

Anhui villages (China)

No 1002

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Ancient villages in southern Anhui – Xidi and Hongcun
<i>Location</i>	Yi County, Huangshan City, Anhui Province
<i>State Party</i>	People’s Republic of China
<i>Date</i>	26 July 1999

Justification by State Party

China has dramatically diverse climates in the north and the south of its vast territory. Different types of village have developed in different regions, in different climates and natural environments. Chinese villages have certain features in common. Their inhabitants are linked by blood ties, agriculture is the main economic activity, serious consideration is given to the geomantic environment, traditional customs are maintained, and there is a high degree of social stability.

The ancient villages of Anhui are among the most characteristic examples of traditional Chinese villages. They are usually located at the base of a mountain, alongside rivers or lakes, they have regular spatial layouts of quiet, narrow alleys, and picturesque gardens at the mouths of the rivers. The architecture is plain, simple, and elegant, with unique forms of gable, delicate carvings and ornamentation, and simple but elegant interior furnishings.

Two outstanding examples are the villages of Xidi and Hongcun, which have maintained their original form, in harmony with the natural environment, to a remarkable degree.

The authentic and well preserved historical character of the two villages have attracted considerable attention from historians, architects, and artists, who come to visit them from all parts of the country for research and study. They have exercised great influence in a number of fields, including architecture, environment, industrial design, aesthetics, and literature. Their overall planning, architectural style, and landscape design provide admirable models for the construction of human settlements. **Criterion ii**

All historic cultures have been more or less eroded as a result of social development and modernization. In the mountain areas of southern Anhui family and blood ties are loosening and the influence of Anhui culture is gradually diminishing. Xidi and Hongcun are two of the few surviving villages that

have not undergone radical changes. They constitute exceptional testimony to the traditional culture of the region.

Criterion iii

Xidi and Hongcun are especially noteworthy in the fields of architecture, craftsmanship, and landscape design. Their architectural style, interior decoration, and environmental management all attain very high standards, and represent one of the highest levels in house building and human settlement design, dating from the Tang and Song Dynasties.

Criterion iv

As outstanding examples of traditional human settlement, Xidi and Hongcun are vulnerable under the impact of irreversible trends. This culture has a special place in Chinese history, since it made major contributions to the development of Confucian culture and to commercial development in the 14th-19th centuries. **Criterion v**

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, these are *groups of buildings*.

History and Description

History

- Xidi

Xidi was originally called Xichuan (West River), because of the streams that pass through it, but its present name, which means “West Post,” comes from the ancient caravan posting station some 1.5km to the west of the village.

It owes its growth to the Hu family from Wuyuan (Xinan), who adopted a son of the Tang Emperor Zhaozong (888-904) after the Emperor was forced from his throne in 904, naming him Hu Changyi. One of his descendants, Hu Shiliang, moved his family from Wuyuan to Xidi in 1047. From that time onwards the family lived and prospered at Xidi.

The population began to rise sharply from 1465, when the Hu family began to act as merchants. The construction of a number of important private and public buildings, and in particular the Huiyuan and Gulai bridges, began at around that time. From the mid 17th century until around 1850 the Hu family was influential in both commerce and politics. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties members of the family became Imperial officials, whilst many also became graduates of the Imperial College. At its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries the village had more than six hundred residences. However, with the decline of the Anhui merchant community and the disintegration of the feudal clan system during the later Qing Dynasty and the Republic, Xidi ceased to expand.

- Hongcun

Hongcun was founded in 1131 by Wang Wen, a Han Dynasty General, and his kinsman Wang Yanji, who brought their families from Qisu village to the upper part of the stream near Leigang mountain and built 13 houses there.

