International Journal of Science and Engineering Applications
Volume 15-Issue 12, 09 – 12, 2026, ISSN:- 2319 - 7560
DOI: 10.7753/IJSEA1512.1003

From "Street Stalls" to "Micro Exhibitions": A Study on the Mechanism of New Exhibition formats Driving the Revitalization of Traditional Village Spaces - Taking Shaoxing Gongfu Market as an Example

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Abstract: Traditional villages in China face a persistent tension between preservation and development. While festival and market activities have long been used as revitalization instruments, existing research seldom examines how the format of market activity itself changes, and how that formal change reorganizes village space. This paper proposes the concept of the "micro-exhibition"—a curated, narrative-driven, spatially dispersed exhibition format that emerges from the transformation of conventional street stalls—and analyzes its role in village spatial revitalization through a case study of "Common Prosperity Markets" in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's triadic production of space and Bourdieu's field theory, the study develops an analytical framework linking format evolution to the production of material, social, and symbolic space. Evidence from three market cases—Anchang Ancient Town's Lunar New Year market, Zhuji's Shanxiahu pearl market, and Xinchang's Meizhu ancient village market—shows that the shift from stall to micro-exhibition operates through three coupled mechanisms: curatorial spatial framing, network-based field translation, and narrative recoding of local knowledge. These mechanisms do not merely add aesthetic value to market activity; they alter the rules by which village space is perceived, used, and valued. The paper contributes to exhibition studies by extending its analytical vocabulary to rural contexts, and to rural revitalization scholarship by specifying the spatial mechanisms through which new exhibition formats produce durable rather than ephemeral effects.

Keywords: micro-exhibition; Common Prosperity Market; spatial production; traditional village revitalization; exhibition-driven rural development

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional villages in China embody a spatial order sedimented over generations—kinship networks, agricultural rhythms, and vernacular building practices converge to produce landscapes that are simultaneously material and meaningful. Yet this order is under strain. Urbanization, outmigration, and the commercialization of rural space have produced a familiar double bind: villages that remain "untouched" risk becoming museum-like shells, while those that embrace tourism often succumb to homogenized development and the erosion of local social fabric.

Festivals and markets have emerged as one of the most widely adopted responses to this bind. Across Zhejiang and beyond, periodic markets, seasonal fairs, and festival-based bazaars are deployed to attract visitors, generate income, and "activate" underused village spaces. In 2025, Zhejiang Province formalized this approach through a policy framework for "Common Prosperity Markets", setting targets of 100 demonstration markets, 1,000 themed market events annually, and per capita income increases of over 10,000 RMB for targeted groups by 2027. Shaoxing, with 25 national-level and 43 provincial-level traditional villages, has become a dense laboratory for this policy.

The dominant evaluation of such initiatives asks whether they "work"—whether they increase visitor numbers, local income, or employment. This paper asks a different question: what kind of spatial intervention is a market, and how does its format shape its spatial effects? A conventional street stall and a curated micro-exhibition both involve vendors, visitors, and temporary occupation of space. But they organize that space according to different logics. The stall is an interface of transaction; the micro-exhibition is an interface of narration. When market activity shifts from the former toward the latter, the village space is not merely occupied differently; it is produced differently.

This distinction matters for both theory and practice. Existing exhibition studies have developed sophisticated accounts of how curated spatial arrangements produce meaning in museums, galleries, and biennials, but have rarely extended these insights to rural market contexts. Rural revitalization scholarship, conversely, has documented the economic and social effects of festivals without systematically theorizing the formal properties of the market-as-medium. The result is a gap: we know that markets can revitalize villages, but we lack a vocabulary for explaining why some market interventions produce lasting spatial change while others leave only temporary footprints.

The paper proceeds in four steps. Section 2 constructs a theoretical framework combining Lefebvre's triadic spatial analysis with Bourdieu's field theory to link format change to spatial production. Section 3 introduces the three Shaoxing cases and the mixed-methods design. Section 4 analyzes the mechanisms through which the stall-to-micro-exhibition shift operates. Section 5 discusses implications for exhibition theory and rural policy.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FORMAT AS SPATIAL PRACTICE

2.1 Lefebvre in the village: three dimensions of produced space

Lefebvre's central insight is that space is not a neutral container but a social product, continuously constituted through a dialectic of spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space). Recent scholarship has extended this framework to

rural Chinese contexts, demonstrating that village revitalization involves the simultaneous transformation of material arrangements, social relations, and symbolic meanings.

