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Exploring the driving forces of community sustainable development based on ABCD theory—A case study of Yucun village China

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Abstract: This case study employs the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) theory as a conceptual framework, utilizing semi-structured interviews combined with focus group discussions to uncover the driving forces influencing rural revitalization and sustainable development within communities. ABCD is considered a transformative approach that emphasizes achieving sustainable development by mobilizing existing resources within the community. Conducted against the backdrop of rural revitalization in China, the study conducts on-site investigations in Yucun, Zhejiang Province. Through the analysis of Yucun's community development and asset utilization practices, the study reveals successful experiences in various aspects, including community construction, industrial development, cultural heritage preservation, ecological conservation, organizational management, and open economic thinking. The results indicate that Yucun's sustainable development benefits from its unique resources, leveraging policy advantages, collective financial organizations, and open economic thinking, among other factors. These elements collectively drive rural revitalization in Yucun, leading to sustainable development.

Keywords: asset-based community development theory; community sustainable development; the driving force for rural revitalization; sustainable development; Yucun

1. Introduction

In recent years, against vigorously revitalizing rural areas, China has introduced the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) strategy in community development. This strategy has emerged as a crucial approach for rural revitalization and sustainable community development. Despite being relatively niche in Chinese communities, ABCD has garnered a dedicated following. Its appeal lies in offering an alternative method that empowers community members to drive development by identifying and mobilizing existing yet often unrecognized assets. It particularly emphasizes the significance of social assets, including individual talents and social network relationships (Li et al., 2022; Tang, 2023). ABCD is perceived as a response to rapid social, political, and economic changes, especially in situations where liberalization policies have weakened social contracts (Paul et al., 2020). This strategy underscores the importance of robust governance at the local level and the emergence of influential civil society organizations, potentially influencing the development practices of Chinese communities.

After several decades of rapid development, China's urbanization rate surpassed 50% for the first time in 2011, reaching 64.72% by the end of 2021 (Hu, 2023). As the

country enters a new stage of integrated urban-rural development, harnessing the rightful role of agriculture and rural areas becomes increasingly crucial. Therefore, since 2017, the Chinese government has implemented the “Rural Revitalization Strategy”, aiming to prioritize the role of agriculture and rural areas and construct a unified development system for urban and rural regions (Wen et al., 2022). However, applying the ABCD theory model in China’s development process encounters various challenges.

Firstly, as the ABCD theory originated from Western culture, its application in China requires overcoming cultural differences to ensure its concepts and methods naturally integrate into Chinese society’s specific context and values. Secondly, there are bottlenecks in policy support, necessitating the formulation of corresponding policy frameworks to facilitate the effective implementation of the theory in community development. At the community level, there are also issues, including insufficient organization and motivation within communities, which may impact the effectiveness of the theory in practice, adding an extra layer of complexity to the application of ABCD (Han, 2023; Hu, 2023).

Like most developing countries and regions, China faces various challenges in the process of rural revitalization, including weak agricultural competitiveness, rapid non-agriculturalization of production factors, ageing population, scattered farmland, and environmental pollution, which require in-depth exploration (Liu and Li, 2017; Tang and Han, 2023). The discussion on achieving sustainable development through endogenous driving forces has become a significant challenge for governments and the academic community globally (Li et al., 2022).

Mainly, with population growth and increasing consumption levels, the traditional economic growth model is under immense pressure. Overemphasis on short-term economic benefits while neglecting environmental protection also hinders long-term financial sustainability. Simultaneously, achieving the United Nations’ “Sustainable Development Goals” by 2030 requires a delicate balance between economic development, social progress, and environmental protection, addressing the three intergenerational tasks (Secretary-General, 1987). Only by comprehensively considering the needs of different sectors and generations can a system that genuinely ensures sustainability be constructed (Magis, 2010; Vallance et al., 2011).

This study proposes an analytical framework for the evolutionary analysis of rural growth based on the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) theory. The aim is to uncover the key elements, mechanisms, and path evolution patterns from rural decline to revitalization. Utilizing ABCD as the theoretical framework, the study employs a deep longitudinal case study approach to dynamically analyze the intrinsic mechanisms of sustainable development and rural regeneration evolution in Yucun, Zhejiang Province. Additionally, focusing on a typical agricultural village in China, spanning from the initiation of China’s reform and opening-up in 1978 to 2023, the research explores the transformation process and experiences from poverty alleviation to comprehensive revitalization. This investigation contributes to a deeper understanding of the growth trajectory of rural areas during their transformation, offering insights that can be valuable for developing villages in China and beyond.

2. Theoretical framework: Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) theory emphasizes enhancing community capacity and sustainable development by leveraging the strengths and assets within local communities (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003; Nel, 2015). Formulated initially by John McKnight and John Kretzmann in the early 1990s based on their work in low-income communities in Chicago (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1993), ABCD theory stands in contrast to needs-based approaches. Positioned as an endogenous development theory from a strength’s perspective, this theory, grounded in asset-based community development, focuses on the rich resources within communities, encompassing material, human, cultural, and social networks (Harrison et al., 2019; Tang and Han, 2023).

The core premise underscores that communities are not only gathering places for problems but also reservoirs of potential and resources. The principles of the theory include starting from within the community, emphasizing community self-organization, and nurturing self-development capabilities. By discovering and strengthening internal assets, communities can better address challenges, achieve sustainable development, and enhance residents’ participation and responsibility (Misener and Schulenkorf, 2016; Panzarella, 2023; Tang and Han, 2023).

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist, posited that every community possesses untapped yet rich “assets,” including individual skills, civic associations, local institutions, and material resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). If these assets are identified and mobilised, sustainable community regeneration can be achieved through a bottom-up process driven by residents (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1993). The classification of community capital in existing research is not entirely consistent. Building upon the groundbreaking work of McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) in the ABCD theory, researchers have expanded and enriched the theory from various perspectives.

Emery and Flora (2006) developed a Community Capital Framework (CCF) (Panzarella, 2023), while Green and Haines (2008) further expanded the classification to seven capitals by including material capital, financial capital, and cultural capital. The development of ABCD theory has been built upon the foundation laid by McKnight and Kretzmann’s seminal work, with researchers contributing to its expansion and enrichment. The classification of community capital varies, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Comparison of community capital classification systems.

