

# The Spiritual Core of the SixChi Alley: Contemporary Interpretation and Practical Paths

Hongkang Jia<sup>1</sup>, Wenyong Wang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Marxism, Wannan Medical College, Wuhu 241002, Anhui, China

<sup>2</sup> School of History, Culture and Tourism, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin 541001, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China

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**Abstract:** As an iconic symbol of Tongcheng culture, the Six-Chi Alley embodies the spiritual genes of “courtesy first, harmony as supreme” in fine traditional Chinese culture. Starting from historical origins, this paper deeply analyzes the core connotations of the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley: courtesy and tolerance, harmony in diversity, and moral edification. Combined with typical cases and supporting data from grassroots governance in Anhui Province, this paper explores its contemporary value in personal cultivation, social governance, and cultural inheritance. It further proposes practical paths for the creative transformation and innovative development of the spirit, so as to provide theoretical and practical references for grassroots governance innovation and high-quality development in Anhui.

**Keywords:** Spirit of the Six-Chi Alley; Fine traditional Chinese culture; Social governance; Creative transformation; Grassroots governance innovation

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## 1. Introduction

“A letter sent only for a wall, why not yield three feet more? The Great Wall still stretches ten thousand li today, yet Emperor Qin Shi Huang is long gone.” During the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty, Zhang Ying, Grand Secretary of the Wenhua Palace and Minister of Rites, used a short poem to mediate a homestead dispute between his family and their neighbors. Both sides each retreated three feet, creating the timeless story of the Six-Chi Alley. This cultural story spanning more than 300 years is not only a model of neighborly etiquette but also condenses the spiritual core of “courtesy and tolerance, harmony in diversity” in fine traditional Chinese culture, becoming a moral symbol engraved in the hearts of the Chinese people [1].

He listened to the historical allusion, learned about its inheritance and development on the spot, and delivered important remarks: “The Six-Chi Alley reflects the historical wisdom of our ancestors in resolving

conflicts. It should serve as an educational site for promoting fine traditional Chinese culture, give play to the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation that value courtesy and harmony, and lay a solid cultural foundation for social governance.” This important statement not only affirms the historical value of the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley but also endows it with a strategic mission in contemporary social governance and cultural inheritance, elevating it from a traditional virtue to an important support for the modernization of national governance<sup>[2,3]</sup>.

At present, Anhui is at a critical stage of development with the superposition of multiple national strategies, striving to build a source of scientific and technological innovation, a cluster of emerging industries, a new highland of reform and opening-up, and a demonstration zone for comprehensive green transformation of economic and social development (the “Three Zones and One District”). In the process of promoting high-quality development, resolving social conflicts, and gathering development forces, in-depth interpretation of the spiritual core of the Six-Chi Alley and implementation and important speech spirit are not only inevitable requirements for inheriting fine traditional Chinese culture but also practical needs for solving grassroots governance problems, fostering a positive social atmosphere, and empowering Anhui’s “Three Zones and One District” construction. Based on the intersection of history and reality, this paper systematically explains the essence of the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley, explores its internal compatibility with the requirements of the new era by combining practical cases and data of grassroots governance in Anhui, and provides targeted theoretical references and practical paths for its creative transformation and innovative development<sup>[4,5]</sup>.

## **2. Historical origins and core essence of the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley**

### **2.1. Historical origin: From neighborly courtesy to cultural symbol**

The Six-Chi Alley is located in Wenchang Subdistrict, Tongcheng City, Anhui Province. Built during the Kangxi period, it is 100 meters long and 2 meters wide, with a simple and elegant style of blue bricks and black tiles. Today, it has become a national 4A-level tourist attraction and a national demonstration base for patriotism education. Its formation originated from a real process of resolving neighborly disputes: during the Kangxi period, Zhang Ying’s family in Tongcheng had a dispute over homestead boundaries with the Wu family. As neither side would compromise, Zhang’s family sent a letter to Beijing for help.

Instead of using his power to interfere in local affairs, Zhang Ying replied with a poem: “A letter sent only for a wall, why not yield three feet more? The Great Wall still stretches ten thousand li today, yet Emperor Qin Shi Huang is long gone.” Deeply touched, Zhang’s family took the initiative to retreat three feet. The Wu family, moved by Zhang Ying’s generosity and courtesy, also retreated three feet. The intense homestead dispute was thus satisfactorily resolved through “each side yielding three feet”, and the Six-Chi Alley came into being.