For the present analysis, three implications follow. First, material space is not reducible to physical infrastructure: the arrangement of stalls, pathways, and display surfaces is itself a spatial practice that encodes assumptions about how visitors should move, look, and interact. Second, social space is produced through the encounters that a market format enables or forecloses—between vendors and visitors, among vendors, and between local residents and outside actors. Third, symbolic space is where the meaning of the village is articulated and contested: what is worth showing, to whom, and in what register.

The analytical payoff is that a change in market format is never merely a change in aesthetics or organization. It reconfigures all three dimensions simultaneously—or fails to do so. The question for empirical analysis is which configurations produce durable spatial effects.

2.2 Field theory as a bridge: capital, position, and translation

Lefebvre's triad identifies what is produced but is less specific about how actors with different resources and interests negotiate the production process. Bourdieu's field theory supplements this gap. A village market constitutes a field in which actors—local government, operating companies, vendors, artisans, residents, and visitors—occupy positions defined by their capital endowments (economic, social, cultural) and struggle over the rules of the game.

The "micro-exhibition" format is significant precisely because it changes the rules. When a market is organized as a series of stalls, the dominant capital is economic and the dominant logic is transactional. When it is organized as a curated exhibition—with thematic zones, narrative sequencing, and interpretive framing—cultural capital gains weight, and actors with curatorial, design, or storytelling competence acquire positions of influence that they would not occupy in a purely transactional market. This shift is not neutral: it can empower local cultural brokers and creative actors, but it can also marginalize vendors who lack the resources to participate in a more demanding format.

The concept of field translation captures this process: the movement of practices, objects, and meanings from one field (everyday village life, agricultural production, craft) into another (exhibition, tourism, cultural consumption), and the transformations that occur in transit. A jar of pickled vegetables sold at a stall is a commodity; the same jar displayed in a reconstructed workshop with interpretive text is a cultural artifact. The object has not changed, but its position in a field of valuation has.

2.3 The micro-exhibition as an analytical category

"Micro-exhibition" is proposed here not as a fixed genre but as an analytical threshold. It refers to a market format in which three conditions are met: (1) curation—the spatial arrangement follows a narrative or thematic logic rather than purely transactional convenience; (2) reflexivity—the format makes visible the cultural or productive processes behind the goods on display; and (3) dispersal—exhibition elements are distributed across existing village spaces (alleys, courtyards, workshops, waterfronts) rather than concentrated in a single enclosed venue.

This definition distinguishes the micro-exhibition from adjacent phenomena. It is not simply a "cultural market" (which may be curated without being reflexive or dispersed), nor an open-air museum (which is permanent and often deactivates everyday use). The micro-exhibition is temporary, embedded, and interpretive. Its analytical value lies in directing attention to the formal properties of market interventions that are often treated as undifferentiated "festival activity."

3. CASES AND METHODS

3.1 Case selection

Three market cases in Shaoxing were selected for their variation in industrial base, spatial morphology, and curatorial strategy, while sharing the Common Prosperity Market policy framework.

Anchang Ancient Town (Keqiao District): the Lunar New Year market. Anchang's "Lunar New Year Customs" festival has run for more than two decades and now incorporates a "Anchang Golden Sauce" Common Prosperity Market. The market is embedded in the town's canal-side alleys and covered corridors, with the local soy-sauce and cured-meat industry serving as both economic anchor and narrative core. The format combines traditional stall vending with craft demonstrations, sauce-making rituals, and night-time light installations.

Shanxiahu (Zhuji City): the pearl industry market. Shanxiahu is the center of China's freshwater pearl industry. Its "Pearl Light Lane" Common Prosperity Market operates alongside the Shanxiahu Pearl Conference and the International Open-Pearl Festival, integrating the full chain from pearl cultivation and harvesting to design, live-streaming, and sales. The market format explicitly frames pearl production as an experiential narrative: visitors move through stations representing different stages of the value chain.