Classification System	Year	Primary References	Subcategories
ABCD (Asset Building and Community Development)	1993	McKnight and Kretzmann	1. Individuals; 2. Associations; 3. Institutions
CCF (Community Capitals Framework)	2006	Emery and Flora	1. Nature Capital; 2. Human Capital; 3. Social Capital; 4. Political Capital; 5. Cultural Capital; 6. Financial Capital; 7. Construction Capital
ABCD (Asset Building and Community Development)	2008	Green and Haines	1. Material Capital; 2. Human Capital; 3. Social Capital; 4. Financial Capital; 5. Political Capital; 6. Environmental Capital; 7. Cultural Capital

This study compares three major community capital classification systems within the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) theory framework. All three systems acknowledge material, human, and social capital as core elements of community capital. These studies emphasize a holistic perspective on community capital and its interconnections (Emery and Flora, 2006; Green and Haines, 2008; McKnight and Kretzmann, 1993). Building upon this foundation, the present study integrates sustainable development theory as a complementary framework to ABCD theory. The aim is to leverage the latent resources and strengths within the community, fostering comprehensive participation and long-term planning to drive sustainable development in various aspects, including the economic, social, and cultural dimensions. This approach aims to achieve effective resource utilization and long-term prosperity within the community.

Sustainable development theory is a globally recognized guiding principle for social and economic development. It emphasizes the harmonization of socioeconomic development with environmental protection to achieve long-term sustainability. Originating from the “Brundtland Report” commissioned by the United Nations in the early 1980s, this theory has become a cornerstone for international discourse on sustainable development (WCED, 1987).

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to delve into the process and influencing factors of rural revitalization in Yucun. Qualitative research design utilizes methods such as in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to allow researchers to explore participants’ viewpoints, experiences, and perceptions thoroughly. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms of community development. The design enables us to capture unstructured and detailed information, revealing the complexity and diversity of the revitalization process in Yucun.

3.2. Selected region

Choosing Yucun in Zhejiang as the research sample was based on multiple considerations. Yucun is situated in Tianhuangping Town, Anji County, covering an area of 4.86 square kilometres with 280 households and 1050 residents, making it a relatively small-scale community. This choice allows for a more detailed understanding of individual and community-level situations (Anji County People’s Government, 2019). To better comprehend Yucun’s development process, we considered several crucial factors, including socioeconomic characteristics, geographical location, and comprehensive development. It ensures the diversity and representativeness of the sample, enhancing the generalizability of the study results.

As depicted in **Figure 1**, Yucun stands out with its bamboo economy and agritainment as the leading industries. It serves as a paradigmatic representative of rural revitalization due to its thriving tourism sector and bamboo product processing enterprises that offer valuable experiences for other rural areas. Situated in the

northwest part of Zhejiang Province, approximately 80 kilometres from Hangzhou and 220 kilometres from Shanghai, Yucun enjoys a strategically advantageous location.

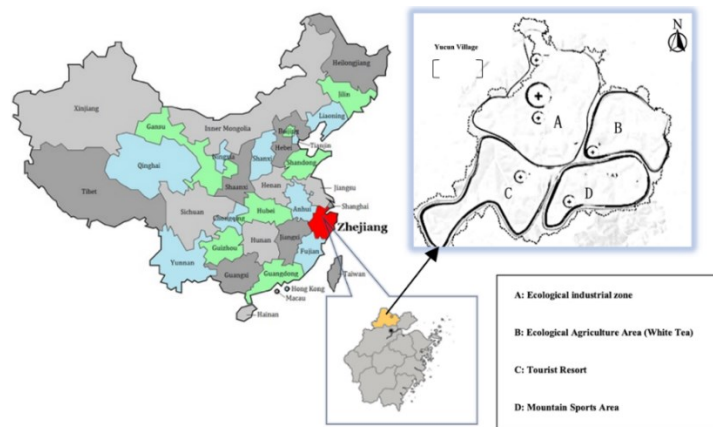


Figure 1. Location of case study area.

In stark contrast, neighboring areas such as the Bai Lu Yuan Folk Cultural Village in Shaanxi provide contrasting experiences. For example, Wu (2020) discusses how Bai Lu Yuan attempted to attract tourists by showcasing folk culture, but ultimately failed due to a lack of market research, management confusion, and insufficient integration with the local community, leading to unsustainable development. Similarly, Wang (2017) conducted a comparative study on the homogenized competition among folk villages, using examples from Shaanxi province like Yuanjia Village and Fucha Town. Despite their natural beauty and agricultural resources, Longtou Village, as discussed by Wang (2017), struggled to develop its tourism industry and other economic sectors. Government-led initiatives resulted in the construction of themed attractions like an ancient street, Qin-Chu Agricultural Cultural Park, and tea plantations, but without effective market guidance and industry integration, local farmers found it challenging to capitalize on land transfers, leading to stagnation in the village's development and exacerbated outbound labor migration.

By contrasting these examples with Yucun's holistic approach to development, this study emphasizes the importance of community-driven development strategies that leverage local assets and promote sustainable growth. Yucun's emphasis on community participation and environmental sustainability provides valuable lessons for rural revitalization efforts, demonstrating the significance of tailored solutions over standardized approaches. Therefore, Yucun not only serves as a source of rich data but also as a representative case study, offering insights and inspiration for other rural areas with similar backgrounds.

