

# Preliminary Investigation and Significance on the Architectural Cultural Value: A Case Study of Ancient Theater Buildings in Shaanxi Central Plain Region

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## Research article

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# Abstract

As a witness to the history of development, architecture is an important material symbol for recording history and a precious "immovable" historical and cultural heritage. The ancient theater building of the village not only condenses the artistic style of traditional architecture, but also embodies the regional character and heavy folk culture formed in the historical development of a region, and its value is indescribable. This paper takes the most characteristic ancient theater building in Shaanxi Central Plain Region as an example, and it takes the Zouyue Pavilion as the research object, and innovatively proposes the preliminary investigation method of the cultural relics protection which is equal emphasis on the protection and inheritance of the tangible cultural heritage and the intangible cultural heritage, it adopts the cultural relic exploration, field survey, local chronicles research and other methods, through the excavation of the diversified historical information and cultural value of the Zouyue Pavilion, it provides a cultural relic value and research significance basis for its restoration and protection, and more importantly, the precious cultural, historical and social values that can be presented, thus realizing the protection and inheritance of cultural heritage in a real sense.

## Introduction

The ancient architecture symbolizes the national wisdom, it is an important carrier of spiritual civilization and historical culture, it is an important "material symbol" for recording history, and it is a precious "immovable" historical and cultural heritage <sup>[1]</sup>. The existing various ancient architectural cultural relics have undergone vicissitudes of life, and it is inevitable that they will be permanently and irreversibly damaged due to factors such as natural environment, man-made, social development, and the deterioration of the main body material. As a witness to the history of urban development, the value of ancient buildings is indescribable, and the protection and repair of ancient buildings and cultural relics have always attracted much attention <sup>[2]</sup>. The core and primary task is the preliminary research of cultural relics, which includes a comprehensive grasp of the diverse historical information and cultural value of architectural cultural relics, so as to provide a practical basis for the later development of protection and repair plans, and more importantly, in the realization of material culture while protecting the heritage, the precious cultural and historical values that can be fundamentally loaded are also protected and presented. It can be said that the preliminary research work is a prerequisite for the protection and repair of cultural relics and ancient buildings, and it will also determine the effectiveness and long-term use of the protection of the building's cultural relics.

According to the "Shaanxi Drama Chronicle: Xianyang City Volume" published by Sanqin Publishing House in 1994 <sup>[3]</sup>, the Zouyue Pavilion in Guandi Temple, Xizhang Village, Fengxi New City, Xixian New District, Shaanxi Province was exquisite in style, and was built at the end of Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China. It is currently one of the only three ancient buildings in Qindu District. The whole building faces north from south, with three rooms wide and three rooms deep, the bottom side is 10.2 meters long. It uses brick and wood as the main building material and adopts the traditional Chinese rivet structure. The original building is solemn and simple yet delicate, among which the

architectural style is rare and provides a indeed model of traditional theater building for the study of traditional architecture in Shaanxi Central Plain Region.

This paper takes the most characteristic ancient theater building in Shaanxi Central Plain Region as an example, specifically, it takes the Zouyue Pavilion as the research object, and it is based on the preliminary research work of the protection and through the excavation of the diversified historical information and cultural value of the Zouyue Pavilion, it provides a practical basis for the protection and repair of the ancient building, and it also innovatively proposes the preliminary research methods for the protection of material cultural heritage that pay equal attention to the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, as well as the collaborative innovation of cultural heritage protection projects and cultural heritage protection that integrate multiple disciplines, multiple fields and professional technologies. With a view to discovering the symbiosis and relationship between tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage, while designing the authenticity protection plan of the building itself, it can also protect the cultural relics from the deep-level connection between material culture and the social politics, economy and culture afterwards, intangible cultural inheritance seeks to put forward protection basis and suggestions, and establish a more complete cultural relic protection and cultural inheritance system.