Meizhu Ancient Village (Xinchang County): the Song-dynasty aesthetic market. Meizhu has repositioned its market activity around "Song-style" cultural themes, with a "Meili Market" zone embedded in the village's historic core. The format combines intangible heritage demonstrations (bamboo weaving, traditional snacks, paper-cutting) with immersive performance, costume interaction, and night markets aimed at younger visitors. A youth market component provides zero-rent stalls to student and young entrepreneur teams.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The study draws on fieldwork conducted across the three sites, combining semi-structured interviews with market organizers, local officials, vendors, and artisans; participant observation during market events; and documentary analysis of policy documents, promotional materials, and local media reports. Analysis proceeded through a directed coding strategy organized around the three Lefebvrian dimensions, with iterative refinement as patterns across cases emerged. The goal was not statistical generalization but analytical generalization: identifying mechanisms that are likely to operate, with variation, in comparable rural market contexts.

4. MECHANISMS OF SPATIAL PRODUCTION THROUGH MICRO-EXHIBITION

4.1 Curatorial spatial framing: reorganizing material space

In all three cases, the market format moved beyond the placement of stalls along a street or square. At Anchang, the

market is structured as a route: visitors pass through sauce-making courtyards, curing corridors, and tasting stations before reaching the main vending area. The spatial sequence is pedagogical—it teaches visitors to read the products as outcomes of a place-based process rather than as generic commodities. At Shanxiahu, the pearl market is organized as a value-chain promenade, with each station visually and spatially distinct: cultivation tanks, opening tables, design displays, live-streaming booths. At Meizhu, the market is dispersed across the village's "eight gardens and eight workshops," so that vending is interleaved with craft demonstrations and performance sites.

This curatorial framing does more than improve the visitor experience. It changes the spatial practice of the market: movement is directed, sightlines are managed, and zones acquire distinct identities. The village space is temporarily re-indexed, with certain alleys becoming "narrative thresholds" and certain courtyards becoming "demonstration zones." Crucially, this re-indexing often leaves durable traces: renovated workshops, upgraded pathways, and newly legible spatial nodes remain after the market event ends.

4.2 Network-based field translation: recomposing social space

The micro-exhibition format does not simply bring more visitors into the village; it brings different kinds of actors into relation with one another, and changes the terms of that relation. At Anchang, the market is organized through a "Common Prosperity Workshop" structure that links individual sauce producers, the Rengchang Sauce Garden (a heritage enterprise), industry associations, and the street-level government. The workshop structure standardizes quality and pricing while preserving the identity of individual producers—a form of collective branding that would be difficult to achieve through atomized stall vending.

At Shanxiahu, the market operates as a node in a broader industrial field: pearl farmers, processors, designers, e-commerce platforms, and tourism operators are brought into a common spatial frame. The market format makes the chain visible and negotiable, allowing actors who would otherwise operate in separate transactions to recognize their interdependence. At Meizhu, the youth market component introduces a new actor category—young, often outsider entrepreneurs—into a village field traditionally dominated by local lineage and craft networks. The zero-rent stall policy lowers entry barriers, but it also raises questions about the terms on which these newcomers are incorporated and whether their presence translates into durable local networks or remains a temporary infusion.

In each case, the micro-exhibition operates as a translation device: it takes practices that are embedded in everyday life (sauce-making, pearl cultivation, bamboo weaving) and reframes them as publicly legible cultural performances. This reframing generates social capital—connections, recognition, trust—that can be mobilized beyond the market event.

4.3 Narrative recoding of local knowledge: producing symbolic space

The most distinctive mechanism of the micro-exhibition is its treatment of local knowledge as narrative material. In a conventional market, local knowledge is implicit in the goods: a bottle of soy sauce is simply a bottle of soy sauce. In the micro-exhibition format, local knowledge becomes explicit, staged, and interpretable. Anchang's market does not merely sell soy sauce; it stages the process of sauce-making as a visible, walkable narrative, connecting the product to the town's identity as a "sauce culture" center. Shanxiahu does not merely sell pearls; it stages the transformation of a raw material into an object of aesthetic and emotional value, from the opening of the shell to the final design. Meizhu does not merely sell crafts; it stages the village as a Song-dynasty aesthetic landscape, with crafts serving as evidence of cultural continuity.

