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Investigation into Spatially and Environmentally Aesthetic Dovecote Designs: A Case Study from the Xinjiang Region on the Silk Road

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Abstract

Globally, the dove is acknowledged as a peace representative and emblem. The Silk Road is noted for its vibrant pigeon culture, particularly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, a bustling hub of Chinese pigeon culture and industry. This research offers a systematic examination of the cultural and aesthetic features of pigeon coops in rural landscapes, utilizing China's Xinjiang region as a representative sample. The study's findings suggest that in Uyghur traditional villages when constructing pigeon coops, emphasis should be placed on their locational visibility and harmony with residential structures. The functional elements of the planning layout include the transition from traditional to modern dovecotes, exploitation of natural conditions, and effective arrangement and optimization of layout. For modern dovecote construction in Uyghur residential buildings, three factors should be considered: the environmental aesthetics of building materials, the use of innovative construction methods, and the safeguarding of significant cultural heritage. Conclusively, traditional Uyghur villages are endowed with abundant cultural heritage, which should be taken into account when designing the layout of pigeon coops for aesthetic considerations.

Keywords: Silk Road; Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; Uyghur traditional village; dovecote; aesthetic features

1. INTRODUCTION

In ancient times, the Silk Road served as a land route connecting civilizations across East Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Europe, and East Africa [1–2]. Consequently, Xinjiang has emerged as the sole bridge linking the cultures, politics, and economies of the East and West

in Asia and Europe [3–4]. In recent years, due to the “Belt and Road” initiative and increased integration with the international community, Xinjiang has transitioned from obscurity to prominence, gradually becoming a pivotal region for the development of the terrestrial Silk Road [4–6]. Nevertheless, the level of economic and social development in Xinjiang significantly lags behind that of eastern China [7–8]. Over half of Xinjiang’s population still resides in rural areas. Hence, the agriculture and rural farmer issue is a fundamental concern impacting the nation’s development and citizens’ lives [9–10]. Furthermore, disparities in development exist between southern and northern Xinjiang, urban and rural areas, and agricultural and pastoral regions [11–12]. Southern Xinjiang, in particular, stands out as one of the country’s most impoverished areas, concentrating over 90% of the poor population in Xinjiang. Therefore, during the revitalization of the rural economy, the transmission of an excellent culture is imperative, as they mutually complement each other [13–14].

Located on the island of Tinos in Greece, near the Aegean Sea, numerous exquisitely constructed white buildings can be found. These buildings are dovecotes that locals have been constructing for centuries to raise pigeons [15–16]. Today, these pigeon lofts not only serve as distinctive local landscapes but also represent significant architectural treasures [17–18]. Traditional Uyghur villages are a natural outcome of rural history and reflect the continuous progression of residents through stages such as “reconstruction–adaptation–retransformation–readaptation” at different historical periods [18–19]. Consequently, Uyghur villages possess a strong rural essence, rich cultural significance, and unique regional characteristics, and serve as significant material manifestations facilitating the integration and development of various ethnic cultures [19–20]. The Uyghur pigeon culture boasts a longstanding history. In the vast rural areas of southern Xinjiang, delightful scenes of pigeons in flight are ubiquitous, creating a harmonious rural landscape where residential areas coexist with pigeon sheds. This paper presents a systematic study of the culture of pigeon sheds, showcasing their typical rural landscape features and aesthetic characteristics, using China’s Xinjiang region as an exemplar.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Residential buildings

Residential buildings refer to the dwellings of ordinary individuals. They possess distinct architectural styles and forms, showcasing diverse artistic and cultural characteristics influenced by historical periods, geographical environments, and national folk culture. In Chinese architectural history, official buildings have predominantly been the focus, with minimal documentation or research dedicated to residential buildings. It was not until Pan Guxi included them in the fifth edition of “History of Chinese Architecture” that they were acknowledged as a distinct architectural type.

2.2 Aesthetic culture

Aesthetic culture is a unique form of culture that encompasses the interplay between people’s daily lives, cultural entertainment, and aesthetics. This culture is guided by spiritual experiences and aesthetic expressions. The spatial structure of the aesthetic cultural thinking model evolved based on the regular triangular pyramid (Figure 1). Aesthetics is an activity, mani-

festing as a psychological sentiment with accumulated aesthetic characteristics through the process of adapting and transforming nature. However, residential buildings have evolved throughout history, embodying a rich cultural heritage. Therefore, it is unscientific to analyze and appreciate them solely using foreign techniques.