## **Research Method**

Investigating the protection of the building itself, the diversified historical information and cultural value of the Zouyue Pavilion has been explored through field research, in-depth interview, cultural relic exploration, ethnographic research, etc., and it has proposed the preliminary research methods with equal emphasis on heritage protection and inheritance in the protection of material cultural heritage and intangible culture heritage <sup>[5]</sup>. The research workflow is shown in Fig. 1:

### **Field Research**

The field research is divided into four parts: research of the existing state of the building, field observation of the location of the building, collection of literature related to the building in the field, and in-depth interview. This paper takes the Zouyue Pavilion of Guandi Temple in Xizhang Village as the research object, visits to understand the preservation status of Zouyue Pavilion, and asks relevant staff about the specific matters of Zouyue Pavilion. It is of interest to the Fengxi area, especially Diaotai Township to conduct interviews on the origins, changes, and artistic activities of the surrounding areas, collect handwritten manuscripts of local people, and make recordings and transcripts.

### **Literature Research**

The cultural research is mainly based on the historical basis of the city, county chronicles and cultural and historical materials published in Shaanxi central plain. It collects the local chronicles of Shaanxi Province, counties and districts, drama, culture and art, folklore, etc. of Shaanxi Province, Chinese temple theater, theater art and other related monographs to understand the historical evolution of Chinese theater

architecture and the development history of theater cultural relics. Among them, the local chronicles containing relevant records include: "Shaanxi Provincial Drama Chronicles-Xianyang Municipal Volume", "Shaanxi Provincial Chronicles" Volume 77-Folklore Chronicles, "Annotation to the Old Xianyang Classics" Ming Wanli-Xianyang County New Chronicles, "Xianyang Annotation to Classic Old Records" Qing Kangxi • Sanshui County Chronicles Qing Qianlong • Sanshui County Chronicles, "Xianyang Classic Old Records and Annotations" Qing Guangxu • Sanyuan County New Chronicles, "Xianyang Classics Old Chronicles and Annotations" Republic of China • Rebuilt Xianyang County New Chronicles, "Xianyang City Qindu District Chronicles" and "Shaanxi Provincial Chronicles" Volume 65-Culture and Art Chronicles, etc.

## Research Results

### Definition of the Concept of Ancient Theater Building

The theater building is also known as "temple theater", "ancient theater building", "temple theater building", "ancestral theater", "theater" and so on. In 1993, Jing Lihu first proposed the concept of "temple theater" in his paper "the Temple and Ancient Chinese Theater". Later, Che Wenming defined it as "a place where a stage is built in a temple and it is a place to watch the theater". The theater buildings<sup>[6-15]</sup> can be roughly divided into five categories: palace theater building, mansion theater building, guild theater building, restaurant theater building, and temple theater building. The main object of this paper is the general sense of temple theater building.

### Existing status and research significance of ancient theater building in Shaanxi Central Plain Region

The theater buildings can be roughly divided into five categories: palace theater building, mansion theater building, guild theater building, restaurant theater building, and temple theater building. The Zouyue Pavilion of Guandi Temple in Xizhang Village was originally an annex building of Guandi Temple. Although the temple has been demolished, it can still be defined as a universal temple theater building.

The theater performance activities in Shaanxi Central Plain Region have been very active since ancient times, and the mid-Qing Dynasty was its heyday. According to the "Shaanxi Drama Chronicle: Xianyang City Volume" published by Sanqin Publishing House in 1994, before the founding of the People's Republic of China, there were 384 theater buildings in Xianyang City, and it can almost be said that "there are temples everywhere, and theater buildings everywhere". Among them, 281 buildings have been destroyed, only 6 buildings are "survived" or "good".

Tab. 1 Statistics of the Ancient Theater Buildings in Qindu District, Xianyang City before the founding of the People's Republic of China<sup>[3]</sup>

Name	Construction Age	Location
Diaotai Township Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Xizhang Village School, Diaotai Township
Majiazhai Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Majiazhai School
Fengxi Township Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Dongzhang Village School
Fengdong Township Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Laoye Temple School
Mazhuang Township Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Mazhuang Town
Shuangzhao Township Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Yan Village School
Pingling Township Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Xia Xiaozhai
Gudu Township Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Xiyang Village
Mapaoquan Township Theater Building	Late Qing Dynasty	Daquan Village

As shown in Tab. 1, the data records that the number of existing theater buildings in Shaanxi Central Plain Region before the founding of the People's Republic of China has dropped sharply: most theater buildings have been forced to demolish due to political and historical reasons, or have gradually lost their practical value during the development and changes of the times, because they are no longer frequently used or they have occupied too much land and they are demolished. The few surviving theater buildings of Ming and Qing Dynasties have also lost historical information or data are difficult to verify due to historical reasons, which has also increased the difficulty of researching and protecting theater buildings today.