3.3. Data collection methods

The data for this study primarily originate from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, on-site observations, official second-hand data releases, village committee meetings, policy records, and archival documents (See **Table 2**). Below is a polished version of the sentence:

- (1) Semi-Structured Interviews (See **Table 3**):

- a) **Participant Selection:** Twenty individuals were selected, comprising residents of Yucun, community entrepreneurs, artisans, staff involved in Yucun's industrial development projects, and representatives from non-governmental organizations or volunteer groups.
 - b) **Recruitment Process:** Participants were recruited based on their active involvement and firsthand experience in Yucun's development processes, ensuring diverse perspectives.
 - c) **Survey Question Preparation:** A set of semi-structured interview questions was formulated, covering topics such as historical changes, institutional reforms, industrial development status, growth experiences, perspectives, and feelings regarding Yucun's sustainable development.
 - d) **Interview Conduct:** Interviews were conducted both in-person and via Tencent video conferencing, enabling participants to freely express their views and yielding valuable qualitative data for researchers.
- (2) **Focus Groups (See **Table 3**):**
- a) **Participant Selection:** Twelve leaders from Tianhuangping Town and the Yucun Village Committee, actively engaged in rural reform and development, were selected to form the focus groups.
 - b) **Discussion Topics:** Focus group discussions revolved around Yucun's development strategy, policies and planning, core driving industries, implementation measures, resource utilization capabilities, achievements, future expectations, and participation pathways.
 - c) **Facilitation:** Skilled facilitators guided the focus group discussions to ensure all relevant topics were covered, encouraging active participation from each member.
- (3) **On-Site Participant Observation:**
- a) **Observation Planning:** Researchers devised a structured observation plan to systematically document daily life and development activities within the Yucun community.
 - b) **Immersion:** Researchers spent time living within the community, observing interactions, events, and dynamics firsthand to gain a deep understanding of the community's functioning.
 - c) **Data Collection:** Observations were recorded through detailed field notes, capturing both overt and subtle aspects of community life and development.
 - d) **Reflection and Analysis:** Researchers reflected on their observations and analyzed them to identify patterns, themes, and underlying drivers shaping Yucun's sustainable development.
- (4) **Document Analysis:**
- a) **Data Compilation:** Official second-hand data releases, village committee meeting minutes, policy records, and archival documents were collected and compiled for analysis.
 - b) **Thorough Review:** Researchers meticulously reviewed and analyzed the documents to extract relevant information related to Yucun's development trajectory, policy framework, and historical context.
 - c) **Integration:** Findings from document analysis were integrated with qualitative data obtained from interviews, focus groups, and observations to

provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Yucun’s sustainable development.

Table 2. Data source and code.

Data Source	Data type	Number of Entries	Code
Main data	Semi-structured interviews	20	Y1
	Focus group	12	Y2
Secondary data	Village Archives	13	Z1
	Village Committee Meeting Records	5	Z2
	Village Committee Work Reports and Summaries	10	Z3
	Policy Documents Regarding Village Reform	24	Z4
	Media Interview Materials	7	Z5
	Existing Research Literature Materials	11	Z6

Table 3. Interviewees and the core content of the interview.

Interviewee	Interview Content	Number of Interviews	Number of Participants	Duration
Focus group (12 people)				
Town Leader	Yucun’s overall development strategy, policies, and planning. Core driving industries and implementation measures based on ABCD development in Yucun. Internal driving forces and action characteristics, resource transformation and utilization capabilities, achievements.	3	3	210 min
Village Committee Director	Attitude towards Yucun’s construction and industrial development based on ABCD theory. Awareness of ecological environment protection. Living conditions of villagers. The characteristics of reform and development.	4	2	280 min
Village Cadres	Attitude towards Yucun’s construction and industrial development based on ABCD theory. Awareness of ecological environment protection. Living conditions of villagers. The characteristics of reform and development.	5	4	192 min
Semi-structured interviews (20 people)				
Village representatives	Important resources and advantages in Yucun village. Details of resource integration and utilization, evaluation of group cooperation effectiveness. Villagers’ participation enthusiasm in community construction. Villagers’ awareness of ABCD theory and sustainable development theory.	6	10	184 min
Entrepreneurs, merchants, or craftsmen	Yucun enterprises’ contribution to sustainable economy. Yucun economic and cultural industry development status, growth trends, and challenges. Sustainable agriculture and rural enterprise development.	4	8	163 min
Staff for development projects	Community villagers’ participation and enthusiasm in cultural activities and economic construction. Cooperation among local community, businesses, stakeholders. Overview of advantageous resources in Yucun, along with its green development goals and long-term plans.	5	6	210 min

Table 3. (Continued).

Interviewee	Interview Content	Number of Interviews	Number of Participants	Duration
Non-governmental organizations and volunteers	Participation and support for industrial development projects. Encouragement and support mechanisms for community members' participation in industrial development. Collaboration with the local community to promote sustainable development.	5	5	133 min

Note: The duration of interviews varied based on the nature of the content and the depth of discussion.

Data collection for this study spanned from April to November 2023, following ethical approval from the local ethics review committee prior to conducting interviews in early 2023. Participants were recruited using non-probability sampling techniques, ensuring representation across diverse demographic groups (e.g., age, gender, industry) to capture varied perspectives while maintaining precise control over participant structure. Multiple interactions were conducted during the early stages of research to establish trust with participants, crucial for obtaining authentic subjective descriptions through qualitative methods like focus groups and semi-structured interviews, thereby ensuring data quality. Additionally, secondary data utilized in this study spans from 1978 to 2023:

- **Historical Archives:** Includes records on Yucun’s overall development, demographic statistics, and infrastructure construction.
- **Village Committee Meeting Minutes:** Documents discussions, decisions, and plans made during village committee meetings at various time periods.
- **Village Committee Work Reports and Summaries:** Summarizes Yucun’s work and development, highlighting key achievements and challenges.
- **Policy Documents on Village Reform:** Collect relevant policy documents on Yucun’s reform and development, understanding national and local policy support.
- **Social Media and Media Interview Materials:** Includes interviews and reports featuring village leaders and residents, showcasing Yucun’s image and development in the media.
- **Yucun Tourism Information:** Surveys content about Yucun on social media platforms, including shares and comments from locals or visitors, reflecting public impressions and interactions with the community over different periods.

3.4. Validity testing of data

In the data collection process in Yucun Village, we employed various qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, on-site observations, and analysis of official documents and archives (Mensah, 2019). To ensure data validity, we first implemented member checking, where preliminary analysis results and findings were shared with participants, including villagers, entrepreneurs, artisans, project staff, and representatives from non-governmental organizations, to validate their agreement with the researchers’ interpretations and conclusions. Additionally, through prolonged engagement and observation, we delved into the community’s daily life and development activities, ensuring the depth and accuracy of data collection. Researchers maintained a high level of reflexivity during

data collection and analysis to minimize personal biases' impact on research outcomes (Emery and Flora, 2006).