The village knew two periods of great prosperity, 1401-1620 and 1796-1908. Like the Hu family in Xidi, the Wang family became officials and merchants and accumulated enormous wealth, which they used to endow their home village with many fine buildings. Around 1405, on the advice of geomancers, a channel was dug to bring fresh water to the village from the West Stream. Two hundred years later the water supply system of the village was completed with the creation of the South Lake. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the construction of a number of imposing public buildings, such as the South Lake Academy (1814), the Hall of Meritorious Deeds (1888), the Hall of Virtuousness (1890), and the Hall of Aspiration (1855, rebuilt 1911).

Somewhat later than Xidi, Hongcun fell into a decline with the birth of the Republic, but it still retains many of its fine buildings and its exceptional water system.

Description

- Xidi

The 12.96ha of Xidi are located in an area surrounded by mountains. Streams enter from the north and east respectively, converging at the Huiyuan Bridge in the south of the village. Its street pattern is orientated east-west, with a main road flanked by two parallel streets, one to the north and the other to the south; they are all paved with granite from Yi County. Narrow alleys join the streets and there are small open spaces in front of the main public buildings, such as the Hall of Respect, the Hall of Reminiscence, and the Memorial Archway of the Governor.

The buildings, which are widely spaced, are timber-framed with brick walls and elegantly carved decoration. Most of them are built alongside the three streams, the Front Stream, the Back Stream, and the Golden Stream, which give a special character to the village. The basic structure of the traditional residential buildings in Xidi and Hongcun usually consists of three bays of rooms and a courtyard, laid out symmetrically; there is a number of variations on this basic layout. The more grandiose residential buildings, dignified with the title of "hall," have complex ground plans, but they are all variants of the basic pattern and conform with the characteristic use materials and decoration.

The roofs of grey tiles, arranged in a butterfly pattern, are pitched, their ends being shaped like horses' heads. The outer walls have very small windows, for reasons of security, carved out of granite and decorated with floral and geometric motifs. The outer gates, also framed in granite, have embedded brick panels above them which are carved with flowers, birds, fish, or historical scenes. Many have small private gardens, usually in the front courtyard, where ingenious use is made of limited space.

- Hongcun

Hongcun covers an area of 19.11ha at the foot of Leigang Mountain. The village faces south, with its central part lying at a point central to the flanking mountains and rivers, conforming with the geomantic theory of "embracing the masculine and positive and gathering the energy of life from nature."

The open watercourse runs through all the houses in the entire village and forms two ponds, one in the centre (the Moon Pond) and the other to the south of the village (the

South Lake). The checkerboard pattern of streets and lanes follow the watercourse, giving the village a unique overall appearance.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The two villages are protected by a suite of laws and regulations, from central to local level. Stemming from the Constitution of the PRC, the national legislation that applies includes the Urban Planning Law, the Land Administration Law, the Criminal Law, and the Cultural Relics Protection Law. The last-named law operates through a number of sets of regulations at national level, reinforced by and interpreted through regulations issued by Anhui Province and Yi County.

Certain individual buildings in both villages have been registered as Provincial Relics by the People's Government of Anhui Province.

The protected areas are surrounded by substantial buffer zones, defined in 1998 by the People's Government of Anhui Province.

Management

Proprietary rights in the two villages belong to the People's Republic of China. Ownership of the individual buildings is variously invested in the state, collective groups, and individuals.

Responsibility for supervision, like the legislation, follows the administrative hierarchy and involves variously the Ministry of Construction and the National Administration of Cultural Heritage at national level, the Construction Bureau and Administration of Cultural Heritage of Anhui Province, the Planning and Cultural Bureaux of Huangshan City, and Administration of Cultural Heritage of Huangshan City, and the Peoples' Governments of Xidi and Jilian Towns.

It is, however, the Peoples' Government of Yi County that is the chief administrative body for the preservation of cultural relics in the two villages. This body is responsible for protection measures, grant-aid, and implementation of the various laws and regulations. It has established a Property Conservation Committee for Xidi and Hongcun, with representatives from the relevant institutions involved.