As part of the cultural protection plan for the architectural relics in the overall plan of Fengxi New City, the area where the Zouyue Pavilion is located is a representative of the ancient theater buildings, and the folk customs derived from it still have important value in the modern context, therefore, it is urgent to carry out the repair work and related historical and cultural research on the Zouyue Pavilion.

### **Information and Preservation Status of Cultural Relics in the Zouyue Pavilion**

As shown in Fig. 2, Zouyue Pavilion has gone through hundreds of years of wind and rain, and it is broken eaves and broken tiles, scarred everywhere. The wooden rafters on the roof were decayed, the tile surface was seriously peeled off, and with the accumulated colored painting dust cover, it cannot be distinguished and it is classified as a dangerous building. In 2019, experts on the preservation of cultural

relics conducted on-site surveys of the Zouyue Pavilion, they found that the main body of the building collapsed very serious, and the original building structure is almost invisible, and due to various environmental factors such as heavy rains and earthquakes, the wood has lost its original structure, the strength of the wood is severely decayed, sinking, and some even cracking, separating, and the precious theater building will completely disappear if protection is not carried out.

## Cultural Value

### Official Sacrifice and Folk Sacrifice in the Ming and Qing Dynasty Temples

The architectural culture of the local ancient theater buildings in the Ming and Qing Dynasties were derived from the ritual records of the sacrifice in the Bronze Age<sup>[16]</sup>. People in ancient China prayed for a good harvest or for eliminating disasters. Most ancient theater buildings in Xianyang Area belong to this category which were annexed to the temples or shrines.

The concept of “Si”, meaning sacrifice or the religious activities, and there were official sacrifices recorded in documents as well as the folk worships among the commoners. As the Tab.2 shows that the Temple for official Sacrifices<sup>[17]</sup> at Xianyang in Qing Dynasty had two characteristics. First, compared with those of the Ming Dynasty, the names of the Temple for official Sacrifices in Qing Dynasty were named with the villages’ or towns’ names which obviously shew that they were built on the towns or villages, the most basic organization of society. From the county level to township level, it represented the folk tendency to a certain degree.

In addition to the official sacrifices required by the authority, the rural areas also saw the emergence of folk worship rituals. With the rise of civic culture in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the deity belief system also continued to increase. The temple number around Xianyang Area also increased day by day. The folk performances, the temple fair, etc. were also becoming more and more prosperous. As mentioned above, a total of 384 recorded ancient theater buildings built during the Ming and Qing Dynasties in Xianyang was recorded before the founding of New China. Among which, 4 were officially recognized and accepted but the rest were not. Therefore, it could be speculated that the number of official sacrifice temples did not increase or decrease compared with the Ming Dynasty, but the folk worship temples was extremely prosperous in the Qing Dynasty, which showed the decline of the status of official sacrifice temples in the Qing Dynasty.

Compared with the previous Dynasties, the government of Ming and Qing had a subtle change for the management and control of folk worship. According to *the New Records of Xianyang*, there were many folk worship temples during this period. The Zouyue Pavilion in Guandi Temple, Xizhang Village, Fengxi New City, Xixian New District was a typical representative of folk worship temple involved from the official sacrifice temple. Its preservation to this day, to a certain extent, shows the important position of the ancient theater building at that time. Whether it is the folk worship of official sacrifice, or the folk worship turning to official sacrifices, both reflect the irresistible trend of secularization.

## The Realization of Rites and Music Education

At first, Chinese theater did not have much in common with rites and music. However, this folk music form had a stronger mass foundation than the refined music. But the rites and music system kept advancing with the times along with the development of folk culture in successive dynasties<sup>[26]</sup>. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, theater had become an indispensable part of people's lives. Such a huge social foundation made the imperial court realize that it was indeed a powerful tool to stabilize social order to incorporate theater into the system of rites and music and endowing it with its educational function. Therefore, to meet the needs of the public, the system of rites and music had been adjusted to a certain extent. Meanwhile, the art of theater had also been greatly prospered under the realistic needs of rural governance.