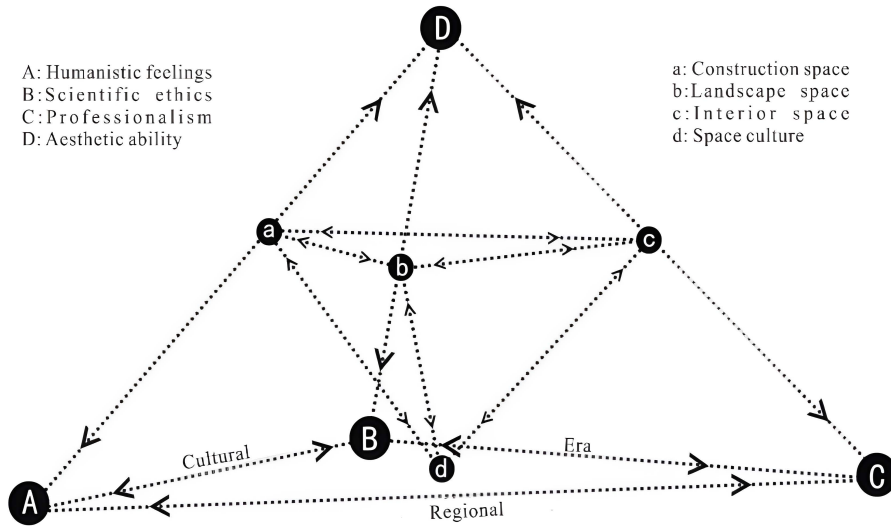


Figure 1. The schematic diagram depicts the core of the space structure.

2.3 The majority of Uyghurs reside in desert oases

They primarily engage in agricultural production. Thus, the construction of houses should prioritize durability. Conversely, Xinjiang Kazakhs are either nomadic or semi-agricultural and semi-pastoral, residing near water and grasslands, with yurts serving as their primary residential structures. The residential style that adapts to nature reflects the ecological principles of simplicity, convenience, and frugality. Figure 2 displays the survey route of residential and dovecote buildings in Xinjiang as investigated in this study. Detailed investigations were conducted on the characteristics and architectural styles of residential and dovecote structures in these regions.

The Cultural Significance of Pigeons in Uyghur Traditional Village. Pigeons, known as “kepter” in Uyghur. Pigeons are commonly regarded as birds symbolizing friendliness and peace, and they are widely raised globally. Through years of domestication and selective breeding, various pigeon breeds have emerged, each possessing distinct cultures and characteristics. Historical records indicate that the earliest known depiction of a pigeon, discovered in Mesopotamia in 3000 BC, was obtained by archaeologists. The coexistence of pigeons and human’s spans thousands of years.

Behavior scientist Louis Kahn argues that the realm of human existence transcends geographical and physical spaces, encompassing the realm of human behavior. He contends that the establishment of an orderly spatial arrangement originates from individual lives, encompassing order of action, order of space, and order of diversity. In movies like “Drummer from Flaming Mountain”, people often share joyful moments with pigeons,

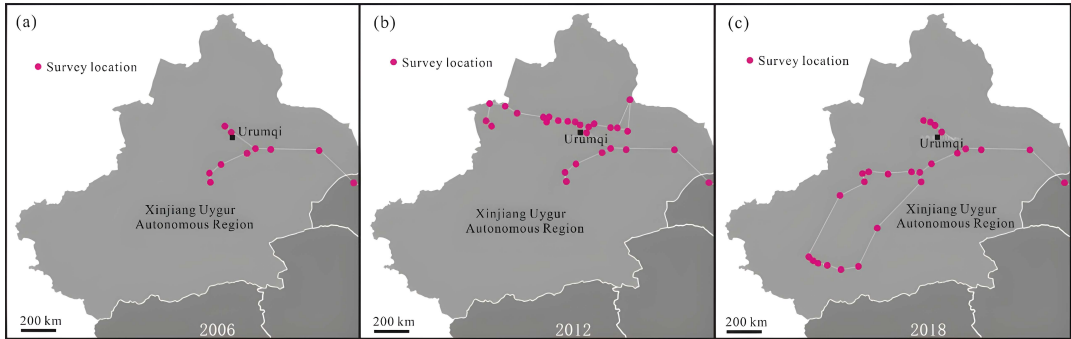


Figure 2. A schematic diagram depicting the research investigation route of residential buildings in Xinjiang.