This incident was not a simple compromise of interests, but a vivid practice of China’s traditional culture of “ritual” and “harmony”. It demonstrates the moral pursuit of “cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and pacifying the world” and the life wisdom of “valuing harmony and winning people by virtue” among scholar-officials. As an important minister of the imperial court, Zhang Ying always adhered to the family tradition of “being honest in office and harmonious in the hometown”. His act of “yielding three feet” not only showed respect for neighbors but also reverence for power, not bullying others

by power, but resolving conflicts through moral inspiration, which is a vivid embodiment of the traditional Chinese thought of “governing by virtue”.

After more than 300 years of inheritance and development, the Six-Chi Alley has transformed from a physical space into a cultural symbol and an important carrier of fine traditional Chinese culture. From a sample of family education in Tongcheng to a national model of moral education, the story of the Six-Chi Alley has been widely spread through poems, operas, songs, films and television works. The spiritual core of “courtesy, tolerance and harmony” has gradually integrated into the national cultural gene. “Modesty, courtesy and harmony are virtues of the Chinese nation, which have been integrated into the genes of the Chinese people and will be consciously inherited wherever we go.” Today, the Six-Chi Alley receives more than 500,000 tourists annually, becoming an important place for people to perceive traditional virtues and practice the spirit of courtesy. Its spiritual influence has spread from Tongcheng to the whole country and even the world <sup>[6,7]</sup>.

## **2.2. Core essence: A three-dimensional spiritual structure**

### **2.2.1. Courtesy and tolerance: Value principles for interpersonal relations and interest coordination**

Courtesy and tolerance constitute the most distinctive core of the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley. Its essence lies in the moral consciousness of “putting oneself in others’ shoes and thinking from others’ perspective” and the pattern of “ignoring small gains and pursuing common harmony”. The act of Zhang Ying’s family “yielding three feet” broke through the limitation of “fighting for every inch of land”, abandoned the narrow mentality of “regarding neighbors as enemies”, and showed the life wisdom that “stepping back opens up a broader view”. Such courtesy is not weakness or compromise, but active tolerance based on respecting others’ rights, understanding differences and sympathizing with others’ difficulties. It reflects the Confucian ethics of “Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself” and “A gentleman seeks harmony but not uniformity”, and conforms to the benevolent thought of “Treat others’ elders as your own and others’ children as your own” <sup>[8]</sup>.

In traditional society, courtesy was an important bond maintaining neighborhood and family harmony. In modern society, this spirit still has strong vitality, manifested in respect for others’ rights, tolerance of pluralistic differences, and rational resolution of interest conflicts. For example, in the reconstruction of old residential communities in Tongcheng, Anhui, residents have inherited the spirit of courtesy from the Six-Chi Alley, took the initiative to negotiate issues such as building spacing and parking space allocation, reached more than 120 consensus on interest coordination, and no petition disputes arose due to reconstruction, which is a vivid practice of courtesy and tolerance in contemporary interpersonal relations.

### **2.2.2. Harmony in diversity: Essential pursuit of social harmony and conflict resolution**

The spirit of the Six-Chi Alley contains the dialectical thinking of “harmony in diversity”, whose core is “acknowledging differences, respecting diversity, seeking common ground and achieving symbiosis”. Although Zhang Ying’s family and the Wu family had differences in homestead interests, they did not fall into a “zero-sum” confrontation. Instead, they achieved the goal of “harmony” through mutual concession and tolerance, protecting their legitimate rights and interests while preserving neighborly friendship, which confirms the ancient wisdom that “Harmony generates vitality; uniformity hinders growth”. Such

“harmony” is not a homogeneous unity that eliminates differences, but coordinated symbiosis on the basis of acknowledging diversity and respecting differences, a philosophy of “seeking common ground while reserving differences and pursuing co-prosperity”.

“Valuing harmony and moderation, being tolerant and inclusive, holding great virtue and carrying all things, and seeking harmony without uniformity represent the tolerant character of the Chinese nation and an important concept for the Chinese people in handling interpersonal, ethnic and state relations.” The “harmony in diversity” advocated by the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley is highly consistent with the concept of “pluralistic co-governance and collaborative efforts” in contemporary social governance. In Anhui, this spirit has become an important guide for resolving grassroots conflicts: on the basis of respecting differences, different groups and interest subjects have achieved the governance goal of “no conflicts handed over to higher levels, no security incidents and full services” through equal consultation and mutual understanding<sup>[9]</sup>.

