the actual execution of policy fell to local government employees. In the next section, I turn to the administrative practices and explore how government employees manage the difficult balance between state policy and residents' expectations.

5.3 Government Employees: What is Cultural Value?

Although government employees may appear less influential than politicians or cultural advocates, they play a crucial role in making heritage preservation possible on the ground. These workers often act as intermediaries in the cultural governance system. However, they also find themselves caught between two competing logics: cultural value and economic value. As policies increasingly focus on economic outcomes, the preservation of traditional settlements and the subsidy system have gradually leaned toward goals of capital accumulation. The original vision advocated by local intellectuals has become conflicted with practical repairs and public expectations. Once preservation becomes part of the bureaucratic system, it is no longer about discussing values. It becomes a political achievement for evaluating government effectiveness.

In the early stages, preservation efforts were carried out by the Urban-Rural Studio, a task-oriented agency under the Lienchiang County Government. Most team members were short-term professionals from outside the islands. From 2000 to 2004, the studio was led by architect Cheng and later by Chiu. After Chiu left the studio, local government employees gradually took over the responsibilities (Chan 2005). Following County Mayor Chen’s success in obtaining massive funding in 2005, the preservation subsidies were jointly administered by the Leinchiang County Cultural Affairs Bureau and the Matsu National Scenic Area Headquarters, marking a shift in who carried out the policies.

Unlike county mayors who guide policy or cultural advocates who oversee and critique, these grassroots employees are responsible for actual implementation. They are under pressure both from superiors expecting results and from citizens demanding assistance. During debates over the “Five-Year, Five-Billion” subsidy project, Liu pointed out the difficult position of frontline government staff caught between large budgets and political pressure.

> "Even under strict supervision by the Urban-Rural Studio, repairs in Qinbi already caused irreversible damage. Now with Chiu leaving, who will oversee repairs? With pressure to spend the budget and politicians eager to please voters, these funds may end in disaster for Matsu’s traditional building." (Liu 2004)

Compared to the early Qinbi pilot repairs—which involved detailed discussions and long negotiations—repairs after the subsidy laws came into effect became increasingly simplified. People came to see preservation merely as a way to follow rules and get money. Issues such as whether a repair was eligible, or if certain materials and techniques met standards, were often settled through informal negotiation, leaving staff caught in difficult decisions.

On one side, cultural advocates warned that rushed repairs and large budgets would lead to irreversible damage. They suggested delaying or even refusing subsidies (Ju 2005; Dongju Community Development Association 2011). On the other side, local residents hoped to get money quickly and often complained about strict rules or overly complicated processes(Councilor Chen Guizhong’s Service Office 2008; ccy 2007)。

In Chang thesis on the subsidy system, she noted how some frontline staff gave in to pressure and relaxed inspection standards:

> "We originally hoped to match the exact color, but let me ask you—many people would say, 'It's close enough,' and they used it. Once it's used, are you going to tell them it's not up to standard and tear it down? The county government launched a subsidy scheme, so everyone went ahead and renovated. Then you turn around and say none of them qualify? People thought they could get hundreds of thousands in subsidies, and now you’re telling them they all failed—just because the stonework wasn’t refined enough. Do you think the county magistrate or the government can take that kind of pressure?"(Chan 2005)

The Urban-Rural Studio had once drafted a white paper outlining a full strategy—from zoning, subsidy rules, construction teams, to reuse projects. But over time, focus shifted to more technical aspects, like how to apply for subsidies and how much money was approved. The cultural and architectural features of Eastern Minn houses were reduced to formal symbols like "stone walls, timber frames, and pitched roofs"(Chan 2005).

What, then, is cultural value? The answer is still unclear. Different people have different ideas of what traditional buildings should look like. Whether a repaired house "meets cultural standards" is hard to define. More importantly, under a private property system, what to restore—and how—is ultimately up to each homeowner. Unlike the vague idea of "culture," the monetary value of subsidies is clear, calculable, and easier for the public to understand. This has pushed preservation work closer to a logic of capital.

As Foucault pointed out, modern governance is not just about command and control—it also works through technical systems and standardized procedures. In Matsu, this means cultural value has been translated into something measurable—subsidy amounts. Yet this system, when filtered through personal networks and populist politics, becomes open to different interpretations, and often fails to meet its original vision. Government employees, therefore, serve both as policy enforcers and as mediators in the field, carrying the weight of pressure from above and below.

Once subsidies become the main tool for preservation, the process is handed over to market logic. Residents choose their own construction companies, materials, and methods. Government officials can only check final results against inspection forms—they have little control over what happens during the actual work. Cultural advocates once envisioned community revitalization and cultural identity. But in practice, these goals were reshaped by development pressures and capital logic. With large budgets, short timelines, and limited administrative authority, government employees are left to navigate a difficult position, caught between cultural ideals and political reality.