highlighting the affection people have towards these birds. The Uyghur pigeon culture encompasses a broad scope of meanings and implications, continually evolving internally and adapting to external changes. Elements like Uyghur homing pigeons, love pigeons, and domestication are deeply rooted in historical heritage. Individuals also envision their perfect “pigeon” counterparts, reflecting the intrinsic qualities possessed by pigeons, such as diligence, simplicity, loyalty, friendliness, unity, and equality. Overall, the Uyghur pigeon culture represents a harmonious coexistence between people and pigeons and holds significant intangible cultural heritage value.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Construction of Pigeon Sheds in Uyghur Traditional Villages

In recent years, the planning of Uyghur traditional villages has primarily focused on rural residential buildings, roads, open spaces, and the natural environment. This settlement pattern is an amalgamation of the rural natural environment, history, culture, and social economy, and it holds significant social, historical, and cultural value. During our investigation, we discovered that the Xinjiang Academy of Building Research primarily employs typological methods for the planning and construction of traditional Uyghur villages. This approach aims to evoke people’s collective memory of morphological elements and traditional culture, ensuring the preservation and development of traditional village aesthetics. This paper focuses on the design of dovecotes in Uyghur traditional villages, outlining their distinctive characteristics.

3.1.1 Visibility of Construction Location

Due to the vast territory of Xinjiang, Uyghur villages across different regions vary significantly. In traditional Uyghur villages, dovecotes are typically installed on rooftops, with the specific location determined by the house’s shape, layout, and orientation (see Figure 3). Our survey results indicate that the Kashgar area predominantly features high-rise residential buildings and compact multi-story dwellings. The Hotan area, on the other hand, consists primarily of plain courtyard-style residential buildings. The pigeon sheds in Hotan are situated on the roof’s “bullet” and have a high degree of regularity. The traditional Uyghur villages in the Aksu area closely resemble those in Hotan. In the Turpan area, Tuyugou

stands as the most renowned traditional Uyghur village, characterized by its mountainous landscape, valleys, and oasis. Dovecotes in southern Xinjiang's traditional Uyghur villages differ in shape, structure, and style but are predominantly located on the top floor. These dovecotes adopt a functional layout that combines semi-closed and semi-open spaces, with wooden ladders or stairs installed either inside or outside the residential buildings (Figure 3). Moreover, pigeon sheds in Uyghur villages are uniformly built on the corners of the gable roofs near the roads, exhibiting similar shapes, sizes, and construction materials. When standing at the village entrance, one can admire a picturesque pastoral scene composed of village roads, walnut trees, irrigation canals, roadside flower beds, arched corridors, landscape walls, main houses, distinctive pigeon sheds, and the graceful presence of pigeons.



Figure 3. The photographs showcase the external architecture of a dovecote in a traditional Uyghur village.

3.1.2 Coordination with residential buildings

The interaction between humans and the land shapes culture, including the culture of human settlements. This cultural form is influenced by the specific geographic environment, population, adaptation methods, and utilization practices, all of which also have an impact on residential buildings in a particular setting. The geographical environment itself contributes to regional culture and gives it a distinct character.

In the case of Kashgar and Turpan, the predominant architectural style in Kashgar is

characterized by brick and wood structures, while in Turpan, raw soil structures dominate. These dwellings were generally constructed in a closed ground floor or courtyard format. Semi-open rooms were incorporated into the upper floors, functioning as balconies. This not only enhances the functionality of the building but also adds to its visual appeal.

Due to geographical, climatic, and economic limitations, houses in the Hotan area have thick walls and double-layer iron windows. The entire structure appears solid, and the neighborhoods are separated by enclosed courtyard walls, resulting in a rigid residential building community. However, the presence of dovecotes on the roofs of each house breaks the monotony of the skyline, adding a unique touch to the village's landscape. These dovecotes, in the shape of a "bullet", activate the external form of each residential courtyard and play a significant role in defining the village's style and altering its skyline. At times, flocks of pigeons flying overhead during sunset bring a sense of harmony and leisure to the village.

3.2 The functionality of planning layout

In Xinjiang, a mysterious and exotic land, the deserts and Gobi have become dominant features of the geographical environment. This has led the Uyghur people to have a particular affinity for things that symbolize freedom and hope. These items should also serve as tangible manifestations of their awareness of functionality, planning, design, and aesthetics, and they should play a crucial role in the dovecote's functional planning, layout, and construction. Considering the village style and external shape of the dovecote, most structures have similar shapes with minimal variations. However, there are substantial differences in the number and types of rearing, as well as in the internal functional setup and structural layout of the dovecote. Basic functional settings are sufficient for ordinary family pigeon sheds; however, families heavily involved in pigeon culture and industry prioritize the functional design and individualization of their pigeon sheds.