To further validate the data, we employed triangulation methods. This included cross-method triangulation, where data from different sources were compared to check for consistent themes and patterns, and cross-data collector triangulation, where different researchers independently conducted data collection and analysis to reduce individual researcher biases (Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2022). Furthermore, we ensured data saturation, continuing data collection until no new themes or categories emerged, aiding in ensuring the depth and breadth of data. Through these methods, we were able to ensure that the data for the study on Yucun Village was not only rich but also reliable, providing profound insights into the effectiveness of rural revitalization strategies.

4. Data analysis

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of data, we employed a multi-channel approach for data collection, involving in-depth interviews to understand the situation, on-site participation for firsthand observations, and obtaining relevant departmental reports. These diverse data sources from different channels and perspectives create an "evidence triangle." By comparing and verifying results from these sources, we ensure the reliability of our research efforts (Li, 2022). After transcribing interview recordings, the research team collaborated with university researchers to organize the data, ensuring that participants accurately expressed their views on the research topics.

The interview guide was developed based on the author's understanding of the subject area, discussions with experts in community development. The interview guide (See **Table 4**) primarily focuses on key issues related to Yucun village's community development. It aims to draw out participants' understanding of ABCD theory, the driving forces behind community development and sustainable development, their attitudes and enthusiasm for participating in community construction, and their suggestions and ideas for current initiatives.

Table 4. Stakeholder interview schedule.

Topic	Interview Questions
Community development drivers and leadership	1). How important is sustainable development in your community? 2). What is the impact of community leadership models on sustainable development? 3). What role do you think leaders play in community development?
Economic development and industries	4). What are the main drivers of economic development within the community? 5). How do you coordinate and promote synergies in rural industry development? 6). What role do sustainable agriculture practices play in the community's economy?
Culture and social capital	7). How does the community's cultural heritage influence a sense of identity? 8). How does social capital foster cooperation and shared resources within the community? 9). What is the impact of cultural events and social interactions on the community?
Environmental and ecological sustainability	10). What measures has the community taken to protect the environment and ecosystems? 11). How do you balance community development with environmental conservation? 12). How is environmental sustainability manifested within the community?

Table 4. (Continued).

Topic	Interview Questions
Policy and institutional environment	13). What policies have influenced the community in the context of rural revitalization? 14). What role does land-use planning play in community development? 15). How do you perceive the government’s role in sustainable community development?
Education and training	16). How do education and training programs impact community members? 17). How can engagement from the younger generation be encouraged for community development? 18). Are there challenges related to education and training within the community?
Community engagement and sustainability	19). How do community members participate in decision-making and community planning? 20). How do residents understand and engage in sustainable development? 21). What role does sustainability strategy play in community participation?
Social innovation and technology	22). What are the practical applications of social and technological innovation in communities? 23). How do we promote social and technological innovation within the community? 24). What are the impacts of open economy and digitization on communities?

4.1. Coding

Guided by the ABCD theory, this study analyzed the qualitative interview data through three levels of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. First, the interview records were subjected to open coding at the lexical level to extract all possible themes and concepts (See **Table 5**). Then, based on the key concepts of ABCD theory, the open codes were classified and integrated along the axial line. Further selective coding was conducted to select one or two main codes among the axial codes that were more closely related to the research focus, and in-depth coding was carried out to find out their intrinsic attributes and relational dimensions, thus forming an analytical framework (See **Table 6**).

Table 5. The results of open coding.

Category	Subject type
A. Community Development Strategies	Rural Revitalization Strategy (A1); Sustainable Development Factors (A2); Community Construction Projects (A3).
B. Leadership and Management	Leadership (B1); Organizational Management Models (B2); Resident Involvement in Decision-Making (B3).
C. Economic Development	Economic Development Mechanisms (C1); Synergistic Development of Rural Industries (C2); Entrepreneurial Opportunities (C3).
D. Culture and Society	Cultural Heritage Preservation (D1); Social Capital (D2); Community Identity (D3).
E. Environment and Ecology	Ecological Protection Measures (E1); Environmental Sustainability (E2); Sustainable Agricultural Development (E3).
H. Policies and Institutional Categories	Rural Poverty Alleviation Measures (H1); Land Use Planning (H2); Government Support (H3).
I. Education and Training	Education and Training (I1); Youth Development Opportunities (I2); Community Education Programs (I3).
J. Social Innovation and Technology	Technological Innovation (J1); Social Innovation (J2); Impact of an Open Economy (J3).
K. Residents’ Lives and Social Services	Resident Satisfaction (K1); Public Service Facilities (K2); Financial Support (K3).

Table 5. (Continued).

Category	Subject type
L. History and Cultural Heritage	Community History and Cultural Heritage (L1); Impact of Cultural Activities (L2).
M. Community Resources and Assets	Human Resources (M1); Industrial Resources (M2); Tourist Resources (M3).

Table 6. Axial coding.

Primary Categories	Second Categories
Community Development Drivers (N1)	Community development strategy (A); Leadership and Management (B); Economic development and industry (C); Culture and Society (D);
Community Support and Institutional environment (N2)	Environment and Ecology (E); Policies and Systems (H); Education and Training (I); Social Innovation and Technology (J)
Resident Life and Social Services (N3)	Community services (K); Historical and cultural heritage (L); Community Resources and Assets (M)

After the axial coding, three main categories emerged: Community Development Drivers (N1), Community Support and Institutional Environment (N2), Resident Life and Social Services (N3) (refer to **Table 6**). Selected interview excerpts were then analyzed to interpret the meaning represented by the selective codes. The coding results were compared with the theoretical paradigm to discover their consistency and extension in describing the community resource mechanism. Finally, through the coding results, the analysis explored how community resources drive interaction and communication among members, revealing the inherent patterns of the dominant mechanism and forming an empirical-based community resource theoretical model (See **Figure 2**).