A number of plans relating to or concerned directly with the conservation of the historic villages are in force. These include a Master Plan for Xidi Town (1997), a Design Development Plan for Xidi (1998), a Preservation Plan for Hongcun (1998), and a Design Development Plan for Hongcun (1999). All these plans were prepared by the Planning and Design Institute of Huangshan City and the Construction Bureau of Yi County.

On the ground in the two villages there are more than 60 people engaged in preservation management. Of these half are professionally trained to technician level.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The systematic, programmed conservation of the two historic villages is a very recent phenomenon, dating from the 1990s.

It was not until 1987 that the ancient buildings in Xidi became protected monuments at the level of Provincial Relics.

The nomination dossier is frank about the attitude of local residents, who are lacking in “preservation awareness,” with the result that ancient buildings have been dismantled or unsympathetically extended, using inappropriate modern materials. However, control is now being exercised over all forms of construction. Fire prevention provisions have been introduced. Reforestation measures are now in force to check the erosion that has taken place, which has in turn led to significant lowering of water levels and the severe silting of watercourses. It is hoped that these will reverse the process and restore both the environment and the role of water in the townscapes of the two villages. All these factors are taken into account in the plans referred to above.

The most recent survey indicates that 70% of the ancient buildings are in a reasonably satisfactory state of conservation, 100% of the ancient trees, which are features of the villages, and 90% of the water system. However, 30% of the buildings in Xidi and 34% of those in Hongcun are in need of some form of renovation or conservation.

Authenticity

The two villages are wholly authentic in so far as their layouts and townscapes are concerned, preserving the townscapes created in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. There has been some loss of authenticity in individual buildings as a result of unsympathetic interventions, restorations, and extensions, but these represent no more than 30% of the overall stock of historic structures.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the two villages in February 2000.

Qualities

Villages form a basic element in all socio-economic structures, not least in China. A very large proportion of the historic villages in China have undergone drastic reconstruction during the past century as a result of intensive social and economic changes. The villages of Xidi and Hongcun have preserved the traditional characteristics of their layouts and architectural forms to an exceptional degree.

Comparative analysis

The culture of the Anhui region, located in the heart of China, is an ancient one, dating back to around 600 BCE. It reached its apogee in the 14th-19th centuries, when Anhui had a dominant influence in various aspects of Chinese culture, such as arts, architecture, the culinary arts, music, and the influential Cheng Zu philosophy, an interpretation of Confucianism that dominated the final centuries of feudal rule.

The two villages of Xidi and Hongcun retain in material form many elements of this important Chinese culture. They are distinct from those of other regions of China, and they are also important because other significant Chinese

cultural groups are now only to be found in towns, rather than in traditional villages.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

The ICOMOS expert mission commented that there are some other well preserved historic villages in Southern Anhui besides Xidi and Hongcun, such as Nanping in Yi County, which has some three hundred houses from the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The State Party may wish to consider the extension of the eventual inscription of Xidi and Hongcun with two or three other villages of the same quality.

ICOMOS noted the steep increase in visitor numbers in recent years at the two villages. Inscription on the World Heritage List would inevitably result in these numbers increasing still further: it therefore urges the State Party to ensure that adequate measures are in place to cope with increased tourist pressure.

Brief description

The two traditional villages of Xidi and Hongcun preserve to a remarkable extent the appearance of non-urban settlements of a type that have largely disappeared or have been transformed in the past century. Their street patterns, their architecture and decoration, and the integration of houses with comprehensive water systems are unique survivals.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii, iv, and v*:

Criterion iii The villages of Xidi and Hongcun are graphic illustrations of a type of human settlement created during a feudal period and based on a prosperous trading economy.

Criterion iv In their buildings and their street patterns, the two villages of southern Anhui reflect the socio-economic structure of a long-lived settled period of Chinese history.

Criterion v The traditional non-urban settlements of China, which have to a very large extent disappeared during the past century, are exceptionally well preserved in the villages of Xidi and Hongcun.

ICOMOS, September 2000