3.2.1 Modern Uyghur agriculture continues to maintain a clear focus on agricultural activities

The Uyghurs reside in areas with limited trade connections to other regions. Furthermore, the harsh environment in southern Xinjiang creates a significant disparity with regions like Urumqi. Historically, the Uyghurs were accustomed to raising chickens, ducks, and geese; however, raising pigeons eventually became a prominent tradition in traditional Uyghur villages. The necessary dovecote is characterized by a simple structure and small size, allowing it to be placed individually in a corner of a residential building courtyard or alongside other poultry. Over time, the Uyghur tradition of raising pigeons has acquired rich cultural significance through stories, proverbs, and ballads, thereby endowing pigeons with increased cultural value and symbolic meaning. The Uyghur people view doves as docile and loyal birds, symbolizing kindness and happiness. Raising, training, admiring, and showing love for pigeons are not only a way of life for the Uyghur people but also reflect their intrinsic aesthetic behavior and psychology. Consequently, pigeon culture has become an integral aspect of the Uyghur community's cultural identity. Pigeons possess aesthetically pleasing characteristics and hygienic habits that align closely with the Uyghur population's

aesthetic psychology. Drawing upon the cultural significance associated with pigeon culture and the strong sense of identity and respect for pigeons, individuals relocated the simple pigeon lofts situated in courtyard corners to rooftops, striving to construct aesthetically pleasing and harmonious pigeon sheds that enhance the overall beauty of the village. Hence, the transformation of a conventional dovecote into a contemporary one encompasses more than just a physical move and shift in position; it is the outcome of an intricate fusion of culture, emotions, a sense of belonging, artistic expression, and scientific knowledge.

3.2.2 *Maximizing utilization of natural conditions*

Pigeons' cultural attributes embody the aspiration for a "refined existence". Due to the harsh climate and environment in the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang, China, which includes large temperature differences between morning and evening, certain strict requirements must be met in the construction of pigeon sheds. The pigeons themselves are highly sensitive to sunlight and temperature, and excessive temperature differences can cause discomfort and even illness, such as catching a cold. In winter, the weather becomes dry and cold, often accompanied by heavy snowfall, resulting in ice crystals forming on the heads of pigeons when they fly. Therefore, pigeons are not suitable for flying during the cold winter, and a partially enclosed outdoor space is needed to ensure moderate activity. Therefore, when constructing the dovecote, the entrance is typically positioned on the side facing the courtyard, while windows are placed on the top [Figure 4]. By constructing a simple wooden shelf adjacent to the semi-enclosed dovecote, natural ventilation and lighting can be maximized, leading to optimal temperature control, ventilation, and moderate winter activity, as well as sun exposure [Figure 5]. In the dry and hot environment of southern Xinjiang, pigeon droppings can be rapidly dried. Traditional Uyghur courtyards often include vegetable gardens and flower beds, providing opportunities to collect pigeon droppings on roofs for easy conversion into fertilizer without leaving the premises. Constructing pigeon sheds in southern Xinjiang can offer practical economic and landscape ecological benefits, providing a viable solution for rural industry revitalization and increased farmers' income.

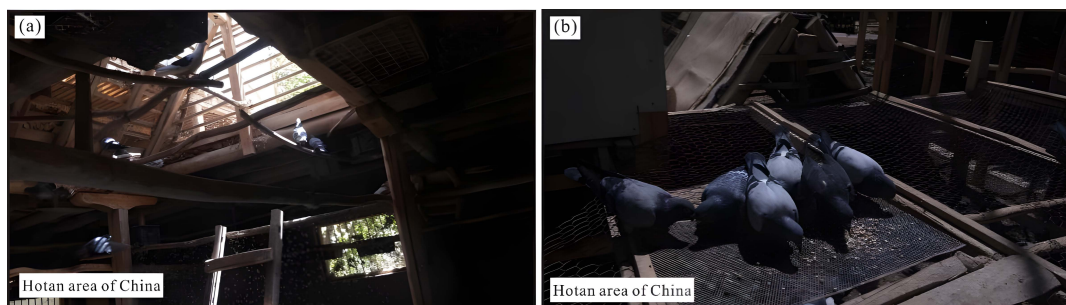


Figure 4. The internal structure of the dovecote and the outdoor foraging area.