How to promote the justice and punish the people who commit bad deeds? Theater could be a most extensive and effective way to absorb cultural nutrients and to distinguish right from wrong. Namely, watching Theater is like reading books. The widely distributed ancient theater buildings and some of the Theater stories handed down from the Ming and Qing Dynasties could fully showcase the local authority had placed much emphasis on the theater's education role. For example, the Shaanxi Daoqing Theater publicized the feudal moral codes, in the historical themed theater like *Annals of the Kingdoms of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty*, *the Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *the Expedition to the East* and *the Expedition to the West*. *Generals of the Yang Family*, *The Case of Penggong*.

When the great virtues such as loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, justice, righteousness, or the promotion of goodness and the punishment of evil advocated by the enlightenment of rites and music integrating into the theater, morality is combined with humor hidden in the funny form of expression, attracting more viewers and causing greater resonance in a simple and understandable way. Every act and move in theater, singing in harmony constantly affirmed and strengthened the orthodox thoughts and the national ideology. The ethics and morals it publicized often became the basis and criterion of people's behavior in a subconscious way. The theater performing as the annex building of official sacrifice temple assumed the important function of educating people through entertainment.

## From Worshiping the Gods to Entertaining People

The ancient folk fairs recorded in *the Annals of the Qindu District, Xianyang* include the Goat-head Fair, the Filial Duties Fair, the Theater Fair and the Temple Fair. Among them, the ones closely related to the ancient theater building are mainly the Theater Fair and the Temple Fair. They were both derived from the traditional sacrifice theater to convey respect to the gods. At the same time, the theater performed also resonated with the audience off the stage, it attracted more villagers to participate and to exchange their material and cultural life. As time went by, it formed the custom of the regular appearance of temple fair. Therefore, the temple fair took the community as the unit, and the shrine came from offering sacrifices to the god of the land.

At the old temple fairs, the faithful men and women around carrying some snacks would throng to the temple to burn the incense and light the candles. The temple fair would normally last for three days with the theater performance and folk music shows going on for day and night. According to a survey conducted by *China's Ancient Open Ancient theater building Studies*, Theater performance after the harvest by ancient Chinese were mostly for worship the heaven or god<sup>[18]</sup>, all these activities were to show people's respect the God of the Land.

In the Tang Dynasty, welcoming the God of Land was a small Buddhism activity originated from the interactions between the temple monks and residents. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it developed into a public activity. In the sixth year of the Republic of China (1917), it became a big event participated by large masses in the communities. Since 2015, the temple fair of welcoming the God of Land has changed into the Eighteen Ancient Culture and Arts Festival, and gongs and drums performance, folk dancing, waist drums and Shehuo folk parade and Big-head baby Dancing Show and other performance. The performance was so grand that it passed down till now.

The Ancient theater buildings represents a concrete existence, and it embodies a semiotic performing art<sup>[19]</sup>. People expressed their respect and wished their family and fellow villagers happiness and blessings. Since then, these Ancient theater buildings as material symbols have gone through ups and downs. Even though the offering sacrifice was not a necessary program in the temple fair, this custom of holding the temple fair is continued. Through the regular assembly and ceremony, it conveys people's joyful emotions and expectations for a better life.

### **The Intercommunication of Symbolic Expression and Spiritual Connotation**

With the deepening of the secularization of official sacrifice in the Qing Dynasty, the official ideology penetrated in the village community by theater. Based on satisfying the aesthetic pleasure of the people, it could purify people's mind, regulate people's behavior, and enhance the sense of regional identity which contributed to the harmony among people. On the other hand, the good effect of rural governance was also achieved through it. The theatrical house, as the material carrier of theater culture, also became the symbol of ritual and music education. When the secularization became the mainstream of folk life, the religious meaning in the custom was gradually lost, replaced by information, materials and emotion exchange. As a platform for emotional communication, the ancient theater building has also become the cultural heritage of rural China and the spiritual wealth of people in Shaanxi Central Plain.

Signs can be divided into materiality and immateriality. As the material symbol of communication, the ancient theater building builds a bridge between the individual's spiritual world and the external ethical norms. It plays a role of inter-mediation. Because the ancient theater building was the artistic medium, culture was conveyed through it. The customs, to some extent, were the source of cultural identity and sense of belonging. Customs in the traditional society were the inherent constraints of people. Under the condition of today, external performance of customs was obscured replaced by a more profound spiritual lineage. In addition, the ancient theater buildings and the customs derived from them all provide a deep

soil for the realization of rural governance. The theater culture was more like a window which plays a role of ventilation and was more conducive to the smooth implementation of government policies.