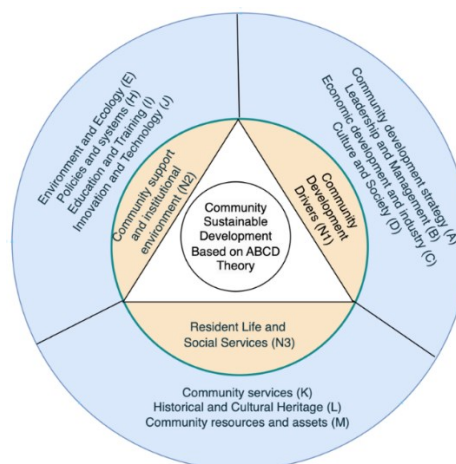


Figure 2. Yucun’s sustainable development framework based on ABCD theory.

4.2. Saturation testing

By employing the theoretical saturation verification method, the researchers aimed to ensure that the concepts and categories abstracted from the study are exhaustive in covering various aspects of the research topic. The use of random sampling further strengthened the objectivity of the verification, with two-thirds of the

data utilized for in-depth coding analysis and the remaining one-third reserved for theoretical saturation validation. The results indicated that through the in-depth analysis of existing data, the researchers have constructed a rich and comprehensive model, encompassing concepts and categories that address the core issues of the study. Upon further examination of the remaining data, no new concepts or categories emerged, clearly indicating that the study has achieved theoretical saturation.

5. Historical stages and background of asset development in Yucun

Yucun, situated in Tianhuang ping Town, Anji County, Zhejiang Province, is renowned for its picturesque natural environment and abundant tourism resources. In the 1950s, Yucun embarked on exploring a modern rural economic system based on the household contract responsibility system. In the 1980s and 90s, Yucun became Anji's "wealthiest village" by mining ore, but the cost of environmental pollution. At the beginning of the 21st century, Yucun applied the concept of "two mountains" (green water and green mountains, as well as gold and silver mountains) and "eight village governance" (clarifying the basic principles, organizational structure, and work methods of rural governance) to Yucun governance, and successfully practiced it in Anji, Zhejiang and other places (Li et al., 2022).

Consequently, Yucun's residents proactively engaged in safeguarding the green mountains and waters, discontinuing the mineral industry, and transitioning towards tourism and ecological agriculture. This transformation garnered attention from various domestic and international research institutions, positioning Yucun as a crucial advocate for green development and ecological civilization construction. It evolved into a social management model characterized by ecological civilization and democratic governance (Anji County People's Government, 2023).

The development of Yucun can be traced back to the implementation of China's reform and opening-up policies and the rural revitalization strategy. Since the initiation of reform and opening-up, rural China has experienced rapid economic and social development, leading to a significant improvement in the living standards of farmers (Liu et al., 2020; Hu, 2023). However, due to various factors such as history and geography, the urban-rural disparity in China remains substantial, and rural development continues to face numerous difficulties and challenges (Wang et al., 2020; Liao, 2018). Against this backdrop, the Chinese government introduced the rural revitalization strategy, aiming to propel comprehensive development in rural economic and social aspects, achieve urban-rural integration, and fulfil the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. The implementation of this strategy has provided new development opportunities for rural areas with natural and cultural resource advantages, including Yucun. The development process of Yucun can be divided into the following stages (See **Table 7**).

Table 7. An important historical stage in the development of YuVillage.

Time Periods	Development Stages	Specific Details
1980s	Starting stage	The economic development of villages mainly relies on stone mines and cement plants
2003–2015	The Road to Green Transformation	Yucun has shut down polluting enterprises to achieve industrial restructuring and embark on the path of green transformation.
2015–2018	Rural Revitalization Plan and Industry Expansion of “Two Mountains” Company	Yucun formulated a rural revitalization plan established the “Two Mountains” company to develop ecotourism blocks.
2018–2019	The Construction and National Promotion of the “Eight Villages Governance” System	Anji County, home to Yucun, pioneered the country’s first “Local Norms for Rural Governance,” establishing an “eight village governance” system.
June 2019 October 2019	The establishment of the “Two Mountains” Reform and Innovation Experimental Zone and the “Yucun Experience” Research Promotion Association	Anji County, home to Yucun, pioneered the country’s first “Local Norms for Rural Governance,” establishing an “eight village governance” system.
2020 to Present	National Social Governance Pilot Counties	Anji County, where Yucun is located, has been selected as a national pilot county for social governance.

Initial stage (1980s–1990s): In the 1980s, Yucun was an impoverished village, where residents primarily relied on farming and odd jobs for their livelihoods. Against the backdrop of economic reforms, Yucun ventured into industrial and commercial development, leveraging local resource advantages to establish small-scale enterprises, such as stone mines and cement factories (Li et al., 2022; Yao, 2023). By the 1990s, the average monthly income of workers in the village exceeded \$1000, and the collective annual income remained around \$313,800 (Li et al., 2022). These enterprises laid the initial foundation for Yucun’s future industrial development.

Rapid development stage (2000s–2010s): Entering the 21st century, Yucun entered a phase of rapid development. Guided and supported by the government, the village transitioned into the tourism and ecological agriculture sectors. Through the development of tourism resources, infrastructure construction, and brand building, Yucun’s tourism industry gradually flourished. Simultaneously, the village actively pursued ecological agriculture, utilizing local natural conditions and resource advantages to develop green and speciality agriculture. By 2021, Yucun had successfully established over 50 pollution-free bamboo processing family workshops and factories (Li et al., 2022). This phase of development optimized and upgraded Yucun’s industrial structure and economic form.

Transformation and upgrading stage (2010s–present): With rapid economic growth and continuous societal changes, Yucun faces new challenges and opportunities. To achieve sustainable development and better protect the ecological environment, Yucun initiated a transformation from its previous resource development and agriculture-dominated economic development model to an ecological protection and tourism-led model. Measures such as strengthening environmental protection, promoting the Two Mountains concept, and developing new energy and modern service industries further optimized and upgraded Yucun’s economic and industrial structures (Gurung and Seeland, 2011).

After years of practice, Yucun has established a social governance system centred around Party branches leading and democratic decision-making. It has constructed a multi-level decision-making platform, extensively soliciting grassroots opinions

through avenues like the Village Representative Congress to make credible decisions (Emery and Flora, 2006). Moreover, it prioritizes environmental protection, implementing industrial restructuring towards the fields of health and wellness and tourism.