3.2.3 *Appropriate treatment and optimization of patterns*

The breeding and domestication of pigeons is an extensive process that necessitates a significant level of expertise and ample experience. This includes careful planning of the dovecote's



Figure 5. The appearance of the dovecote and its wooden ladder structure leading to it is noteworthy.

internal structure and facilities, as well as distinguishing the age and gender of the pigeons, particularly when considering breeding preferences. It is important to maintain a proportional ratio of pigeons to space to avoid overcrowding. Furthermore, the construction of the dovecote must prioritize proper ventilation to ensure a convective airflow. Pigeons are active during the day and rest at night in the shed, so the dovecote must provide a “safe, comfortable, and livable” environment to enhance their sense of belonging and attachment to the nest. Consequently, the pigeon shed has become an essential architectural structure in traditional Uyghur villages, occupying a prominent position that requires significant time and effort. From an architectural perspective, the dovecote can be viewed as a miniature residential building, necessitating consideration of the natural and physical environment, functional distinctions, user-specific characteristics, and spatial relationship with the entire village. Taking these factors into account, the proposed appearance layout of the dovecote is illustrated in Figure 6. The pigeon sheds are thoughtfully arranged, integrating various external environmental factors, and equipped with functional structures.

3.3 Aesthetic Characteristics of Pigeon Sheds in Traditional Uyghur Villages

The culture of pigeon shed buildings in traditional Uyghur villages holds significant value within human settlement culture, showcasing commendable aesthetic qualities. The dove-

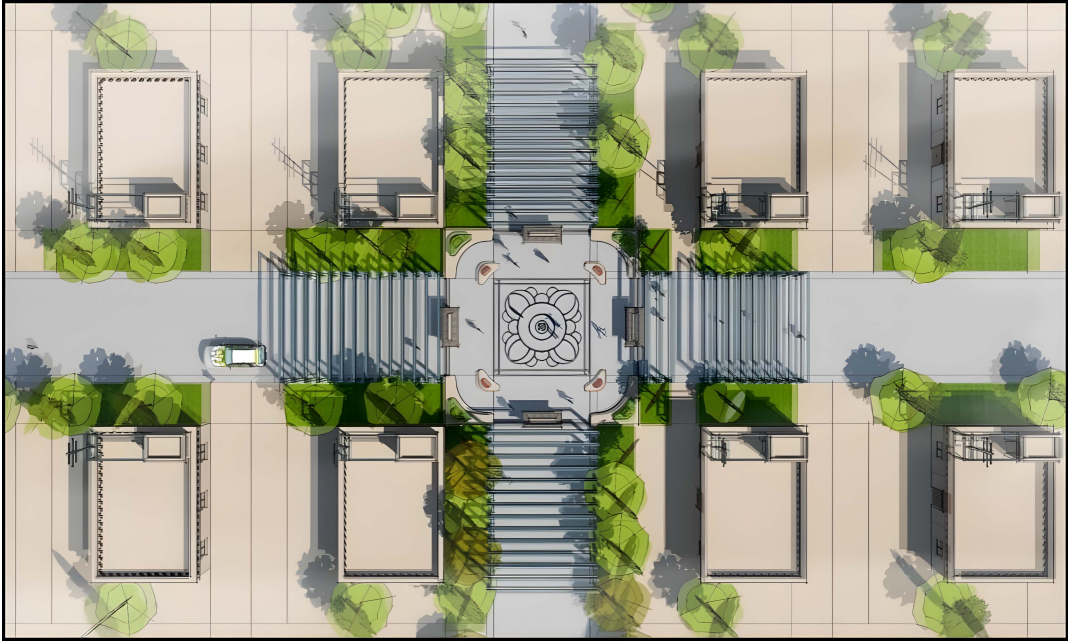


Figure 6. Design of the layout and structure of the dovecote.

cote's aesthetic features stem from the harmonious coexistence of its inherent attributes, pigeons, and pigeon breeders.