### **2.2.3. Moral edification: Cultural foundation for social governance and family tradition inheritance**

The far-reaching influence of the Six-Chi Alley story lies in its governance wisdom of “moral edification” and its value in family tradition inheritance. Instead of using power to forcibly resolve disputes, Zhang Ying resolved conflicts through moral inspiration and family education, achieving the governance effect of “subduing others without fighting”, which is in line with the Confucian governance thoughts of “governing by virtue”, “winning people by virtue” and “cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state and pacifying the world”. The family tradition of “passing on courtesy” in Zhang Ying’s family not only influenced generations of Zhang’s descendants but also educated neighbors and nurtured rural customs, forming a cultural atmosphere of “upholding virtue and courtesy, and valuing harmony”.

This governance mode of “moral edification” goes beyond mere institutional constraints and legal sanctions. It guides people to consciously regulate behaviors, resolve conflicts and cultivate virtues through moral demonstration, cultural infiltration and family tradition inheritance, providing valuable experience for modern social governance. “Consolidate the cultural foundation for social governance”, precisely recognizing the unique value of traditional culture in grassroots governance, culture can subtly influence people’s ideology and behavior, with more durability and penetration than pure institutional constraints. Today, the courteous family tradition of the Zhang family in Tongcheng has been inherited for more than 300 years, and many descendants have set examples of being honest in officialdom and friendly to others, which is a vivid continuation of the spiritual core of “moral edification”.

## **3. Promote the integration of culture and tourism, realize cultural empowerment and boost economic and social development**

Centering on the Six-Chi Alley, build a “Tongcheng Cultural Tourism Zone”, integrate resources such as Tongcheng School culture, Huangmei Opera culture and Zhang’s family tradition culture, design characteristic routes such as “Courtesy Culture Experience Tour” and “Family Tradition Inheritance Study Tour”, and promote the deep integration of culture and tourism. Specifically, first, upgrade the historical and cultural block of the Six-Chi Alley, build a comprehensive cultural scenic spot integrating cultural exhibition, leisure tourism and cultural and creative sales, improving the quality and attractiveness of the scenic spot. Second, develop themed cultural and creative products of the Six-Chi Alley, transforming spiritual

connotations into visual and tangible cultural products, such as picture books of the Six-Chi Alley story, courtesy-themed crafts and cultural and creative stationery. Third, hold the “Six-Chi Alley Cultural Festival”, expand the influence of the Six-Chi Alley culture through opera performances, calligraphy exhibitions, academic seminars and family tradition forums, attracting more tourists to visit and experience.

At the same time, combine the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley with rural revitalization, build “Demonstration Villages of the Spirit of the Six-Chi Alley”, cultivate industries such as rural tourism and characteristic agriculture, realize the benign interaction between cultural inheritance and economic development, and make traditional culture a new engine for local development.<sup>[10]</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

As a bright pearl of fine traditional Chinese culture, the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley, with the core connotation of “courtesy and tolerance, harmony in diversity, and moral edification”, still has strong vitality and contemporary value after more than 300 years of inheritance and development. These important remarks during his inspection of Anhui provide fundamental guidance for promoting the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley in the new era, elevating it from a traditional moral model to a cultural foundation for social governance, a spiritual driving force for high-quality development, and an important carrier for cultural inheritance.

On the new journey of advancing the Anhui chapter of Chinese-style modernization, in-depth exploration of the contemporary connotation of the spirit of the Six-Chi Alley and adherence to its creative transformation and innovative development have important practical and long-term value: at the individual level, it can cultivate core socialist values and improve citizens’ moral literacy; at the social level, it can innovate grassroots governance models, improve governance efficiency and resolve social conflicts; at the cultural level, it can promote the creative transformation of fine traditional Chinese culture and strengthen cultural self-confidence; at the development level, it can empower Anhui’s “Three Zones and One District” construction and promote high-quality development.

Although the Six-Chi Alley is narrow, it reflects the broad world of social harmony; although the spirit of courtesy is subtle, it converges into a mighty force for national rejuvenation. It will surely inject inexhaustible impetus into building a better Anhui and realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.

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