From a deeper level, both the physical symbol of the theater or the non-material symbol of the custom, governance is the external manifestation of the traditional culture dominated by Confucianism for a long time. In essence, both of them have the local roots and spiritual connotations of Chinese society, that is, the core ideological benevolence of Confucianism since the Pre-Qin period. It has also shaped China's local traditions and formed a variety of symbolic expressions when benevolence and virtue are linked. Benevolence is the source of inner virtue. Without the support of inner benevolence, the so-called rites and music would be empty talk, and it would be difficult to have customs and ways of governance. As the form of symbolization and secularization, the theater expresses the Chinese philosophy since ancient times. It was to promote the good and punish the evil and to enlighten the people.

## Discussion

The ancient architecture of the village not only condenses the artistic style of traditional architecture, but also embodies the regional character and heavy folk culture formed in the historical development of a region. However, with the acceleration of the modernization process, the original space of traditional villages gave way to modern construction, making the ancient theater building as a material symbol move from the center to the edge. Although on the surface, this is only the demise of material symbols, but at a deeper level, the disappearance of theater building means the break of the cultural genes of the village communities and the changes in the propagation ecology of traditional culture, therefore, the intangible culture behind the theater building is also dying. However, the culture behind the ancient building in the village is often ignored by people, and this is one of the important reasons why it is difficult to implement the protection of the ancient building in the village.

The study found that, as a typical representative of the Zhengsi civilization of in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Zouyue Pavilion is an important material basis for studying the changes in the sacrificial traditions in Xianyang during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the downward shift of ritual and music education, and the derivation of related folklore dramas, and the immaterial culture behind it is not only closely related to the architectural body, but it also has a certain enlightening effect on the implementation of today's rural revitalization strategy. Therefore, the Zouyue Pavilion urgently needs to be repaired, and the intangible cultural heritage also needs to be better obtained through systematic collection and special sorting.

## Conclusion

The preservation and inheritance of the building will fundamentally realize the cultural self-confidence of the overall building and the deeper culture, and the culture and social symbiosis relationship that it represents. Although from the current point of view, the protection of cultural relics has made great progress, and the level of protection, management and utilization of cultural relics has been continuously

improved, and many cultural relics protection efforts simply focus on the restoration of cultural relics, but ignore that the core of cultural relics protection is the inheritance and protection of culture, this is precisely the key point of cultural relic protection. In this real dilemma, the cultural relics protection and cultural inheritance work need to initiate interdisciplinary interactions, and try to explore the synergy between material and intangible cultures in cultural relics protection from a historical perspective, to create more comprehensive cultural relics protection with the cultural protection and inheritance system, ancient buildings such as the Zouyue Pavilion can continue to exert their cultural value in the new era.

In the process of preliminary investigation the Zouyue Pavilion, we carried out research into two different aspects of material and intangible culture and creatively proposed the new idea with "one body and two sides" of cultural relics preliminary research, and the idea is to combine the survey of cultural relics with intangible cultural research to form a more systematic research method. It provides a cultural relic value and research significance basis for its restoration and protection, and more importantly, the precious cultural, historical and social values that can be presented, thus realizing the protection and inheritance of cultural heritage in a real sense.

## **Abbreviations**

The Zouyue Pavilion in Guandi Temple, Xizhang Village, Fengxi New City, Xixian New District, Shaanxi Province: the Zouyue Pavilion

## **Declarations**

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### **Authors' Contributions**

J. C. conceived the research, designed the research methodology, performed experiments, data acquisition and processing, and revised the manuscript. Z. D. B. performed data acquisition and processing and discussed the results. L. W. F. performed data and photo acquisition and processing. J. S. designed the research methodology. D. L. performed data acquisition and their support in the related work such as field research and literature research. Y. H. L and J. L. W designed the research methodology, conducted data analysis, and reviewed and corrected the manuscript.

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## Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysis results obtained in the current study are available from the corresponding author on request.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this work. We declare that we do not have any commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in connection with this work submitted.