3.3.1 *The Ecological Beauty of Construction Materials*

Traditional building materials play a crucial role in preserving people's historical heritage and maintaining the traditional context. Using locally available materials that are suitable for the local conditions demonstrates respect and adherence to the local resources and environment. Moreover, the use of these materials can emphasize regional characteristics and preserve historical memory, resulting in an architectural and cultural landscape that is rich in distinctive features and promotes a sense of unity. Due to the influence of the geographical environment and climatic conditions, the predominant economic timber in southern Xinjiang is Xinjiang poplar. This species is highly resistant to drought and saline-alkali soil, grows rapidly, and has a high yield rate. While apricot, mulberry, and walnut trees also grow in southern Xinjiang, they are fruit trees that have slow growth, and premature branching, and their wood is prone to bending, making them unsuitable for frame structural materials. An investigation revealed that the construction structure of the dovecotes in Moyu County, Hotan Prefecture, follows a simple civil flat roof design. Therefore, beams with a diameter of approximately 15 cm can be used as supports, and a straightforward straight tenon structure can be employed for fixing them. In terms of maintenance structure, poplar strips of similar sizes are woven into a wattle by being threaded through the warp and weft. These are then embedded in the framework made of large timbers, and the gaps between the wattle are filled with a mixture of mud and straw collected from nearby farms. To enhance durability and aesthetics, the surface can be smoothed using a clay tile trowel. The

utilization of local materials in the construction of the dovecotes not only reflects respect for the local land but also serves as a tribute to the earth and trees, as pigeon dung becomes a valuable by-product. Both humans and pigeons benefit from this symbiotic relationship, thereby creating a virtuous circle within the ecosystem.

3.3.2 The ingenuity displayed in the craftsmanship is remarkable

The ingenuity of craftsmanship is evident in the construction of residential houses and courtyard facilities by Uyghur families who have inherited farming practices. This is particularly pronounced in Kashgar. Careful design considerations, such as column placement, erecting structures, weaving, grass chopping, mud application, and wall wiping, are necessary to ensure that the dovecote aligns seamlessly with the village-style and courtyard landscape. The composite beauty of the dovecote, influenced by both its objective aesthetic qualities and the beauty of labor involved in its construction, creates a dynamic and humanized beauty within the multidimensional space. Ultimately, this achieves a harmonious blend of social and natural elements.

3.3.3 The beauty lies in the inheritance of an excellent culture

The Silk Road has played a crucial role in facilitating the dissemination of both ancient and modern Chinese culture on a global scale. Despite having been historically influenced by numerous civilizations, Xinjiang still exhibits significant remnants of the Central Plains culture through archaeological findings and existing residential construction methods and structural techniques. This is evident in various aspects such as the wooden frame structure of the pigeon shed, the tenon-and-mortise structure used in beam-column connections, the woven branches integrated into the warp and weft, and the utilization of wheat straw mud, among others. These elements not only serve as prominent cultural features but also represent an intangible cultural heritage. Similarly to the transformation of historical buildings by Carlo Scarpa, this process involves not only form and space but also materials and construction techniques. These alterations involve subtle modifications to the spatial configuration of existing historical buildings, which also serve as a reflection of traditional techniques and craftsmanship. Grounded in the local sentiments and modest character of the Uyghur people, the lifestyle of nurturing a connection with pigeons during the construction of the dovecote and beyond has been successfully passed down through generations. As a result, the exceptional culture of the Central Plains has been transformed into a remarkable manifestation of Chinese culture with distinct regional characteristics through adaptation and transmission in Xinjiang.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The traditional Uyghur village landscape is a combination of the material environment and non-material culture, encompassing historical memory, cultural identity, emotional belonging, and the foundation of cultural creation through historical accumulation. Pigeon culture plays a significant role in the local human settlement culture of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Additionally, the pigeon-raising industry serves as an important sector for the region's rural development, contributing to its economy. This paper presents a

systematic study of the culture of pigeon sheds with typical rural landscape features and explores their aesthetic characteristics, using Xinjiang region of China as a case study.

The research findings indicate that the construction of pigeon sheds in traditional Uyghur villages should prioritize the visibility of the location and its harmonization with residential buildings. The functionality of the planning layout encompasses the conversion from a traditional dovecote to a contemporary structure, the utilization of natural elements, and the appropriate treatment and optimization of the layout.

Three aspects should be considered in the construction of the aesthetic characteristics of modern Uyghur residential buildings' dovecote: the ecological beauty of construction materials, the ingenuity of construction techniques, and the inheritance of excellent culture. Generally, traditional Uyghur villages, with their extensive history, possess numerous exceptional cultures. Therefore, the aesthetic features of the pigeon shed layout must take these into account.

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