This narrative recoding has a dual effect. Externally, it produces a coherent "place image" that can circulate through tourism marketing and social media. Internally, it can reinforce or reconfigure local identity: artisans who were previously "just vendors" acquire the status of cultural bearers; village spaces that were previously "backstage" become "frontstage." But the process is not without tension. Narrative recoding selects certain elements of local knowledge for display while marginalizing others; it favors practices that are visually legible and performable over those that are diffuse, embodied, or resistant to staging. The symbolic space produced through the micro-exhibition is therefore always a partial space—selective, curated, and contestable.

4.4 The coupling of mechanisms and the question of durability

The three mechanisms are analytically distinct but empirically coupled. Curatorial framing (material space) creates the spatial conditions for field translation (social space), which in turn provides the actors and relationships through which narrative recoding (symbolic space) is carried out. Conversely, narrative recoding can motivate field translation by making certain social connections appear valuable, and field translation can motivate further curatorial framing by generating demand for new spatial arrangements.

The critical question is durability. Temporary markets, by definition, dematerialize. Do their spatial effects persist? The Shaoxing cases suggest a conditional answer. Durability is more likely when the micro-exhibition format produces infrastructural residues (renovated spaces, new pathways, display fixtures), organizational residues (workshop structures, producer networks, curatorial capacity), and narrative residues (place images that continue to circulate and attract visitors after the event). Where the format remains purely event-based—a temporary overlay with no institutional or material trace—its spatial effects are correspondingly ephemeral.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Implications for exhibition studies

Exhibition scholarship has largely been organized around institutions—museums, galleries, biennials—and their curatorial regimes. The micro-exhibition cases suggest that the analytical vocabulary of exhibition studies (curation, framing, narrative sequence, interpretive mediation) can be productively extended to non-institutional, dispersed, and temporary settings. This extension is not merely a matter of applying existing concepts to new objects. It requires taking seriously the spatial embeddedness of rural exhibition formats: unlike the enclosed gallery, the village micro-exhibition cannot fully control its boundaries, and it must negotiate with the ongoing rhythms of everyday life. This constraint is also a resource: the porosity of the format allows it to draw on the village's own spatial and social fabric in ways that enclosed exhibitions cannot.

5.2 Implications for rural revitalization policy

The policy implication is not that all markets should become micro-exhibitions. The point is rather that format design matters, and that the difference between a transactional

market and a curatorial one is not merely aesthetic. If the goal is durable spatial revitalization—rather than a temporary spike in visitor numbers—then policy should support the organizational and curatorial capacities that enable field translation and narrative recoding: training for local cultural brokers, stable platforms for producer networks, and investment in the material infrastructure that allows curatorial framing to leave a residue. The risk is that policy evaluation, focused on short-term metrics (visitor counts, sales volumes), will systematically undervalue the slower, less visible work of spatial production.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The study's limitations are those of a qualitative, three-case design. The mechanisms identified are analytically generalizable but not statistically representative; their operation in other regional and industrial contexts remains to be tested. The question of durability is addressed only provisionally: longitudinal research tracking spatial, organizational, and narrative residues over multiple market cycles would substantially strengthen the analysis. Finally, the paper has focused on the production of space from the perspective of organizers and cultural intermediaries; the ways in which ordinary residents and visitors experience and appropriate the micro-exhibition space deserve further attention.

6. CONCLUSION

The transformation from street stall to micro-exhibition is not a simple aesthetic upgrade. It is a shift in the spatial logic of market activity—from transaction to narration, from interface to interpretation—that reorganizes the material, social, and symbolic dimensions of village space. The Shaoxing cases show that this shift operates through curatorial framing, field translation, and narrative recoding, and that its durability depends on whether these mechanisms leave infrastructural, organizational, and narrative residues. For exhibition studies, the cases suggest that the discipline's analytical vocabulary has purchase beyond the institutional gallery, provided it is adapted to the embedded and porous conditions of rural space. For rural revitalization, they suggest that the most consequential policy question is not whether to hold markets, but how to design their format so that the space they temporarily produce continues to matter after the stalls are folded away.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Project Fund: Zhejiang Exhibition Society. This paper is the concluding paper of the 2026 Zhejiang Exhibition Society Research Project.

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