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## Figures

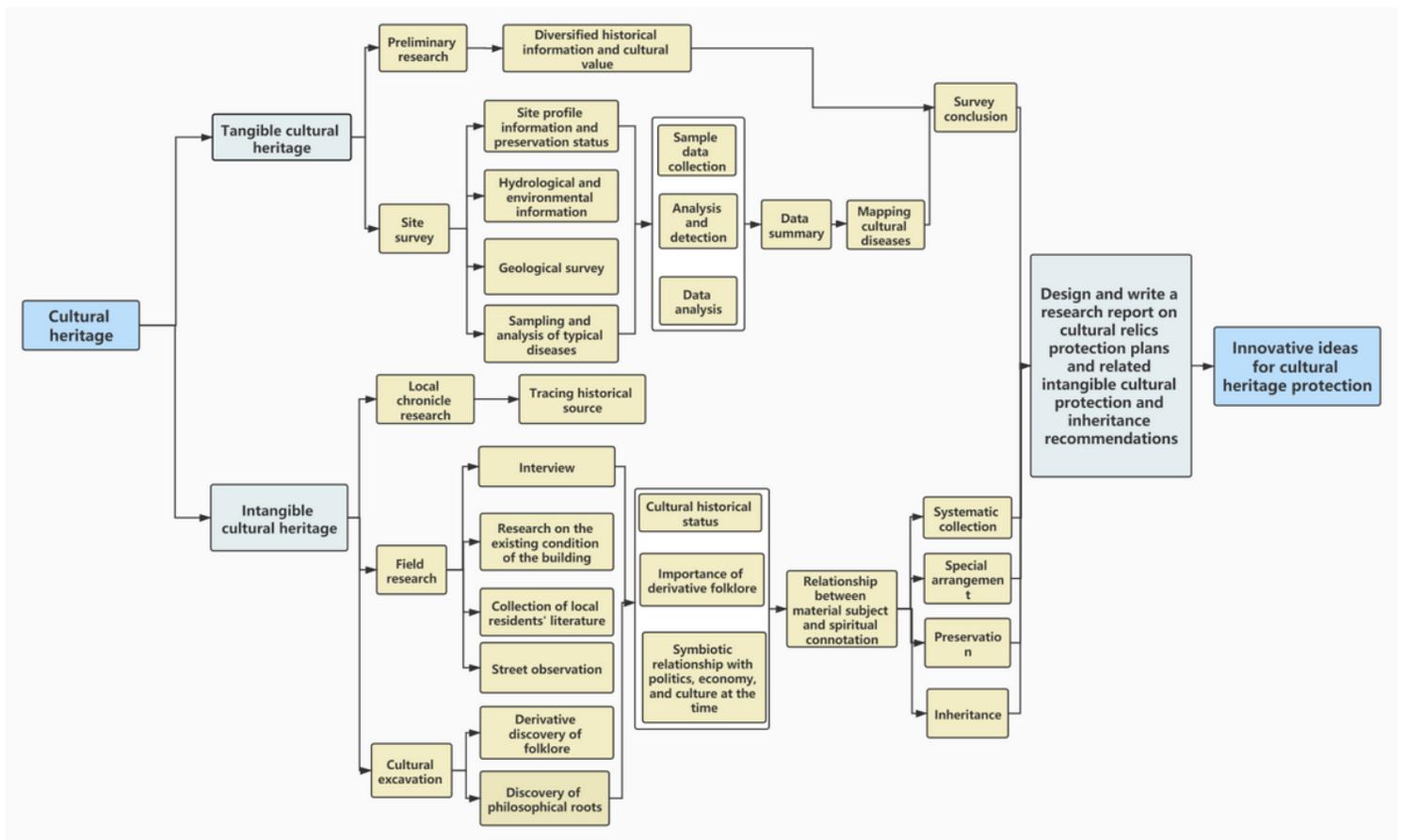


Figure 1

The research workflow of the current situation of cultural relics preservation in the early stage of the preservation and repair of architectural cultural relics



## Figure 2

Preservation status of the Zouyue Pavilion of Guandi Temple in Xizhang Village (1, 2, the pictures were taken in the 2008 Cultural Relics Census, 3, 4, the pictures were taken in 2019 Site Survey of Cultural Relics).