5.4 Homeowners : Traditional Values and Modern Needs

Although government officials, cultural advocates, and local administrative staff all play key roles in the heritage restoration network, the actual decisions about what and how to restore are made by the property owners of traditional buildings. In this final section, I examine how these homeowners interpret cultural heritage, assess their own needs, and make decisions about restoration.

Although the current subsidy policy allows for “modernized restoration methods, the rebuilt structure must still maintain its original height and floor area due to building regulations. In other words, if residents wish to expand their houses to meet modern needs, the law does not permit such extensions. Instead, they must either rebuild entirely or forgo any expansion, unlike in the past, when living spaces could grow gradually around the main house.

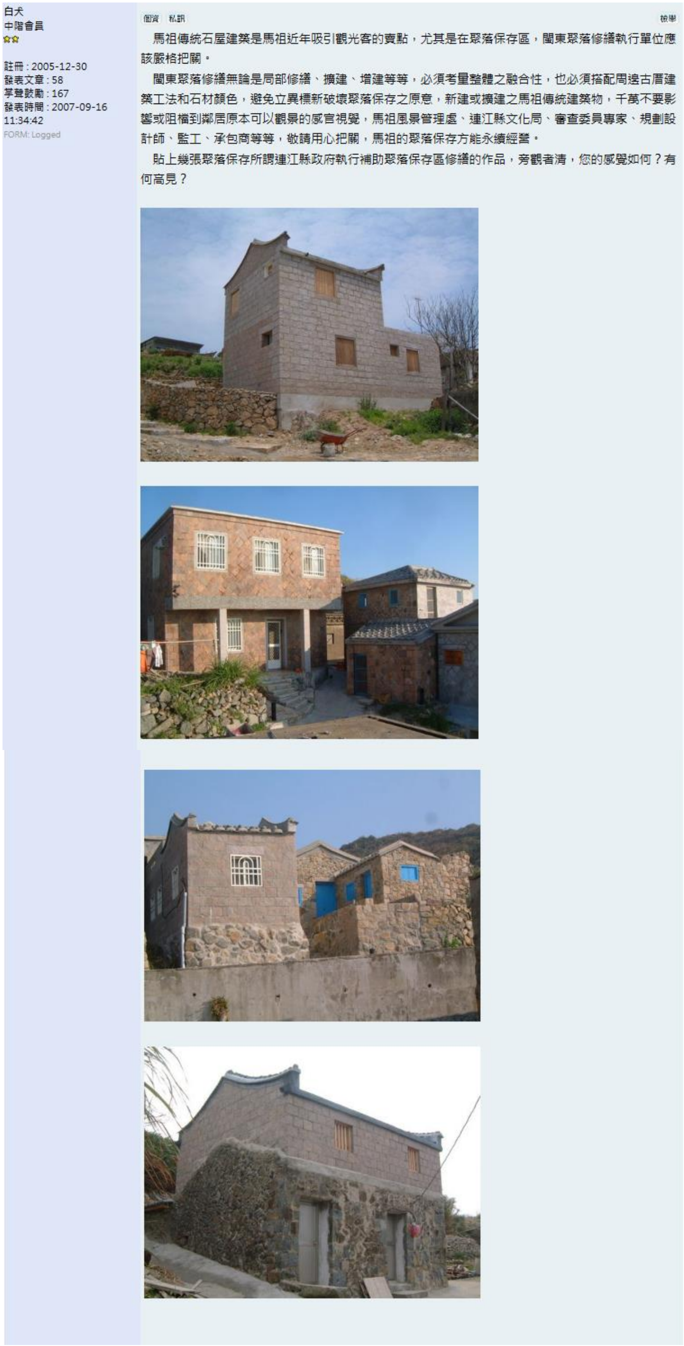
While these restrictions help preserve the traditional landscape, they also reduce spatial flexibility. The old layouts often struggle to meet modern living standards, creating tensions between preserving tradition and accommodating contemporary life. For example, many traditional buildings lack bathrooms. With the spread of sewage systems and shifting hygiene norms, indoor bathrooms have become a necessity. Similarly, kitchens, air-conditioning units, and other modern equipment require additional space, putting further pressure on the tight interiors of traditional homes.

One forum user, ccy, argued that if the goal is to encourage adaptive reuse—such as converting old houses into guesthouses—the policy should loosen its restrictions on expansion:

> “At various public meetings, some residents suggested allowing limited vertical expansion within legally registered land plots (up to a second floor). This would help homeowners put the restored buildings to use, such as running tourism-related businesses (like guesthouses), and achieve the goal of reuse.” (ccy 2007)

However, another user, Baiquan, criticized such modifications for damaging the overall visual consistency of the settlement. They posted photos of subsidized buildings and questioned the changing appearance of the preserved landscape (Baiquan 2007).