6. Results and discussion

6.1. Identification and assessment of Yucun's Assets

6.1.1. Asset identification

Yucun village spans 4.86 square kilometers and has a population of 1060 people. It hosts 43 private enterprises, 14 farmhouses, and 4 major tourist attractions focused on sightseeing, leisure, and entertainment. By 2019, total rural income reached 279.6 million yuan that year, with per capita income for farmers at 49,598 yuan—a testament to achieving comprehensive prosperity. Collective economic income for the village was a robust 5.21 million yuan. These figures cemented Yucun's reputation as a widely acclaimed demonstration village for comprehensive rural revitalization in the region. (Anji County People's Government, 2023; Shi and Wei, 2020).

It is a blend of traditional and modern Jiangnan water town community, featuring convenient transportation and well-established public service facilities. Yucun is a historical and picturesque tourist destination (Li et al., 2022). The residents, predominantly Han Chinese, also include a small number of ethnic minority residents, contributing to a rich and diverse cultural environment. In Zhejiang's Yucun, community leaders and residents place great importance on the community's green and sustainable development due to historical reasons:

“In Yucun, we pay special attention to the green and sustainable development of the community because we recognize that past historical factors have led to health and environmental issues among residents. To improve this situation, community leaders and residents have been working together...” (Y1, Y2, Z1, Z3, Z5).

To assess the community's assets, the researchers first evaluated various aspects, including natural resources, human resources, industrial infrastructure, and social organizations. The ABCD theory proposes methods such as asset mapping and community dialogue. The asset map, created through resident participation, details the distribution of various assets in the community, providing a clear picture of community development. Every community has five key assets: individuals, associations, institutions, physical assets, and connections (Harrison et al., 2019). These assets are categorized into three types: gifts of individuals, citizens' associations, and local institutions (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1993). The researchers also conducted map-drawing exercises under the guidance of community mapping experts to scan existing services, facilities, plans, networks, volunteers, and service personnel in local community service infrastructure. The asset map of Yucun's community (See **Figure 3**):

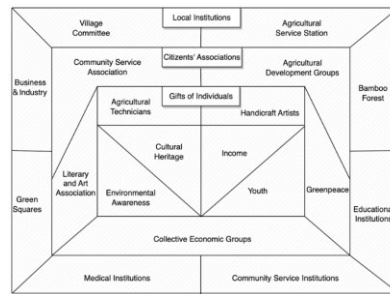


Figure 3. Map of Yucun community assets.

The citizens’ associations in Yucun vividly exemplify the practice of the ABCD theory, driving community development and resident engagement through the identification and utilization of internal assets. The Literary Association, by organizing artistic performances and handicraft exhibitions, unleashes residents’ individual talents, enhancing cultural exchanges within the community, precisely as emphasized in the ABCD theory regarding the effective utilization of personal assets. Similarly, the Environmental Protection Association embodies the ABCD principles by promoting green ecological practices in sustainable development (Shi and Yang, 2022). Through initiatives such as waste sorting and tree planting, the association mobilizes residents to actively engage in environmental protection efforts, thereby improving environmental quality and nurturing a culture of sustainable development within the community (Gurung and Seeland, 2011).

Furthermore, the Community Service Association serves as a crucial platform for providing support and services to residents, aligning with the ABCD emphasis on community empowerment and mutual support (Walker, 2006). By organizing volunteer teams to care for the elderly and facilitate community services, the association strengthens social cohesion and solidarity, contributing to the overall well-being of residents (Harrison et al., 2019).

The Agricultural Development Association exemplifies the ABCD approach by focusing on upgrading agricultural industries and improving farmers’ efficiency (Wang et al., 2023). Through initiatives aimed at enhancing planting techniques and agricultural productivity, the association empowers local farmers and supports economic development in the community. Through their dedicated efforts, these citizens’ associations have provided multifaceted support for Yucun’s sustainable development, propelling the community towards greater prosperity and well-being (Li et al., 2022) (The following “Y” and “Z” represent different sources of interview data, for details, please refer to **Table 2**).

“The citizens’ associations in Yucun have been a tremendous help for us. These associations not only facilitate communication and interaction among residents but also contribute to the improvement of our living environment and agricultural industry, making our community more prosperous and healthier……” (Y2, Z2, Z5).

Yucun, as a community full of potential, exhibits diversity and richness in individual talents. Firstly, agricultural skills stand out as a prominent feature among the residents, showcasing their abundant experience in planting, farming, and animal husbandry. This not only provides a solid foundation for the local agricultural

industry's development but also highlights the unique talents of individuals in the field of agriculture. Secondly, traditional craftsmanship skills are widely inherited within the Yucun community, including weaving, pottery, painting, and other traditional handicraft techniques:

These traditional craftsmanship skills in Yucun not only hold historical value but also possess high practical utility. For instance, woven baskets, pottery tableware, and decorative items from painting are integral parts of our daily lives. These handicraft skills also constitute a vital component of our economic development in Yucun. For example, we can increase income and improve living standards by selling handicrafts (Y1, Z2).

These skills not only showcase individual unique potential in artistic creation but also provide strong support for cultural heritage and innovation. Additionally, skills related to the recognition and utilization of natural resources are prevalent among Yucun residents. For example, the utilization of local bamboo forest resources for industrial development reflects environmental sensitivity and the concept of sustainable utilization (Liao, 2018; Mensah, 2019). Residents of Yucun demonstrate excellent community cooperation and solidarity, establishing a robust interpersonal network that crucially supports cooperation within and beyond the community.

Some individuals play the role of guardians of cultural heritage, possessing traditional cultural knowledge and skills that provide robust protection for local cultural heritage (Emery and Flora, 2006). Moreover, residents of Yucun exhibit a unique set of assets, including a focus on environmental protection, sustainable development, and an innovative spirit. These aspects propel the community towards a more sustainable direction.

Yucun village in Zhejiang possesses abundant natural resources, providing favorable conditions for the development of agriculture and tourism. The village has ample land and water endowments due to its location (Anji County People's Government, 2019). At the Bamboo Expo Park Forest Experience Base, the vegetation coverage on the mountains exceeds 85%, consisting mainly of bamboo (Li et al., 2022). Moreover, wildlife is extremely diverse in Yucun, with over 50 animal species and 500 plant species documented.