In the images, all four buildings had stone walls rebuilt with machine-cut blocks and raised rooflines. One case showed a second floor built directly above the original stone wall. Another extended a concrete beam outward to create a new porch. Two others replaced traditional wooden windows with white aluminum frames. These examples suggest that, despite the policy guidelines, many residents reinterpret restoration according to their own needs.



白犬
中階會員

註冊 : 2005-12-30
發表文章 : 58
掌聲鼓勵 : 167
發表時間 : 2007-09-16 11:34:42
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馬祖傳統石屋建築是馬祖近年吸引觀光客的賣點，尤其是在聚落保存區，閩東聚落修繕執行單位應該嚴格把關。

閩東聚落修繕無論是局部修繕、擴建、增建等等，必須考量整體之融合性，也必須搭配周邊古厝建築工法和石材顏色，避免立異標新破壞聚落保存之原意，新建或擴建之馬祖傳統建築物，千萬不要影響或阻檔到鄰居原本可以觀景的感官視覺，馬祖風景管理處、連江縣文化局、審查委員專家、規劃設計師、監工、承包商等等，敬請用心把關，馬祖的聚落保存方能永續經營。

貼上幾張聚落保存所謂連江縣政府執行補助聚落保存區修繕的作品，旁觀者清，您的感覺如何？有何高見？

Figure 1 Post from Baiquan

In 2013, a post titled “Building Old Houses Has Become a Nightmare for Dapu Residents” criticized the height restrictions imposed by the government and questioned their fairness:

> “To maintain the original village look, they say that since Dapu couldn’t afford big houses in the past, we shouldn’t build big houses now either… But just because we lived in a remote place and were poor back then, does that mean we don’t deserve comfort today?” (Hopeless People 2013)

That same year, a Matsu Daily editorial raised the opposite concern: that restoration was going too far and harming the original character of the settlements:

> “Today’s restored buildings may meet the basic subsidy requirements, but their scale has expanded beyond recognition… These neatly cut, uniform stone walls have lost the texture of traditional craftspeopleship. And these houses were all built according to the government’s funding guidelines.” (Matsu Daily Newspaper 2013)

In fact, as early as 2004, Chiu, one of the original leaders of the preservation program, had already emphasized that restoration should also take future function into account (Chiu 2004). But what counts as “appropriate function” is constantly shifting with time and social norms. This makes restoration a process of ongoing negotiation.

Whether seen from the policy side or the homeowner’s decision-making, these actions are ultimately about the future—about industry development, economic benefit, and how families plan or imagine their lives. The debates and struggles over “reuse” reveal the cultural dilemmas of governance under late modernity: on one side, a nostalgic desire to preserve tradition; on the other, the push for comfort, efficiency, and market value.

Subsidy programs, as tools of cultural governance, shape not only how heritage is defined but also turn the site of restoration into a battleground between institutional norms, economic interests, and cultural meaning. Restoration is no longer just about responding to the past, it is a political and cultural choice about the kind of future people want to build.

6. Conclusion

Photos of Matsu show a landscape that feels very different from the high-rise buildings in cities. From afar, small lights scatter across hillside stone houses, creating a scene of islands, ocean, stone walls, and starry skies that resembles the Mediterranean. This scenery has led the media to call Matsu “Little Greece”. However, when one gets closer to these traditional buildings, signs of patchwork and uneven repairs appear everywhere: machine-cut stones are placed beside hand-carved granite, aluminum windows are inserted into old stone walls, and narrow alleyways are filled with a mix of tiles and concrete.

For cultural activists who value “authenticity,” these renovations are often seen as damage caused by globalization and market forces, signs of cultural loss. But instead of judging only by appearance, we should delve into the history and political context behind these materials. We need to ask: How did the idea of cultural heritage take root in Matsu? What rules now govern it? And how do these rules shape the way people renovate buildings? Only by understanding this can we answer the question: how should traditional buildings be restored in the future?

Cultural heritage is not just stone walls or wooden beams. The act of repairing and maintaining is itself part of heritage. It involves many different actors, and it leaves visible marks of power and time in the landscape. With this in mind, we can better understand how Matsu’s unique system of governance works and what heritage means today.

This thesis uses the concept of “cultural governance” to analyze Matsu’s case. I draw from Michel Foucault’s idea of governmentality, focusing on three parts: forms of knowledge, normative frameworks of behavior, and subjectivation. Governance is not only about top-down control. In liberal societies, the state uses statistics, policies, and procedures to guide people to manage themselves. Cultural governance builds on this by treating culture as a way to manage political and economic problems.