Tourism has since emerged as the economic pillar industry of Yucun. The number of visitors to the village rose drastically from approximately 100,000 in 2015 to nearly 900,000 in 2019–2020. Compared to 2005, Yucun's village collective income and per capita disposable income have increased substantially. Specifically, collective income grew from US\$110,000 in 2005 to over US\$1.04 million in 2020. Similarly, per capita income surged from US\$1065.96 to US\$8071.32 over the same period (Li et al., 2022; Shi and Wei, 2020).

In terms of industrial infrastructure, Yucun has established a relatively complete transportation network and energy supply system. These community assets not only constitute valuable wealth for the Yucun community but also provide a solid foundation for its sustainable development. By exploring and fully utilizing these unique potentials, Yucun can further promote economic, cultural, and social prosperity, achieving comprehensive sustainable development goals.

6.1.2. Asset evaluation

The material capital of Yucun primarily manifests in its natural resources and infrastructure. Land and water are the foundations for community survival and development, and Yucun has demonstrated relatively effective protection and management of these resources. However, with population growth and industrial development, issues such as soil contamination in certain areas and sedimentation of water sources have gradually emerged. To address these challenges, the community has implemented more efficient environmental protection measures and strengthened infrastructure construction, such as reforestation of fallow land. This transformation shifted the economic structure from one reliant on ore to an economy centred on green and environmentally friendly agriculture, forestry, and tourism, ensuring the sustainable utilization of natural resources and the ecological environment's sustainable development.

In terms of economic capital, Yucun adheres to the development philosophy that emphasizes the importance of green mountains and clear waters over material wealth. The village has phased out industries harmful to the ecological environment, promoted the upgrading of the agricultural industry, and achieved an organic integration of ecological beauty and industrial prosperity..... (Y1, Y2, Z1, Z4, Z6).

Yucun actively involves residents in environmental protection actions through organizations like the Environmental Protection Association, maintaining the community's ecological balance. The construction of a digital governance platform has further enhanced the efficiency and convenience of governance..... (Y1, Z2, Z6).

The human capital of Yucun reflects the interaction between young labour and traditional skills. In recent years, with the widespread popularity of high school vocational education, some young individuals within the village possess strong applied technical skills, providing support for the community's economic development. Additionally, interviews revealed that 82% of respondents expressed willingness to participate in rural governance, 7% were unwilling, and 11% held indifferent attitudes. The results indicate that the majority of respondents are willing to engage in rural governance. Furthermore, effective measures are urgently needed to promote the inheritance and innovation of traditional craftsmanship, ensuring the preservation of these valuable skills through comprehensive means and preventing their loss over time:

Yucun prioritizes cultural education and, through organizations such as the Literary and Art Association and Environmental Protection Association, cultivates a culture of integrity and discipline, fostering cultural heritage and the dissemination of green ecological concepts. This effort contributes to creating a rich cultural atmosphere in the community..... (Y1, Y2, Z5).

To address the challenges of traditional craftsmanship inheritance, the community needs to take measures to promote the preservation and innovation of traditional craftsmanship, such as establishing a fund for traditional craftsmanship protection, providing training for skills inheritance, and offering financial support..... (Y2, Z4, Z6).

The social capital of Yucun is mainly evident in its social organizations and cultural heritage. While the operational capacity of the village committee as a village-level management institution needs improvement, social organizations exhibit a certain level of activity in participating in community construction and development. For example, the Democratic Guan Village has significantly optimized democratic governance. However, there is a need to strengthen the permeability of cultural heritage and promotion activities and focus on cultural innovation and transformation. Additionally, attention should be given to the construction of new cultural identifiers to cultivate community vitality and cohesion:

Currently, there is room for improvement in the cultural heritage and promotion activities in Yucun, requiring more cultural innovation and transformation to make the activities more deeply ingrained in people's hearts..... (Y2, Z3, Z4).

6.2. How assets drive development

6.2.1. Asset utilization model

Yucun's asset management model exhibits a diverse and synergistic nature, primarily constructed by the township-level government, village committees (Party branch committees and Village Residents' Autonomous Committees), grassroots social organizations, and villagers collaboratively. The government of Tianhuangping Town in Anji County serves as a key player, acting as a link in rural governance. By actively promoting demonstration area construction and green economic development, the town government provides policy guidance and development goals for Yucun. The township government not only guides the village committee in fulfilling its responsibilities within legal bounds but also leads Yucun towards sustainable development goals by formulating specific construction and development strategies.

The village committee, as the core leadership in rural governance, is democratically elected, integrating party affairs and village affairs, effectively avoiding disunity between the Party branch and the village committee (Shi, 1999). The village committee promotes the participation of diverse stakeholders by establishing unique deliberative councils and village decision-making methods, achieving normalized consultations for village-wide democratic discussions and decisions (O'Brien and Li, 2000). However, conflicts between the leadership and autonomy of the Party branch and the village committee still exist and require further refinement:

I think our village's deliberation and decision-making methods are quite good, which can allow everyone to express their opinions and make village affairs fairer. However, I hope that the party branch and village committee can cooperate well and solve practical problems for us more (Y1, Z2, Z3).

Grassroots social organizations such as "The People's Mediation Committee" and "The Volunteer Service Station" have played a positive role in rural governance. By offering services such as conflict mediation, legal advice, and tourism services, they alleviate concerns for villagers and provide complementary support to the village committee's work. However, these grassroots social organizations still face challenges, such as unstable income sources and inadequate internal management systems. Their dependence on government support limits their autonomy in participating fully in rural governance.

Villagers, as the ultimate beneficiaries and participants in rural governance, engage in the process through democratic elections, handling village-level affairs, and participation in comprehensive social governance command centres. Despite the willingness of most villagers to participate, decision-making outcomes, guided by majority opinions, may not always meet the needs of all villagers and, at times, could impact their enthusiasm (Panzarella, 2023). Some villagers face limitations in participation due to educational and political awareness constraints. Therefore, in the asset management model, it is crucial to pay more attention to the needs of villagers and enhance their involvement in governance affairs.

6.2.2. Asset innovation drive

Yucun demonstrates a strong drive in asset innovation. By upgrading industrial parks and facilitating the replacement of traditional industries with emerging ones, the village achieves innovation in industrial structure. Additionally, the formulation and issuance of the nation's first "Beautiful Countryside Democratic Rule of Law Construction Norms" inject the concept of the rule of law into rural governance, enhancing the normativity and transparency of social management (Li et al., 2022). Notably, Yucun utilizes digital technology to construct a "digital brain" platform, facilitating information sharing and real-time management, enhancing governance efficiency, and providing new means for the modern management of the village.

6.2.3. Development promotion factors

For Yucun, the driving force behind its development lies in a clear development philosophy and a comprehensive social governance system. Over the years, it has adhered to the concept of green development, integrating ecological civilization thinking into various aspects. This not only charts a path for sustainable development but also forms an intrinsic source of motivation. Simultaneously, it continually explores a democratic-based village governance model. This model is built on a multi-level participatory decision-making mechanism, deeply soliciting grassroots opinions through various levels of deliberative platforms, channelling the creativity of the masses into resolving specific issues. Building upon this foundation, it further improves regulatory support and strengthens party construction, forming a relatively scientific and effective operational system. This is the institutional guarantee that continuously propels reform and innovation.

6.2.4. Factors driving development

For Yucun, the driving force behind its development lies in a clear development philosophy and a comprehensive social governance system. Over the years, it has adhered to the concept of green development, integrating ecological civilization thinking into various aspects. This not only charts a path for sustainable development but also forms an intrinsic source of motivation. Simultaneously, it continually explores a democratic-based village governance model. This model is built on a multi-level participatory decision-making mechanism, deeply soliciting grassroots opinions through various levels of deliberative platforms, channelling the creativity of the masses into resolving specific issues. Building upon this foundation, it further improves regulatory support and strengthens party construction, forming a relatively

scientific and effective operational system. This is the institutional guarantee that continuously propels reform and innovation.

Industrial Development: From initially relying on non-renewable mining industries to gradually developing a modern agricultural industry system through the establishment of a green agricultural chain, industrialization has consistently permeated Yucun's development process.

Institutional Reform: The transition of the agricultural land system from collective ownership to private use and the shift in agricultural management from taxation to subsidies have brought more development impetus to Yucun.

Talent Cultivation: The shift from individual leadership to organized operation, the transformation of talent from experiential to technical and composite, becomes a key driving force for Yucun's continuous progress.

Utilization of Resource Advantage: Leveraging geographical resource advantages, Yucun focuses on developing tourism and speciality agriculture, achieving optimized resource allocation.

Collective Economic Organizations: Relying on the village's collective economic organizational system, participating in decision-making collectively, sharing benefits, fostering a sense of belonging, and driving development.

Open Economic Thinking: Embracing an open and progressive economic mindset, Yucun continually accumulates experience, explores new development models, and accelerates the pace of development.

Meanwhile, Yucun places great emphasis on the potential application of digital technology in social management. Effectively utilizing big data to optimize services has significantly enhanced governance efficiency. For instance, the establishment of the "Rural Accommodation Alliance" in Yucun, with centralized management, shared facilities, and the aggregation of industry resources, increased the appeal of rural homestays through platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu (Liu et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2023). Additionally, while leveraging ecological resource advantages, it continuously explores the path of upgrading the industrial structure, achieving a symbiotic interaction between the economy and ecology. This is also supported by policies and the long-standing leadership role of the village committee, driving the active participation of the community. It is through the internal drive of philosophy, institutional safeguards, technological applications, and the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders that Yucun has formed a relatively complete and sustainable social management model. This has become a crucial internal driving force for its innovative development (Harrison et al., 2019).

7. Conclusion

Yucun has achieved initial economic improvement through the development of leading industries such as speciality agricultural products and unique industries. Simultaneously, the reform of the household responsibility system promotes family participation in rural resource integration, forming a cooperative mechanism that enhances overall efficiency. The integration of talent-driven rural resources is also realized during this phase. By cultivating local agricultural professionals, Yucun has propelled the development of rural technological innovation and modern agricultural

management.

Transitioning into a phase of rural prosperity, Yucun prioritized collaborative development between industries, leading to the formation of a comprehensive industrial chain and maximizing economic benefits. Agricultural management system reforms and rational resource allocation further propelled sustainable agricultural development, ensuring long-term prosperity. Meanwhile, the integration of agriculture emerged as Yucun's core driving force, facilitating the transformation of agricultural industries into a modern agricultural industrial system. Land policy reforms supporting sustainable agricultural development ensured effective land resource utilization, while collective economic organizations played a pivotal role in fostering a self-sufficient economic system. Yucun's comprehensive development strategy, focusing on leading agricultural industries and nurturing local talents, has been instrumental in its transition from poverty to prosperity, ensuring sustained momentum and endogenous development capabilities for rural revitalization.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this single-case study, including potential biases inherent in data collection methods and the constraint of time. While the findings offer valuable insights into Yucun's successful journey, they lack quantitative support and may not be easily generalized to other regions. Moving forward, future research should address these limitations by expanding the sample size, incorporating multiple data sources, employing mixed research methods, and conducting long-term follow-up studies to assess the sustained impacts of implementing the ABCD theory in Yucun. Evaluating the long-term effects of these changes would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the theory's sustainability and profound impacts on rural revitalization.

In summary, this study, using Yucun in Anji County as a case study, aimed to explore its path to rural revitalization and its success factors. The findings indicate that Yucun's success stems from various factors, such as adhering to a sustainable development strategy centred around economic construction while prioritizing economic development and environmental protection. Additionally, it places a long-term emphasis on the leadership role of party building, upholds democratic decision-making, leverages collective economic functions, and shares development achievements collectively—all of which align with the principles of rural revitalization. However, due to the limitations of a single-case study, as well as the impact of data collection methods and time constraints, the results lack quantitative support and are challenging to generalize to other regions. Therefore, future research should consider expanding the sample, utilizing multiple data sources, employing mixed research methods, and extensively validating successful models, with a particular focus on the adaptability of development patterns in different regions. Overall, Yucun's successful journey provides valuable insights into China's rural revitalization, but more reliable conclusions require further systematic and in-depth research.

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MAAR; project administration, MRR. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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