In Matsu, cultural governance didn’t emerge from powerful structures or resistance movements. It slowly formed through negotiation and local adaptation during the early years of democratization. This study uses the concept of cultural governance to examine Matsu’s cultural struggles under late modernity.

While ideas like governmentality can feel abstract, landscapes and material worlds are visible. Changes in the landscape often reveal deeper ideological forces. That’s why I begin with the material landscape and trace how it was shaped by history and politics. The current appearance of Matsu—its villages, roads, forests, and airport—is not natural. It was shaped first by Cold War military modernization and later by capital development efforts under globalization. Settlement preservation policies began during this shift. Local governments adopted these concepts to respond to population decline and economic change. As Matsu moved from military control to neoliberal development, the function of culture shifted too—from supporting political legitimacy to supporting economic growth.

In this process, the idea of “cultural heritage” became a tool used by local governments to get funding from the central government. It was closely tied to tourism policies. Therefore, I analyze urban planning documents and regulations to show how these governance tools set rules for how restoration is done. I examine central government policies like the “Offshore Island Development Act” and the “Forward-looking Infrastructure Development Program,” which show Matsu’s dependence on central funding. I then look at preservation regulations and subsidy procedures to show how these define what counts as a “proper” restoration, and how these definitions become the language through which people understand heritage.

At the final part, I highlight the roles of four key actors: county magistrates, cultural advocates, government employees, and residents. Each has a different experience of heritage practices and faces different struggles under current conditions.

County mayors use heritage policies to secure funding and show political achievements, often turning restoration into construction projects. Cultural advocates, who first promoted preservation ideas, have gradually stepped back under pressure from bureaucracy and efficiency demands. Local government staff have little power in policy, but are responsible for implementation, caught between cultural values and economic expectations. Homeowners, who make the final decisions on repairs, often see subsidies as a way to improve their quality of life or earn income. In this system, residents are no longer imagined as a community of shared cultural identity. Instead, they are treated as market actors under neoliberal logic. This can be seen in the heterogeneous and collage repairs across Matsu’s landscape.

I had hoped to also include the perspective of local craftspeople. However, taking digital ethnography as the research method, I could only find limited public statements or online posts. This absence may reflect their marginal position and limited ability to speak out, even though they play a key role in actual repair work.

Today, traditional materials and techniques are no longer widely available. Local construction often uses modern alternatives, pieced together under minimal visual guidelines. Rather than blaming preservation policies for “failing,” we should examine the political and historical structures behind people’s repair choices. From a governance perspective, people’s actions are shaped by their subjectivity—and that subjectivity is influenced by the knowledge and rules of the system. So when we ask how to restore traditional buildings in the future, we should not only focus on form or technique. We must also rethink the system that defines what kinds of restoration are possible. We need to design a new space for cultural dialogue, reflection, and experimentation. Restoration should not be the end of a technical process. It should be the beginning of a conversation about cultural politics.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Development Visions of Offshore Islands Development Implementation Plan

Program Title	Program Period	Development Vision
Lienchiang County Comprehensive Development Plan	2000－2011	Balanced development across the four townships and coordinated progress among the five islands 四鄉均衡、五島並進
Review and Revision of the Lienchiang County Comprehensive Development Plan	2003－2014	Develop the tourism industry, strengthen transportation systems, and enhance infrastructure 發展觀光產業、強化交通運輸、整備基礎建設
Phase I	2003－2006	A tourism hub of Eastern Minn, the Pearl of Eastern Minn, a Homeland of Hope 閩東觀光軸心、閩東之珠、希望之鄉
Phase II	2007－2010	A maritime utopia and a responsible island homeland 海上桃花源、打造負責任島嶼家園
Phase III	2011－2014	A low-carbon and leisure-oriented island cluster for immersive tourism experiences 低碳樂活、體驗型度假群島
Phase IV	2015－2018	Sustainable development and a livable, vibrant Matsu 永續發展、樂活馬祖

Appendix B

Table2: Traditional Building Restoration Subsidy Programs in Matsu

Year	Offshore Islands Development Fund (Lienchiang County Traditional Building Restoration and Subsidy Plan)	National Scenic Area Development Plan (Matsu Characteristic buildings Appearance Improvement Subsidy)
2010	NT$ 9,000,000	-
2012	NT$ 8,000,000	NT$ 20,000,000
2013	NT$ 8,000,000	NT$ 20,000,000
2014	NT$ 8,000,000	NT$ 20,000,000
2015	NT$ 6,000,000	NT$ 20,000,000
2016	NT$ 6,000,000	NT$ 5,000,000
2017	NT$ 6,000,000	NT$ 5,000,000
2018	NT$ 6,000,000	NT$ 5,000,000
2019	-	NT$ 5,000,000
Total	NT$ 57,000,000	100,000,000